

Breaking the Silence, Building the Bridge: An Autoethnographic Reflection on Survival, Faith, and the Birth of the LeadHer Healing Movement

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Abstract

This autoethnographic exploration traces the lived experience of Dr. La'Tesha Sampson, a licensed clinical social worker, author, professor, media personality and survivor of profound childhood trauma, as a lens to examine healing, leadership, and liberation for Black women survivors. Through narratives of betrayal, silencing, spiritual reckoning, and ultimate reclamation, this work highlights how the intersections of racialized trauma, family dysfunction, and institutional betrayal can devastate the spirit — but also birth extraordinary leadership. Dr. Sampson's survival journey, culminating in the creation of the LeadHer Healing Certification Program alongside Dr. Jamila T. Davis, reflects the radical possibility that survivors are not broken — they are builders of new worlds. Centering faith, cultural resilience, and peer-led healing, this article calls for trauma recovery models that honor lived experience as expertise and transform survivors into healers of generations.

Introduction: A Voice Was Waiting to Be Heard

Before I ever learned my ABCs, I had already learned betrayal.

Before I ever learned to spell "God," I had already learned to wonder if He could see me.

There are stories many Black girls carry — stories buried under the weight of family secrets, smothered by church hymns, wrapped in smiles stitched too tightly to ever tear.

I was four years old when the first touch taught me that my body was not mine.

By twelve, four different family members had left scars invisible to everyone but me.

At eight, the weight of survival became so heavy that I decided to leave this life altogether.
And it was there — on the precipice of death — that I heard a voice, not my own.

"If you endure, I will use you to free My people," God said.

I didn't want the assignment.

I wanted relief.

But somehow, somehow, I endured.

What follows is not simply a story of trauma.

It is a story of how surviving the unimaginable can carve a path to leading others toward the unimaginable freedom they never thought possible.

This is the journey that birthed LeadHer Healing:

a revolutionary space where survival is not where the story ends, but where leadership begins.

Section 1: Prelude — The Girl Before the Storm

Before the world taught me to hide my wounds,
before betrayal whispered its first lie in my ear,
I was simply a little girl trying to find her place in a world too big to understand.

I was born into a family stitched together by survival, not tenderness.

A family where secrets lived in the walls and silence was an heirloom passed down like Sunday dresses.

In the earliest memories I can find — the ones before the cracks appeared — I remember loving the world without fear.

I remember singing in church choirs, my voice too big for my tiny frame, hoping somehow God could hear me louder if I sang louder.

I remember pressing my small body against my grandmother's apron, breathing in the scent of sweet potato pie and hair grease, believing that safety could be baked into a kitchen, into a touch, into a home.

There were moments that almost made me believe I was invincible:
running barefoot through backyard grass, hair wild, skin kissed golden by a sun that felt like
it belonged to me.

Building dreams out of chalk on concrete, dreaming of becoming a teacher, a singer, maybe
even someone important enough to matter.

But even in those softest of days, the shadow was already creeping.

The same family who hugged me after Sunday service was the same family where some
hands wandered where they should not.

The same house where prayers were said was the same house where my spirit was broken
piece by piece.

And yet, in my innocence, before the knowing came,
I still believed that love was simple, that family meant protection,
and that God was always watching.

I was four years old when I first learned that not all hands are safe.

I was four when the storm began — quietly, invisibly, like a poison slipped into sweet tea.

But before the breaking, there was believing.

And that little girl — the one who believed in songs, in kitchens, in barefoot summers —
she is the one I fight for every day.

She is the one I lead healing circles to protect.

She is the one I refused to let die.

Section 2: The Silent House — Abuse, Church, and Family Betrayal

There is a special kind of betrayal that happens when harm is wrapped in prayer cloths.

In my house, Bibles sat in various rooms, both upstairs and downstairs.

We prayed before every meal, we wore our Sunday best, we clapped and shouted and spoke in tongues.

But no one spoke about the hands that crept at night.

No one spoke about the poisoned meals, the stolen childhoods.

What lived inside our walls was a double life:

One for God. One for survival.

From the outside, we were a “good Christian family” — the kind neighbors admired, the kind church folk trusted.

Inside, I learned a darker theology:

that obedience was demanded, even when it hurt,

that silence was survival, even when it killed something inside you.

By the time I was twelve, four different family members had crossed boundaries no child should ever know.

I lived a double consciousness — part of me playing the smart daughter and granddaughter, the model student, the quiet church girl.

The other part of me learning how to leave my body during moments when staying would have shattered me.

Worse than the abuse itself was the conspiracy of silence.

The way grown folks turned their faces away.

The way mothers and aunts said, “That didn’t happen,” or “You’re being fast,” even when the evidence lived in my eyes.

There are wounds that bleed on the outside.

And then there are the wounds that grow underground, under the skin, under the ribs, festering into beliefs:

“Maybe this is what love looks like.”

“Maybe this is what I deserve.”

“Maybe I am invisible after all.”

The silence in my house was louder than any scream.
It was in the way prayers were louder than apologies.
It was in the way everyone pretended Sunday service could erase Saturday night.

When I tried to name my truth, I became the villain.
The abusers remained in family photos, remained invited to dinner.
I became the outcast — the difficult child, the troubled one, the liar.

The ones who hurt me walked free in my own house,
but it was I who carried the chains.

Inside that silent house, I learned an early, brutal lesson:
that survival would not come from being believed,
but from believing in myself when no one else dared.

Section 3: Eight Years Old — When Survival and Suicide Met

At eight years old, the weight of silence became too heavy for my small frame.

Eight years old —
still learning cursive,
still believing in the tooth fairy,
still singing Sunday school songs off-key —
and already ready to leave this world.

I don't remember what final betrayal broke me open that day.
Maybe it was another wandering hand.
Maybe it was another voice saying, "That's not what happened."
Maybe it was just the exhaustion of carrying a secret too big for my tiny chest to hold.

I only remember the stillness of decision.
The quiet way a child decides that breathing is optional when no one seems to notice her living.

I wanted it to be quiet.
No dramatics. No goodbyes.
Just an ending to the noise inside my head.

I found myself alone in my room,
eight years old,
ready to let go of everything.

And then —
in the space between despair and silence —
a voice spoke.

"If you endure, I will use you to free My people."

It was not the voice of the grandmother who tucked me in at night.
It was not the voice of the church ladies who laid hands on my forehead until I fell out.
It was not even my own battered voice.

It was God.

Clear.
Firm.
Unmistakable.

I wanted to argue.
How could a broken, poisoned, already-dying child possibly free anyone?

I wanted to reject the assignment.
Freedom felt like a cruel thing to promise a child trapped in a house of horrors.

But something in me — some stubborn root God had planted before I ever knew my own
name — held on.

I lived.

Not because the pain ended.

Not because justice came.

Not because anything got easier.

I lived because something ancient inside me whispered:

"Stay. There is more."

At eight years old, survival stopped being an accident.

It became my first act of rebellion.

My first act of faith.

I did not know then that the journey to healing would take decades,

that the voice I heard that night would keep calling me back when the scars itched and the shame screamed.

I only knew this:

God had seen me.

God had called me.

And somehow, despite everything,

I was still here.

Section 4: The Aftermath — Growing Up in Trauma's Shadow

Survival is messy.

There is no neat line between victim and victor,

no clean break between past and present.

There is only the long, slow ache of learning to live with a body you were taught to hate.

After eight, I was alive —

but I was hollow.

I carried the scars like invisible tattoos:
the self-doubt etched into my skin,
the shame wrapped around my voice,
the deep, gnawing belief that somehow the abuse had been my fault.

Puberty came like a second betrayal.
My body shifted, curved, grew in ways I could not control.
Where once I had been invisible, now I was hypervisible — and every glance felt like a threat.

I learned early that my body was currency.
That attention, even the wrong kind, was a way to feel seen.

Promiscuity wasn't about pleasure.
It was about power — the small, fleeting kind — the kind that said:
"At least this time, I choose it."

But the choosing was hollow too.

Inside, the little girl still curled in the corner, whispering, "Is this love?"

In the silence left by my family's betrayal, I filled the void with busyness:
Overachieving.
Caretaking.
Performing strength so loudly that no one dared ask if I was okay.

I became what trauma taught me to be:

- Hyper-independent, because needing anyone was dangerous.
- Emotionally numb, because feeling too much could drown me.
- Perfectionistic, because mistakes were invitations for pain.

Church remained a theater of contradictions.

I sang in choirs. I served on committees.
All while hiding the broken girl underneath the polished surface.

Every hallelujah was a question mark.
Every prayer was a dare: "God, do You really see me?"

I mastered the art of survival.
But survival is not the same as healing.

Survival is armor.
Healing is learning you don't have to wear it forever.

It would take years — decades — before I understood that the girl who learned to
disappear deserved to take up space.
That the body I blamed was never the villain.
That the voice I buried was always holy.

The aftermath of trauma is not a straight line.
It is a labyrinth — of victories and relapses, of numbness and weeping, of hope and rage.

But even in the darkest corners, some part of me kept the ember alive:
the stubborn belief that someday, somehow, all of this pain would mean something more.

I didn't just survive my childhood.
I survived myself.

And survival was just the beginning.

Section 5: Reclaiming the Body, Reclaiming the Voice

Healing doesn't happen all at once.

It begins with small, defiant acts:
Whispered prayers in dark rooms.

Tears finally allowed to fall.

Saying "no" for the first time — even if your voice shakes.

For me, healing started not with triumph, but with surrender.

Not the surrender that gives up — the surrender that says, "I can't carry this alone anymore."

Therapy was my first rebellion against the silence.

Sitting across from a stranger, pulling words out of places I had buried for decades, I started to name things:

The abuse.

The betrayal.

The anger.

The shame.

Naming them didn't erase them.

But it took away their power to define me.

Slowly, I began to uncurl from the fetal position trauma had forced me into.

I began to reclaim my body — not as an object to be used or punished, but as a sacred home.

A home that deserved love.

A home that deserved safety.

Faith — the same faith that once felt complicit in my silencing — became a lifeline again.

But this time, it wasn't filtered through the mouths of abusers or the pages of judgmental theology.

It was raw.

Personal.

Unfiltered.

It was the God who met me at eight years old,
still whispering:

"Stay. Rise. There is more."

Education became another form of healing.

Every degree I earned was a scar transformed into a medal.

Every paper written, every class taught, every woman counseled was a testament:

"I survived. And now I'm building a new legacy."

But perhaps the deepest healing came when I found my voice.

Not just the voice that could counsel others.

The voice that could speak my own truth — without apology, without minimizing, without shame.

The voice that could say:

- "Yes, I was hurt."

- "Yes, it was wrong."

- "And yes, I am still worthy."

Healing wasn't linear.

Some days, the old ghosts knocked louder than others.

Some days, the mirror still reflected the lies I had been told about myself.

But day by day, choice by choice, I stitched myself back together.

Not into the girl I was before — she was gone.

Into the woman God had called me to become.

The woman who could hold the pain without being swallowed by it.

The woman who could stand where she once crawled.

The woman who could turn her survival into a blueprint for others.

I was no longer just surviving.

I was reclaiming.

And this time, I wasn't just reclaiming my life.

I was reclaiming my mission.

Section 6: LeadHer Healing — Building the Bridge She Needed

Every survivor carries within her a blueprint —
a map of what healing could have looked like
if someone had met her with love instead of silence.

For years, that map lived folded up inside me —
unread, unseen, waiting for the right season to be revealed.

I knew what I needed back then:

- A space where my pain wasn't too heavy.
- A circle where my voice wasn't too loud or too messy.
- A community that could see the warrior inside the wounds.

But that space didn't exist.
So together, we built it.

When I met Dr. Jamila T. Davis —
a woman whose life had also been shaped by trauma, by betrayal, by systems designed to
silence her —

I recognized a kindred spirit.
Not just someone who understood pain,
but someone who had refused to let pain have the last word.

Together, we dreamed LeadHer Healing into existence:
Not as a therapy group.
Not as a charity program.
But as a movement.

A radical reimagining of what it means to heal, to lead, to live after trauma.

LeadHer Healing is built on a sacred truth:
Survivors are not broken — they are called.

They are called to rise,
to lead,
to heal not just themselves, but generations who come after them.

Through the LeadHer Healing Certification Program, we train women survivors —
including those who have survived incarceration, domestic violence, sexual assault, and
generational trauma —
to become Healing Circle Leaders.

Not just passive recipients of services.
Not just anonymous statistics.

Leaders.
Warriors.
Midwives of a new world.

Each woman who passes through our program learns not only how trauma lives in the body
and spirit —
she learns how to build a bridge for others.

A bridge made of storytelling.
A bridge made of radical love.
A bridge made of sacred survival.

The very bridge I once needed.
The very bridge Jamila once needed.
The very bridge so many of our sisters still need.

This isn't just about healing old wounds.
It's about rewriting destinies.

When a woman leads a healing circle,
she doesn't just break her own chains.
She snaps the chains waiting to be placed on the next generation.

This work is not easy.
It costs tears, labor, faith, and fierce commitment.

But every time a woman stands in front of a circle, scarred and shining, and says,
"You are not alone,"
the heavens bear witness.

This is the work.
This is the call.
This is the bridge.

We are not just survivors.

We are the architects of a new future.

Section 7: LeadHer Healing — Anatomy of a Movement

Out of the ashes of betrayal, survival, and hard-fought healing,
LeadHer Healing was born — not just as a program, but as a movement.

It is a sanctuary where women survivors are not treated as broken projects to be fixed,
but as powerful architects of their own futures.

The LeadHer Healing Certification Program is a trauma-informed, spiritually grounded,
culturally honoring training designed to transform survivors into Healing Circle Leaders —
women who carry their wisdom forward to light the path for others.

At its core, the program teaches one radical truth:

You are not what was done to you.

You are the healer you have been waiting for.

The Journey Through LeadHer Healing

Participants walk through a sacred and rigorous journey, learning:

- How trauma shapes the brain, body, and spirit — and how healing restores them.
- How to reclaim identity, power, and voice after years of silence.
- How to use storytelling as medicine, transforming personal pain into collective liberation.
- How to lead healing circles with compassion, strength, and cultural humility.
- How to recognize and regulate emotional triggers, safeguarding both themselves and their circles.
- How to weave spiritual, cultural, and creative practices into healing work — honoring traditions that have kept Black and Brown communities alive for generations.

This is not therapy in the traditional sense.

This is community-based healing leadership — led by survivors, for survivors.

Graduates of the program leave not only with skills, but with an unshakable new identity:

Healer.

Leader.

Architect of a new world.

The Pillars of LeadHer Healing

The Certification is built on eight transformative modules:

1. Welcome & Orientation — Setting sacred space and anchoring in values.
2. Understanding Trauma & the Healing Brain — Unpacking trauma's imprint with compassion.
3. Identity, Power, & the Wounded Healer — Reclaiming selfhood and purpose.
4. Storytelling & Narrative Healing — Using voice as a tool of freedom.
5. Circle-Keeping & Peer Group Facilitation — Building safe, sacred communities.

6. Boundaries, Triggers, & Emotional Regulation — Leading with emotional intelligence and self-awareness.

7. Safety Planning & Crisis Support — Responding to survivors' needs with care and wisdom.

8. Spiritual, Cultural, & Creative Healing Tools — Honoring indigenous, faith-based, and artistic traditions as medicine.

The journey culminates in a Capstone Healing Circle,
where each woman stands, fully empowered, and leads a circle of her own —
offering the healing she once needed.

A Call to Those Who Carry the Scars

LeadHer Healing is more than a curriculum.

It is a revolution in how we understand recovery, resilience, and leadership.

It is a call to every woman who ever wondered if her story mattered.

To every survivor who dared to believe she could be more than what happened to her.

To every soul who still feels the weight of generational pain — and dreams of breaking the chain for good.

The bridge we needed is here.

The movement has already begun.

And we are just getting started.

If you are ready to turn your survival into leadership,
your scars into sacred wisdom,
and your voice into a vessel for healing —
then LeadHer Healing is waiting for you.