

The Purpose Gap

*Empowering Communities of Color
to Find Meaning and Thrive*

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Introduction

The phone rang. “Your cousin passed away.” It hit like a ton of bricks. The last time I talked to him was a few years back. He was smiling, dancing, being silly as I had always remembered him.

As I sat with my grief and pain, I struggled with how my cousin would be remembered. Like many in this country, he experienced incarceration for use of controlled substances. Dying from addiction, diabetes, and lack of necessary love and support, he left this planet entirely too early.

What a contrast to the life I was living and what I stood for as a faith leader. When I got the news, I was preparing to talk to a group of college students about how to create conditions for thriving while my family back home was preparing a funeral. My cousin’s death, more than any other loss, challenged my notion of what it means to thrive. It brought into focus the fact that, for so many people, the move from surviving to thriving is not just some inward journey, exploration of purpose, or “aha” moment. When the conditions are so dire, life-threatening, and oppressive, thriving may feel like nothing more than trite expressions, like “Living the American dream,” “You can be whatever you want to be if you work hard,” or “Follow your dreams.” These sayings only apply to those with privilege who do not have to face the threat of extinction.

I wrote about my relationship to this cousin in my first book. When I moved into my grandma’s house, she made it clear that I was sleeping in his bed, a bed dedicated to any person in the family who needed it. I still remember Grandma Carmen saying, “We are glad you are here, *mijo*, but that bed and room are not just yours.”

My grandparents surrounded me with love and care, yet I was sleeping in my cousin’s bed. My cousin, who left behind four siblings, dozens of

cousins, and four children, was no longer here. I couldn't help but feel it was all because I took his bed. But, of course, there was so much more to our stories than a simple piece of furniture. As I started to track his life and my own, it became clear why he was now in the above and beyond while I was traveling across the country working and speaking about creating conditions for life.

Whenever violence overwhelmed and consumed my life, my grandma and a whole host of witnesses cast a different narrative for me. That list of supporters is long, including family members, teachers, pastors, friends, *primos/as*, homies, teammates, classmates, and so on. People told me throughout my life they saw something in me that I did not see in myself.

My cousin and I were similar in many ways. We both had the classic Reyes Chicano look: bald, Brown, and beautiful. Yet, unlike in my life, there were very few conditions present for him to thrive. The narrative around the less-than-positive aspects of his life were not the results of a bad break, a few bad choices, or a couple of rough friends, the sort of things people reminded me of when I messed up. Society assigned painful moments as part of his narrative as if he chose that life. Our community would say there was something wrong with him—that his character was the problem. He was a “bad kid.” No one wanted to take care of him—not just in young adulthood but also when he was a child. How do you thrive when the world sees you as a problem? How can you find purpose when the world has written you off?

Here, however, is the painful truth: None of these narratives accounted for the conditions, the context, the love, or the lack thereof that surrounded my cousin.

He suffered a major injury when he was younger. A car accident sent him flying through the middle seat, and the rearview-mirror stem pierced his head. He had to have part of his brain removed, spent over a year in the hospital, and needed services and care for the rest of his life. He was not a bad child. He was a Brown child who suffered a traumatic brain injury and waited for the rest of us to pick him up, to support his life, and to say, “We see something in you that you do not see in yourself.” We had a responsibility to do this because the accident made it so that he was not able to dream a different narrative for himself. He was a Chicano young man living in America. The world casts us as “Gangster no. 1” instead of seeing our God-given potential. The police follow us. The education system expels us. Job opportunities are exceedingly rare, especially for those who must check the box for those who were formerly caged on an application form. People design these oppressive conditions. They represent a

history of trauma and neglect against my Xicanx, Chicana/o, Indigenous, and broader Latinx community.¹

What you are going to find in this book are stories, studies, and dreams about care for the conditions of our lives, of our communities, and of our bodies. For one to thrive, understanding the conditions that already surround us (and others) is the first step. For so many of us, purpose is defined, stolen, or withheld before we even enter the world. The question now is “How do we understand and influence these conditions?”

This book attempts to do this work; it bends toward the positive. Written into my bones and my flesh are the markers of trauma and abuse that my people have suffered. These scars live alongside the tattoos outlining the traditions, practices, and wisdom of how to survive and thrive in this world. I have lived and worked my entire life in marginalized and oppressed communities and know that too often books and studies addressing conditions in these communities can be overwhelmingly revolutionary or post-apocalyptic (understandable given the contexts in which the oppressed find themselves). This book acknowledges that violent and oppressive conditions exist while making the point that for those just trying to survive, moving toward thriving is not beyond your reach. Where the headlines are filled only with ill tidings, I try to provide some good news.

“What about those who are taken too young?” you might ask. “What about those locked in cages? Children separated from their families at the border? What about the stolen lives of the young people I mourn? What was their purpose in life? To die?”

I have worked with hundreds of leaders who are searching for meaning and purpose in the face of such questions. They include young adults discerning a call to ministry, scholars of color, higher-education executives, nonprofit leaders, private industry boards and executive teams, survivors of abuse and trauma, those whose lives were stolen as they lived in cages, former gang members, and essential workers, such as fieldworkers who make sure you can eat. I serve on boards of local nonprofits and universities and serve my community in my children’s school system. I have facilitated hundreds of hours with leaders from various walks of life as they seek answers to questions like “What is the meaning and purpose of life?” For those on the “underside of history,” for those forgotten or, worse yet, considered a problem before they even got a shot, these questions weigh on the soul. They point to something missing—a gap—in how we as scholars discuss meaning and purpose. We steal lives of meaning and purpose from young people when we deny them access to resources, people, networks, and even the imagination. The *purpose gap*

is about more than just economics or wealth. It is more than the housing gap or the education gap. It is the compounding effect of all these gaps on the next generation.

Before young people can find a firm grounding in their purpose, we first need to close the gap. Like the education, housing, opportunity, and wealth gaps, the purpose gap exists where people cannot achieve what they were born to do. It exists when people are not able to fulfill their calling, resulting in lives of meaning and purpose stolen from future generations. The purpose gap exists because of the war on our children's future.

The literature on vocation, meaning, and purpose designs a narrative for a specific person: white, middle socioeconomic level, and professional class. I ask you, What about Brown, working-class people? To put a finer point on it, I wonder about all the people—mostly Black and Brown—left out, left behind, and left for dead. Did God not call us as well? I ask about all those children locked in cages at the border in 2017–2018. I wonder about those young people who took to the streets in 2020, asking along with author Kimberly Jones, “How can we win when we are up against the legacies of slavery? What about the income and wealth gap generated from the enslavement, theft, and violence against Black and Brown lives? How can children of color of this generation win?”²

I wonder what resources we must design to direct our own lives? I write this as the COVID-19 pandemic rages in the United States and around the world. The question of purpose confronts us as we decide whose labor is essential among workers whose lives are considered unimportant. Like during an earthquake, I have witnessed with the rest of the world what happens when the tectonic plates of our society, burdened by unsustainable pressure, finally slip and grind against one another, shaking the very foundations of our world.

As a Chicano, Christian author, writer, thinker, and human who is raising two wonderful children with my Jewish wife, I write, in many ways, from just outside the purpose gap. Tragedy and violence, however, drove the writing of this book. First, we mourned the deaths of the victims of the Tree of Life Synagogue shooting in Pittsburgh on October 27, 2018. We remember that day when an anti-Semitic shooter murdered eleven innocent people. Then we witnessed the July 28, 2019, shootings at the Gilroy Garlic Festival just miles from my dad's home. We have tried ever since to make sense of the fact that family and friends who had survived the violence in our streets could not escape the senseless violence of hate. Stephen Romero (age six), Keyla Salazar (thirteen), and Trevor Deon Irby (twenty-five) had full lives ahead of them that were cut short by a

single human with hate in his heart for them and all the members of *mi familia*. We lost three innocent lives that day. In less than a week, the violence returned in an El Paso Walmart on August 3, 2019. Twenty-three people were murdered in cold blood, and another twenty-three were injured. It was one of the deadliest hate crimes against the Latino/a community in modern history. Those lost were remembered on both sides of the border, as Ciudad Juarez and El Paso held services to mourn the loss of life. As the country mourned this explicit attack on Brown life, the very next day a shooter killed nine people in Dayton, Ohio. Each attack was by white men upon people of color. Like many others I responded to these incidents by calling those who were organizing vigils, checking in on family, and holding conversations with my children about the violence against our community.

I watched on the news as political extremism took hold, leading to the abandonment of my *primos/as* on Puerto Rico after Hurricane Maria and other natural disasters. I watched with the rest of the world as our government separated families at the border and placed children in cages. To date children continue to die behind bars at the U.S. southern border, children whose families came seeking a better life. Their stories have been cut short, never to be told outside fleeting mentions in local news reports.³ I completed this book while watching protests and violence erupt following the deaths of Breonna Taylor in her own home,⁴ the modern-day lynching of Ahmaud Arbery while jogging,⁵ and the death of George Floyd⁶ as a police officer crushed his neck. I wrote the final words as Bay Area police killed Sean Monterossa, who was on his knees when police opened fire. I was mourning the death of eighteen-year-old Andres Guardado,⁷ who was working security when police gunned him down. I turned in my final manuscript just a week after twenty-seven-year-old Rayshard Brooks⁸ was killed by Atlanta police in the drive-thru of a Wendy's. Brooks's eight-year-old daughter had her dress on and was waiting for her dad to come pick her up to go skating, and that Wendy's burned to the ground as the city erupted in a collective cry for justice. As I wrapped up my work on the manuscript, I mourned with the nation the loss of Carlos Ingram Lopez, who died while in police custody, crying out for water and his *abuela*.⁹ The report of his death was released a month later—a reminder that they can take our lives in a moment, yet it takes much longer to acknowledge the violence against our people. All these tragic deaths, all this violence, is now. It is not some distant past. It is right now.

The systems that govern and dictate our lives do not include our thriving. This truth extends to the literature on vocation, meaning, and

purpose. In their present state, these writings do not apply to those who cannot see or imagine tomorrow. Those of us who know that these stories of violence and death could have easily been our own stories must ask what it will take to imagine a better future. We tell our children that they can be anything they want to be. But we don't tell them the world will never grant them the time, space, or grace to live lives of meaning and purpose.¹⁰ Do utterances like "Find your life's meaning" or "Hear the call of God" not apply to our essential workers who toil in the fields?

What Is the Purpose Gap?

I can see the purpose gap plainly. This book is an attempt to articulate what that gap is, why it exists, and how to find freedom in spite of it. I hope to provide just a few guideposts for people to see what thriving looks like when the purpose gap has been closed. My argument is not complicated, so I want to start with a brief illustration to show what I mean by the term "purpose gap."

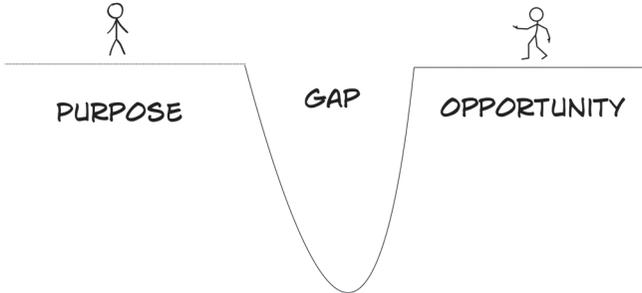


Figure 1.1

For those on the side of the gap who have discerned their purpose, the opportunities to turn that purpose into a sustainable life are not always clear. The road is unpaved, and the gap is wide. Their elders are on the same side of the gap with them, so there is no way to the other side except the extraction of the best and brightest. For example, a scholarship for a young person of color to attend an elite university is an exception, not the rule. It extracts a single individual from the community, leaving the rest of their peers behind. This gap is so unsurmountable that it takes extraordinary circumstances to get the person to realize their purpose through this sort of opportunity.

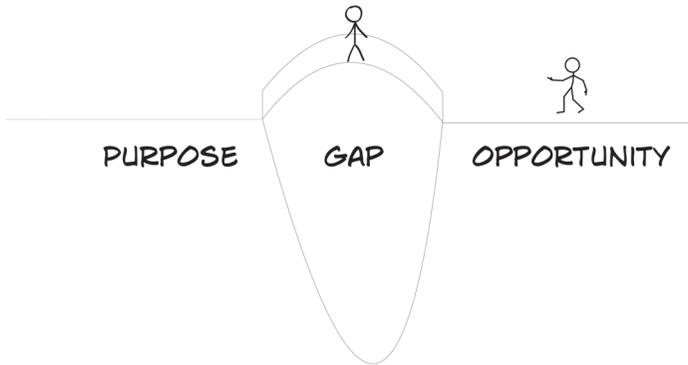


Figure 1.2

A few of us have discerned our purpose *and* have received access to a bridge built typically by someone from our community who has already found a way to the other side. To be clear, not everyone in the community has access to the bridge. The bridge supplies access to resources and opportunities but does not guarantee them. Gatekeepers guard both sides of the bridge. Those in the community who are afraid of people realizing their purpose strive to keep the gate closed. Some on that side of the bridge will use words like *traitor* (in my case, *pocho*) to those who seek to cross. These gatekeepers aim to say that to rise above one's station, one's assigned place in society, is a violation to the community. However, there are also gatekeepers who help push the gates open. These champions will not only walk you across the bridge but celebrate your arrival on the other side. Like Moses standing on Mount Nebo, they believe in you and your purpose. For me, this was my grandma. She was with me every step of my vocational journey, every step of my education. I remember her smile when, as a first-generation graduate student, representing the less than 1 percent of Latinos/as to get a graduate degree in any field, I told her on Sunday that I was beginning my PhD studies the following week. She died a few days later during my orientation. As written in Deuteronomy 34:4–5: “The LORD said to him, ‘This is the land of which I swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, saying, “I will give it to your descendants”; I have let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not cross over there.’ Then Moses, the servant of the LORD, died there in the land of Moab, at the LORD’s command.” My grandma did not have access to the same opportunities I did. She was a brilliant woman, as you will come to see in this book. It is not just about how she overcame and sacrificed so that future generations might thrive. It honors her gifts,

wisdom, and knowledge as equal to anything I received in my education, and it acknowledges the creation of opportunities to cross the bridge and honors those whose knowledge and wisdom never required leaving our community.

Once you cross the bridge, there is no guarantee of success. Guarding the other end of the bridge are the trolls from the land of opportunity. These are the inheritors of wealth who were born on this side. They “belong” on this side of the purpose gap and see anyone entering their land as a threat. We see this play out in xenophobic conversations in industries that imagine they are meritocracies, like education. Some of these trolls may have experienced obstacles to achieving their position, but the question was never *if* they would succeed but simply *when*. They had the choice to stay in this space or to go. Once someone has crossed the bridge, they are in a land that is completely foreign with no real help or guidance. This is best evidenced in first-generation college students of color who are navigating systems of education not designed for us and must mirror dominant cultural definitions of success.

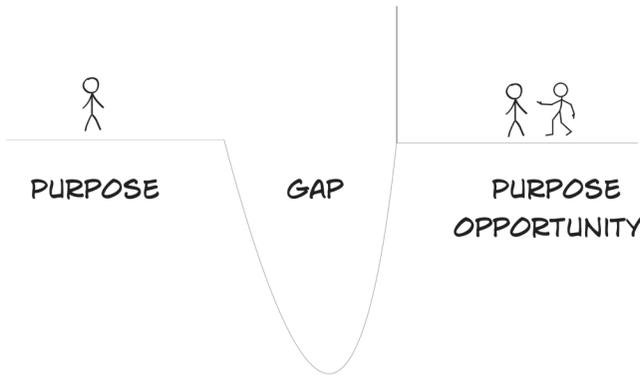


Figure 1.3

In Figure 1.3, we see the land of opportunity. Everything here works to the advantage of those individuals born on this side of the gap. The privileged descendants of power and privilege inherit a world built and designed for them. The conditions are perfect for them to thrive. Here the purpose gap is all in the mind. For those born into privilege and opportunity, the only obstacles are internal. The gap exists to keep those resources and opportunities for themselves and future generations. Their barriers blind them to the lives of purpose of those on the other side of the gap. A wall separates and maintains their power and dominance.

This is not to downplay the internal purpose gap, which is real. People face internal gaps in each of these illustrations. In Figure 1.1 the internal gap might be internalized racism and oppression, where people have come to believe the lie that they deserve the gap that exists between themselves and their purpose. Internalized oppression suggests that there is always some deficiency to overcome: “If only I had another degree, better skills, technical ability, or the like, I would deserve to fulfill my purpose.” In Figure 1.2, it may be imposter syndrome in the land of opportunity. Because they do not recognize their surroundings, have no guides, and are figuring out how to navigate new opportunities on their own, the gap widens to make accomplishing their goals difficult to impossible. The internal gap could be navigating best options and opportunities and seeking credentials. The gap here is the challenge between having enough resources to pursue vocational pathways. If I have discerned that my purpose is to heal, do I have the test scores and money to go to med school? The internal gap has to do with *having enough* and not *being “good” enough*. People in this image find the support and encouragement they need to pursue their purpose.

In Figure 1.3, the internal resistance manifests itself in words like *happiness*, *joy*, and *satisfaction*. The question is not whether one will be comfortable; it is whether a sense of fulfillment will accompany that comfort. And for those in this picture, even if they personally do not have the resources, the barriers to gaining them are minimal. If you are guaranteed an education and the connections that will lead to a well-paying career, the purpose gap you face is whether you will live up to your own expectations and those of your family and friends. Saint Francis is a notable example of someone who willingly set aside his privilege, turning his back on his father’s money while choosing to serve the poor by becoming one of them.

I authored this book for people in the first two scenarios: for those whose purpose gap is so insurmountable that a book such as this might find itself in a public library where they can pick it up and see a little hope. As a regular patron of public libraries, I know that they are a true gift to the communities they serve. In fact, if you want to know more about how to close the purpose gap through books, look at Yuyi Morales’s *Dreamers*. It is an exploration from the Latino/a community that humanizes our immigration narratives, fills the pages with images from our community, and celebrates the library as a place where people from our communities can find freedom.¹¹ I am writing particularly for our communities and the children of our communities. I want to help parents, teachers, social workers, friends, neighbors, and elders see that to create conditions

for people on the margins to thrive is not just central to our purpose, but it is the very heart of our tradition. *The Purpose Gap* looks to create opportunity within our own communities, making the “gap” more than just surmountable. This book hopes to reframe the entire design of the conditions that created the purpose gap and our responses to them in the first place.

We will no longer settle for gaining access to the systems of oppression that created the purpose gap as achieving our purpose. If we choose to cross the gap, it will be on our terms. If we choose to build in our own spaces, it will be on our terms. We will close the purpose gap by any and all means necessary so that generations from now our descendants will have access to the resources, knowledge, and practices to dream big dreams and achieve their many purposes.

My secondary audience is for those in that second picture, who build, manage, guard, and cross the bridge from purpose to opportunity. It reflects my own experience, so much of what I write is from this perspective. Without my father going first across the bridge in education, when a poor Brown student was a novelty in every classroom, I would not have a bridge to education myself. While I had to navigate much of academia on my own, learning to code-switch, translate, and operate in different spaces to survive, I had my father’s example to lead me and my grandma’s love to get me to where I am today. It was the community that supported, fueled, held, and loved me. Many of the stories and illustrations in this book come from this perspective.

My purpose is to close the gap so that every human will have access to the people, processes, and resources needed to achieve their purpose—to build a bridge from purpose to opportunity. We can do this work no matter our circumstance, but we need to be realistic with our starting place. The myth of the American dream plagues too many of our imaginations about purpose.¹² This myth is not just economic, though economics certainly matter. As Robert Putnam showed, “As income inequality expands, kids from more privileged backgrounds start and probably finish further and further ahead of their less privileged peers.”¹³ The ever-widening gap between the haves and the have-nots, between the modern-day Egyptian elites and marginalized Hebrews, wreaks havoc on our communities. More troubling is the impact of this violence on the imagination of the children from these communities. Closing the purpose gap means not turning away from reality by escaping into the false idealism of the American dream. To close the purpose gap, we must draw on our own spiritual and intellectual wellsprings.

We must take command of the story we tell about our communities and reject the lie that we are not excellent enough to achieve our life's many purposes. But it is not simply about "pulling ourselves up by our bootstraps." For me, this book is not about being the first in my family from the barrio to achieve some standard. Rather, it celebrates the "firsts" who made sure they were not the "lasts." I wish to reframe the narrative about what we are capable of if we collectively reframe who, how, and what we do to close the purpose gap for those most marginalized.

Jonah Sachs writes in *Winning the Story Wars: Why Those Who Tell (and Live) the Best Stories Will Rule the Future* about a similar phenomenon: the meaning gap.¹⁴ He explains how stories and myths make and shape meaning in our lives. He says that "myths are the glue that holds society together, providing an indispensable, meaning-making function . . . when myths are functioning properly, they bring us together and get us to act by using a specific formula that appears to be universal across cultures."¹⁵ The core features, such as symbolic thinking, story, explanation, and ritual, have tethered groups of people together for all of human existence. Origin stories, family histories, institutional stories, and extraordinary narratives of the fantastical and impossible supply the imaginary stitches of our communal blanket. Sachs also points to a myth gap. What happens, he wonders, when we give up the power of our own mythmaking, meaning making, and storytelling? He challenges us to say that a myth gap starts to arise when our communal stories are no longer strong enough to hold people together.

In an age of technological and societal disruption, there are forces that are actively trying to disrupt our communal mythmaking. The storytellers define the myth gap; they determine what stories are worth telling and who listens. Sachs writes, "A myth gap arises when reality changes dramatically and our myths are not resilient enough to continue working in the face of that change."¹⁶ He argues that we need to find a new generation of creators, storytellers, mythmakers, and meaning makers to address the gap. These storytellers, as you will read, are you. By the end of this book, you will be able to close the purpose gap.

For colonized people, the myth gap has always been clear. For those here in the West, there is a documented record from 1492 onward of the destruction of an entire continent's myths and stories. In the transatlantic slave trade, lives, stories, and spiritualities were tossed into the sea. Human history reveals the myth gap—borrowing, stealing, suppressing, and expressing the stories that give our communities meaning. From the Greeks to the Romans, from the Toltecs to the Aztecs, people have

borrowed, appropriated, and reimagined myths of conquerors and conquered alike. The gap continues to widen between dominant culture and the colonized, co-opted, and destroyed lives, narratives, theologies, and histories.

In the following pages, we will explore the purpose gap, help close it, and leave you, the reader, with a sense of purpose. This is no small order. For those left out of the literature on “finding one’s meaning,” please know that this book is for you. If you resonate with the works of Ibram X. Kendi, if you have been marked or “stamped” for death by a culture that wants to keep you from achieving your purpose,¹⁷ then this book is for you. If you are not one of the oppressed, damned, marginalized, or those left behind and left out, you are still welcome. Know that you are reading over our shoulders. You are not the center here. But by your very presence in the conversation, we are implicating you in the necessary task of closing the purpose gap for all those who do not have access to the resources, networks, and opportunities you have. Returning to Kendi, if you are going to be here, you have to be committed to a “potential future: an antiracist world in all its imperfect beauty. It can become real if we focus on power instead of people, if we focus on changing policy instead of groups of people.”¹⁸ It is an opportunity for you to examine your own power, privilege, and complicity in the ever-widening purpose gap.

This book is about helping you find your purpose, but more importantly, it is about closing that purpose gap for our communities. To close the purpose gap, we must acknowledge that it exists. We must dive deeply into what that means for our spiritual and intellectual inner lives and what it means to survive in the midst of this reality. We must also explore ways to discern our many purposes when there are systemic structures at play to keep us from them. We must design solutions that are free from oppression and that provide access to opportunities for the next generation to thrive. Can we build thriving communities without having to gain access to systems of domination? Can we build on our own terms? Can dominant society support our building without getting in the way or claiming ownership? This communal and networked work requires an organized effort from all of us who care about humanity.

Closing the purpose gap means creating the conditions for future generations to achieve meaningful and purpose-filled lives. It means removing the barriers, generating the resources, building the power, and imagining the future where those who are most marginalized thrive. It is spirit work. Closing the purpose gap is the realization of Jesus’ Beatitudes in the

Sermon on the Mount: Blessed are the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, the persecuted, the insulted. Closing the purpose gap is realizing the promise of the Beatitudes: “For theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 5:10). We are building a world in the purpose gap that imagines and realizes this vision.

Framing

I want to leave you with a word about the style and tone of this book. Like any good facilitator and animator, I want to set proper expectations. Regarding time, I have set out to design and draft a four-hour book. It is just long enough to read in two to three sittings. Have a cup of coffee (or four or five if you are like me), get up and walk, reflect on your own purpose using the guiding questions, or see them as discussion points for your leadership teams. My hope is that this book will create a dialogue with your life and help you create the conditions in your institutions and communities for the least of those within them to thrive.

Regarding audience, I wrote a book in love with and on behalf of my people. I write for our children. I write to my beautiful Brown children. For those familiar with my writing, I tend to bear the full weight of the oppression, violence, and injustice in every letter on the page. The focus here is the thing that is central to closing the purpose gap: love. The purpose gap exists because we have made choices as a society about whom we do and do not love. As people of faith, we have sometimes expressed this love violently by excluding people we do not recognize as belonging. It has occurred in the church even though Jesus, whom we follow, was an exemplar of radically inclusive love.

I have a powerful sense of calling and purpose, and I identify with the biblical story of Ishmael (Gen. 17:20). On the one hand, elders told me that I was born to live a purposeful and meaningful life. Cast into a desert, God finds us there. The text has named us, Ishmael, *God bears* or *God will bear*.¹⁹ In my journey from being chosen by God to standing on the brink of survival, I have heard God calling me to call others to life, but I have also met people who have not felt that love. They are still by the water, discarded by society and family. My work has taken me to prisons, to fields where people are surviving the day-to-day, back-breaking work of putting food on the table, and to the halls of higher education. It has led me to work with young adults pursuing their call, many of whom experience a seemingly insurmountable purpose gap, given institutional

bias against LGBTQIA+, Black, Indigenous, people of color, immigrants, marginalized bodies, and our beloved in the disabled community. In writing for all these family and friends, I realize that the least I can do is offer a book out of love. I hope these pages reflect my love and my hope for us.

When I began working on the book, the fundamental question I held before me was “What if I wrote as though I loved the reader? Could a book about purpose, written that way, heal our community?” I am sensitive to the cultural gaslighting that often takes over vocational literature. Those from marginalized communities are not in these texts, nor were they written for us. The purpose gap is real. The obstacles people face or succumb to are both historical and contemporary facts. I wanted to acknowledge this reality and to say to you, the reader, I love you with all my being. Marian Wright Edelman, founder of the Children’s Defense Fund, writes in her masterpiece *The Measure of Our Success* that it “is the responsibility of every adult—especially parents, educators, and religious leaders—to make sure that children hear what we have learned from the lessons of life and to hear over and over that we love them and that they are not alone.”²⁰ This message is a fundamental truth of the work that God is calling us all to pursue. For many of us that purpose will be primarily to call others to life, to create the conditions for them to thrive.

Structure

Part 1: Why the Purpose Gap?

Part 1 teases out the purpose gap and answers why we need to address it. It explores why creating conditions for people to thrive requires our collective effort. Chapters 1 through 4 make plain the case for why we need to close the purpose gap. In chapter 1, we will look closely at the historic conditions of the purpose gap. We will challenge the myth that we all have equal opportunities to find our purpose and passion.

In chapter 2 we begin to challenge the story of purpose. Theologians, historians, and artists alike have all bought into the linear storytelling of meaning and purpose, otherwise known as the hero’s journey. We challenge that notion if we really look at our lives and the stories that inspire those who are overcoming the purpose gap, for they reflect non-linear notions of space storytelling. When we do so on our own terms, we reframe the narrative arc and design of our everyday lives. In chapter 3, we examine the cultural commute of people of color in this country and

how these commutes—both literally and figuratively—intentionally create distance between people and their purpose.

In chapter 4, we look at ways that communities and institutions have vocations. We challenge the mission and purpose of organizations and ask if they close the purpose gap for the people they serve. These chapters together lay the framework for the “conditions” of our lives. The history, the stories, the design, and the communities and institutions that govern our lives can define, expand, or close the purpose gap. Through understanding how they work in concert, out of our singular control, we can begin to see the purpose gap a little more clearly and build a foundation for strategizing to change the conditions of our lives.

Part 2: How Do We Close the Purpose Gap?

Chapters 5 through 7 aim to answer the question “How do we close the purpose gap?” How do we create, design, and build systems, structures, contexts, ecologies, and communities that support the thriving of the next generation? We have discovered that to close the purpose gap the work is communal because the desired outcome is for a thriving community. This is not a self-help book to help individuals achieve their purpose. Rather, we challenge that myth in chapter 5, suggesting that instead of creating conditions for stars to shine, we should turn our attention to building constellations. Chapter 6 explores this theory a little more explicitly, examining the roles of networks in creating conditions for all its members to thrive. Chapter 7 turns toward home. Here we look at how difficult it is to build networks and celebrative collectives. Home is often the hardest place to close the purpose gap, both because home is difficult to define and change and because, at the same time, it has a definition and is always changing. We wrestle with this paradox and what it means for our own leadership in our institutions and the communities we serve.

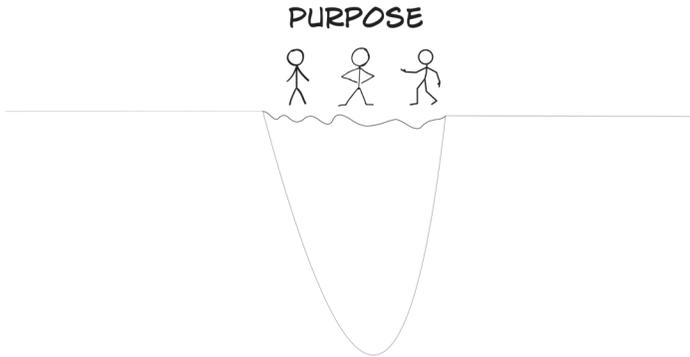
Part 3: What Is My Purpose?

The book concludes with the following question: “What does thriving look like if people are able to live into their purpose?” It explores the traditions, skills, and practices needed to cultivate and support leaders who can close the purpose gap. In chapter 8, we turn to inspiring stories of impossible feats. Here I make the claim that everyone in the community has a role to play in closing the purpose gap. Chapter 8 reexamines our notion of education, one of the principal vehicles for social

transformation, as out there or tethered only to the classroom and curriculum. If we are going to help the next generation find meaning and purpose, we must reclaim and value the knowledge and wisdom from our communities. Education happens everywhere, healing and transforming.

Closing the purpose gap must be part of our everyday lives. Chapter 9 concludes part 3 by reframing this daily living around the notion of a “good day,” where we actively lift one another up, support one another, and create the conditions for future generations to achieve meaning and purpose. We imagine together how to have a good day.

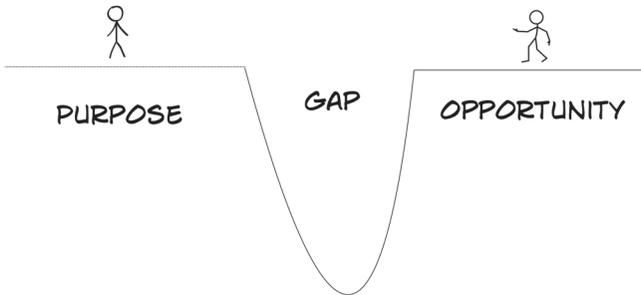
I have a purpose: to help future generations know that they are the embodiments of the love, wisdom, and traditions of their ancestors. I did not *find* my purpose. My purpose found me in the form of my community. We can close the purpose gap together.



Part 1

Why the Purpose Gap?

*Razor wire covers the horizon
I can see the wire cutters
To find a way through
A journey said to be impossible
I would need to bleed.
To get to the other side*



*Cut the wire
Hold open the small hole
To help others pass without incident
To collectively remove the horizon
Returning a landscape
Removing artificial barriers
To its natural wonder
And finding freedom.*

Conditions

Daring to Dream

In 2018, between May and the end of June, more than 2,300 children were separated from their families at the U.S. border.¹ Family separation was not the act of a few bad politicians. It was an explicit U.S. strategy described as deterrence—the same strategy the military uses, where the punishment of certain actions will be so severe that people choose not to engage in them. The message is clear: *If you come here with your family, we will break your family, break your spirit, break your will to find meaning and purpose in this country.* Children have been held behind chain-link fences and, in one case, under a bridge,² sleeping on concrete floors away from their families. All of this is punishment for wanting a better life and daring to seek it out. The purpose of these families' journey, of bringing these innocent children on it, was to find a better life among us, their neighbors. And in response we stole their lives and purpose. Brown Latinx/o/a and Latin American children, like my family, have been denied a life of flourishing. In fact, we are collectively and actively deterring them from pursuing their purpose.

I watched the news like the rest of the country, witnessing pastors and faith leaders, many of them my friends and colleagues, go to play, pray, worship, and break bread with those on both sides of the border. Not one of those nights did I sleep with dry eyes. Their sacrifice, their faith, and their love for their children were not unlike my own. Gilberto Ramos, a fifteen-year-old boy, travelled to the United States to get his mother's epilepsy medicine and find a better life. He was found dead in the Texas desert, recognizable by the white rosary that his mother draped around

his neck and a phone number written on his belt.³ What separated these young people from my own family's experience was the distance of just a few generations on this side of the border.

When I was in seminary, I spent time offering spiritual care visiting adults who were awaiting deportation, often separated from their families, and even more tragically, whose families did not know their location. When I arrived at the facility, I would sit in the parking lot, praying to God for strength because I felt personally responsible for stealing their many purposes. I gripped my own rosary, a gift from my grandma that I still carry with me. These were my friends who had hopes and dreams for themselves and their children, who came here to close the purpose gap for their own children. Their children's view of the world would be shaped by this harrowing violence.

There is a program in my hometown of Salinas, California, where a local pastor and priest take children to federal prisons all over the state to visit their incarcerated parents. These children get to "play" with their parents under armed guard and in view of razor-wire fences. How can these young people imagine their purpose in life? For Black and Brown children across this country, we have stolen the purpose of the next generation. The children look lovingly at their parents. Happiness overflows when these young people reunite with their family members. Accompanying this meeting is a guard with a shotgun in hand, ugly physical barriers, and the volunteer who was their sole means of seeing their loved one. Can anyone doubt that this scene will forever shape that child's imagination about what is possible? American adults have declared war on America's children, committing violence over the question of who has a purpose and who does not. The denial of the sacredness of every child is a sin we have committed collectively. To close the purpose gap for all children and people on this planet requires that we repent and undo the systems that judge some lives worthy of freedom and others not.

Those who do not see their connection to these young people caged like animals are blind to the oppression and violence committed against Black and Brown children. Those who say, "They are not my children," "It is not my problem," or "My community has our own problems," are traumatizing their own children as well. It is a moral injury that will last for generations. Those who choose to break the cycles of violence will look back at this generation and say, "I can't believe my family let that happen."

Others of us can neither ignore nor explain away this trauma because we live it. We inherit this generational trauma. We feel in our bones and our skin the attempted genocide of indigenous people on this continent

and Jewish people on another, the violence of apartheid and slavery, the lasting effects of Jim Crow, and the abuse and murder of generations of Black bodies through policing and mass incarceration. They are the sum of our history, which creates horizons within which there is no imagining a better world, only surviving this one.

When our children are not free to imagine, they live in fear of the future. There is no celebration of their potential. On a drive home from an extracurricular activity, my son said to me, “I wish I wasn’t Latino because then I would be safe.” Parents, educators, social workers, and pastors alike remind children that we love them, not just because it is the right thing to do, but because the world sends these innocent children the opposite message. We have to be realistic about the ways our children of color behave in a certain way around police, to explain the violence against other children who look like them, and to prepare them for a world that has tried to eradicate or enslave them. Closing the purpose gap is about these conversations. These are conversations about purpose and meaning. What does it mean to discern purpose as a person of color? Does God call us to live a life of meaning and purpose? Does God allow us to imagine lives beyond the cages designed to capture our dreams, to snatch our lives’ many purposes, to incarcerate our imagination about our own self-worth? This is what we mean by the term “purpose gap.” There is a deep chasm between the children who get to dream freely and the children whose purpose must be shaped within a nightmare, between Pharaoh and Pilate on the one hand, and Moses and Jesus on the other, tattooed by death even before coming into this world.

There are truths that our collective bodies know and hold. A pain expressed in a word, a shout, a whisper, a hand gesture, or a look that does not need translation. Closing the purpose gap is about working through and exploring the wisdom and practices from our communities that might give the next generation a chance to dream with less fear and to dream of the realization of freedom. For example, I work at home with my children using a mixture of practices that deepen their sense of self. This work is accompanied by the ancestors, the community, and, of course, their parents, who love them beyond all things. I teach my children how to perform rituals, say prayers, and practice traditions that have been handed down over generations to ensure their survival and connect them to the above and beyond.

As I outlined in the introduction, intimate moments with our own communities and in spaces designed for our thriving do exist. They include neighborhood playgrounds, fields, worship spaces, historically Black

colleges and universities, Hispanic-serving institutions, tribal colleges, and the like. Yet with these exceptions, we largely spend our time responding to dominant white, Anglo, Protestant, patriarchal, cis-gendered, able-bodied, neuro-homogenous, heteronormative, and anthropocentric categories of existence. A gap exists between the dominant culture's ability to create meaning and purpose and my own. A misperception confronts us, saying that the only knowledge creators are the descendants of the dominating, colonizing, and violent forces. To assert our wisdom and knowledge, especially to say that our lives are divine and equal, is to demand life in the face of death. There will be resistance. If we are to liberate ourselves, we must demand our freedom and the right to dream, the right to have a purpose in this lifetime.

We have constructed and designed worlds around this myth of white supremacy and Western superiority. It is as though our society is part of a science fiction novel in which the author created a world reflective solely of his own white, male experience. Not a single day goes by in which whiteness, patriarchy, and colonization do not affect my life. In the grocery store, labels in the produce section provide a helpful reminder that people like me plant and harvest the food while privileged white families reap the benefits. From the dishes, to the coffee, to the clothes, the cars, the roads, the buildings, the systems and structures, rules and regulations, laws and legal structures—within all of these I will, at some point in my day, encounter whiteness as it subjugates, oppresses, and celebrates its victory. There is no denying it exists, because it surrounds us.

On the other hand, *we* exist everywhere too. The wisdom of my ancestors guides me and leads me. The love of our *tías*, mothers, and *abuelas* guides us to lives of meaning and purpose. Their example proves why I need to author this book in a hue, a tone, and a color that reflects the love of the divine. Next time someone of my hue or tone, or our brothers and sisters, *primos* and *primas*, look for literature to help find meaning and purpose, they will have in this book something that reflects both their reality and their beauty. If, as I have argued elsewhere,⁴ vocation is the call to life, then I claim here that external conditions have as much to do with one finding one's purpose as does one's internal discernment. To understand the purpose gap, one need only the vocational literature, the theology of vocation, and the self-help genre to see it was not intended for us.

Those from marginalized and minoritized communities must begin with our material reality. White, upper-middle-class scholars typically author works in the fields of vocation, meaning, purpose, and related disciplines in self-help and psychological well-being. That is not to say that

the writing coming from my colleagues Dorothy Bass,⁵ David Cunningham,⁶ Kathleen Cahalan,⁷ Dori Baker and Joyce Mercer,⁸ Diana Butler Bass,⁹ Parker Palmer,¹⁰ and David Brooks,¹¹ or the great collection William Placher¹² pulled together in exploring the vocational writings of Martin Luther, George Fox, Walter Rauschenbusch, Søren Kierkegaard, and the like, are necessarily wrong or bad. It does not mean that we cannot go back to definitions as set forth by Thomas Merton,¹³ Dorothy Day,¹⁴ or the like. It is not to dismiss Rick Warren's popular *The Purpose Driven Life*, because there is deep value in knowing that our purpose exists beyond our own desires. However, when Warren writes, "You were made of God, not vice versa, and life is about letting God use you for his purposes, not your using him for your own purpose," I cringe.¹⁵ For young children of color who are locked up against their will, whose lives are cut short, who never have a shot, this was not God's nor should be society's plan for the innocent. They should not be used and abused. Suffering children are not in God's plan, and if it is, that is not a God worth believing in.

White authors write from a particular place that could not be farther from the fields in which I grew up, a fact none of them would argue, for the backgrounds and cultural vantage points of white authors often go unaccounted. In a slightly comical story, I was set to present with several scholars on the topic of meaning. One of them, a preeminent scholar and middle-aged white woman, asked me what I was going to talk about. I told her about my work on meaning and purpose. She asked if I knew her work and the work of one of her friends, emphasizing that they are both well known. I responded, "Of course. In my research, I make sure to look at people doing similar work." And after a slight pause I added, "Do you think you and your friend know my work?"

Without hesitation her response was "No." However, she knew the work of all the other presenters that night, two white scholars who did nothing in our shared field of study. I am not saying that everyone must know my work, but the assumption of power was clear. I was supposed to know her and her friend's work, but they do not have to be curious or even think twice about what is appearing in their own discipline from my community. Their work is the standard, and mine is only a niche, a particularity, a margin to the center.

Even in the best-case scenario, authors from majority cultures qualify their writings with a level of awareness, saying something like, "I want to recognize my privilege. My white, cis-gendered, middle-class, heteronormative, and educated background informs how I write and think."

Sometimes they will add something like, “. . . who writes from stolen land and recognizing that I benefit from years of oppression to communities of color.” Without missing a beat, they all seem to go on to re-create the same power dynamics in their writing that they had set out to dismantle with their recognition of power and privilege. As Jennifer Harvey writes in *Raising White Kids*, it is not just about acknowledging difference; it is about being race-conscious enough to undo and dismantle the very systems that create the purpose gap between white children and everyone else.¹⁶ If you have the power to acknowledge white privilege, you have the power to dismantle white supremacy. The distance between the two is closer than people think.

I want to acknowledge some especially important work that I think drives this point home. I love Brené Brown. I am a better person because of her writing, which has calmed some of my inner doubts and rage. It has influenced my thinking and has challenged me in ways that have made me a better person, scholar, parent, and human. However, I want to address an assumption she makes that has become a famous Internet meme. In *Rising Strong*, she tells a tender story about parenting and wanting our children to know that we love them: “All I know is that my life is better when I assume that people are doing their best. It keeps me out of judgment and lets me focus on what is, and not what should or could be.”¹⁷ In her book *Rising Strong*, she quotes her therapist, who told her, “People are doing the best they can”¹⁸ (which became the Internet meme). Brown argues that by assuming people are doing their best and appealing to their better nature, we will be whole and happy. We could live a better life.

On this single point, I disagree with Brené Brown with every fiber of my being. Though she is writing to discuss how to make sure people feel loved, just as I have set out to do, we have remarkably different starting places.¹⁹ People are *not* doing their best. Her social location may give her that viewpoint, but it does not provide the full picture, not even close. The purpose gap is real, because, in fact, her people have not always had the best intentions. Even though it is easy and pleasant to assume people are at their core altruistic and working for the freedom of those around them, the facts suggest otherwise. Even well-meaning people are not doing their best to create conditions for others to thrive.

To close the purpose gap, parents of color must teach our children they are loved despite a world that is not doing its best. In a very embodied way, I teach my son how to survive this world that has set out to destroy his people more than once in recent history. As a Latino Jew with indigenous roots, there have been multiple attempts to annihilate his peoples.

Those who were doing their best watched as it happened, over and over. I must teach my son, and my daughter, about these histories, precisely because people are not doing their best.

Basic activities like jogging through a white neighborhood are not safe for some of us. Working is not safe for some of us. To call the police is certainly not safe for us. To demand an equitable education is not safe for us. To believe that people are doing their best is to tell yourself a lie with a strong historic precedent for marginalized and communities of color. The propagation of the idea that people are doing their best is a truth that is part of a long line of self-justifying, colonialist ideas that are rotten at their core: colonial piety.²⁰ You may want it to be true because it helps you feel better. But if we are going to create conditions for future generations to thrive, we start from our material and historical reality. The truth is that the history and legacy of colonization, the ramifications of slavery, the continued incarceration of our families, and the exploitation of our people and our labor all point to a different set of facts, a different set of conditions that create and exacerbate the purpose gap. The purpose gap is best expressed when someone in Brené Brown's target demographic—middle-class, educated, white women—read her work and know that it was written for them, and someone like me knows that it was written for them too. I must translate her work to make it applicable to readers of color, a task that all students and people of color must do constantly within dominant culture. My people are not even an afterthought. And at the same time, I recognize Brown's writing is as close as it comes to helping someone like me find my inner freedom.

Let's look at a few more pieces of evidence to show how the belief that everyone is a "good Samaritan" is wrong and dangerous. "Sixty million and more" is the dedication in the late Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, signifying all those lives lost to the transatlantic slavery system that empowered those of white, European ancestry and robbed Black and African American people of their history, culture, wealth, health, and homeland.²¹ The ramifications of the transatlantic slave trade on the vocational outcomes of African Americans in this country go well beyond Thomas Craemer's modest reparations estimate of \$14 trillion.²² The impact of generational trauma, the stripping of generations of wealth, health, and the sacred, the lost stories and ancestors, and the loss of being treated as beloved by God ripples across generations. The journey still haunts the collective imagination of what is possible: that freedom and purpose were stolen. Consider Zora Neale Hurston's *Barracoon*, a work drawing on her interview with Cudjo Lewis, who survived that journey as a child. She

conducted the interviews in 1927 and 1931, but the book was not released until 2018.²³ What does it mean to discern your purpose when you have a living memory of the transatlantic slave trade? Angela Sims's incredible work *Lynched: The Power of Memory in a Culture of Terror*, grounds the history of lynching in the oral histories and memories of African Americans today. What does it mean to have living memories of these heinous acts informing your imagination of the possible?²⁴ The question of purpose is central in Octavia Butler's *Kindred*.²⁵ Her main character, Dana, finds herself transported between two realities: her life in the twenty-first century as an accomplished professional and a life enslaved in the antebellum South. The violence against Black life and Black lives, and the relative silence about that violence in my colleagues' work on vocation, meaning, and purpose on the matter, casts a deep shadow over that work.

Elie Wiesel writes, "For the survivor who chooses to testify, it is clear: his duty is to bear witness for the dead and for the living. He has no right to deprive future generations of a past that belongs to our collective memory. To forget would be not only dangerous but offensive; to forget the dead would be akin to killing them a second time."²⁶ While at Boston University, I had the privilege of sitting with Elie Wiesel for coffee. Throughout his career Wiesel honored the more than six million Jews murdered during the Shoah, the Holocaust. He was clear that it was not enough to just remember those who were lost. It was important to remember that *the world watched* as the Jewish people were targeted and executed for simply existing. People were not doing their best. To turn away, to write about something else, would be to betray the memory, the unfulfilled lives and purposes not pursued of the Jewish children in the concentration camps, of our human brethren. Though his philosophy was different from Wiesel's, Viktor Frankl's reflections on life on the inside of a concentration camp, *Man's Search for Meaning*, explores similarly the question of how one finds meaning in such harrowing circumstances. He writes that although the world may want to strip a person of their humanity, each human is unique. He claims that "this uniqueness and singleness which distinguishes each individual and gives a meaning to his existence has a bearing on creative work as much as it does on human love."²⁷ His vision of life, meaning, and purpose is cast from inside the concentration camp. It is from that place that purpose is discerned.

David Treuer writes, "In 1890, the U.S. Census Bureau tabulated that there are fewer than two hundred thousand Indians left alive, of populations that had likely numbered over twenty million."²⁸ The sustained genocide of multiple indigenous peoples in North America has

been carried out over generations. When people and cultures are wiped out, we do not have the luxury to assume people are doing their best. In *The Heartbeat of Wounded Knee: Native America from 1890 to the Present*, Treuer carefully lays out the ways indigenous peoples have been targeted for genocide and how some found the means to survive. If you are an indigenous person or descended from those who survived this intentional genocide, how do you discern purpose from this space? How do we assume everyone is doing their best, when history, and the current reality, has proven the exact opposite?

These atrocities and genocides, all perpetrated on an international scale and all tethered to the white, European quest to dominate the globe, prevent me from buying into any line that suggests, "People are doing their best." Worse yet would be to say that these practices of domination no longer exist, hence ignoring current conditions and dismissing the deep-rooted and persistent effects of colonialism. *Coloniality* is a term used in academic circles to describe the lasting impacts of colonialism and supremacy.²⁹ One example of this lasting impact is that on any given day in the United States, nearly 48,000 children are incarcerated. According to the Prison Policy Initiative, at least 10 percent of those youth are incarcerated in adult facilities.³⁰ Nearly 5,000 children are locked in with adults, most of them Black and Brown. We have sealed their futures as a society. We are not doing our best. How does any one of those young people discern their purpose in a cell? How do their families discern purpose knowing their loved ones, their children, are treated like animals?

How do my people dream or imagine their purpose when immigration enforcement raids their places of work? How do we reflect on our place in the world when white individuals can place our lives in peril by summoning the police to answer false threats to their privilege? How do we find our purpose when military-style police squads can burst into our homes and kill us simply because they got the wrong address? How do we take time for ourselves to discern our calling when we can be lynched simply for jogging along the street? How do we trust those sworn to serve and protect when police can casually choke the very life from our bodies? How do we slow down to discern our many purposes when we have those images and more always before us? How do we live into our call when the world riots and burns in response to that hate?

In 2020, while George Floyd lay dying from a police officer kneeling on his neck, he called for his mother. This was the same cry on the lips of those whose lives were stolen and brought to these lands. That cry for Mama reverberates on the border as children traverse the desert for

a better life, only to be separated from their parents and locked in cages. It is the call of neglected Puerto Ricans after natural and political disasters. It is the same cry when indigenous children were pulled from their families and forced to go first to religious schools and missions and later to government boarding and residential schools. This theft of life and purpose stretches across generations. What does it mean to be human in systems of domination such as these?

How do we imagine people are doing their best when Eric Garner, John Crawford, Michael Brown, Ezell Ford, Dante Parker, Tanisha Anderson, Tamir Rice (a twelve-year-old child with a toy in his hand shot dead by police), Romain Brisbon, Freddie Gray, Sandra Bland, and Vanessa Guillén, a US Army soldier murdered inside Fort Hood, are constant reminders of the opposite being true? How do we discern our purpose when we live in a country that separates children from their families? How do we discern our purpose when 2,654 children are removed from their families, many being placed in cages?³¹ How do we discern life when detained children die because of their immigration status, considered not to belong to us? Darlyn Cristabel Cordova-Valle (age ten), Jakelin Caal Maquín (seven), Felipe Gomez Alonzo (eight), Juan de León Gutiérrez (sixteen), Wilmer Josué Ramírez Vásquez (two), and Carlos Hernandez Vásquez (sixteen) passed away while being detained for seeking a better life.³² These young people made it to the border, but what of all those who did not? The journey has killed so many others, like Gilberto Francisco Ramos Juarez (fourteen), the young man mentioned above whose mother gave him a rosary and wrote a phone number on his belt.³³ These are children who speak multiple languages yet experience a poverty rate far higher than most other groups. These are my people, pursuing their purpose, creating a better life for the next generation through back-breaking labor, performing tasks considered as “essential,” even as their lives are not. Seventy-five percent of Latinos/as/xs work in the construction, agriculture, or hospitality industries. Without unions, the conditions in the fields would lack bathrooms, shade, and water. These rights had to be fought for using arguments that animals had better protections in the fields. People are not doing their best when basics like water and bathrooms need to be part of an organizing campaign.

Why do we think that people are doing their best as, in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, racism, prejudice, and hate crimes against Asian and Pacific Islander persons skyrocketed to a hundred per day?³⁴ A reminder is found in the heartbreaking graphic memoir *The Best We Could Do*, by Thi Bui.³⁵ Bui traces her family’s attempt to create a better life, despite

the death-dealing and traumatizing narratives caused by the conflict in Viet Nam in the 1970s. People are not doing their best. And for some of us, discerning life's meaning and purpose comes with this backdrop. These are the conditions we live and breathe.

This book is written with this historic and contemporary backdrop of violence and oppression. We will discern purpose within this backdrop, never letting it escape our gaze because the pain never escapes our flesh.

Reflections

Where is your starting place? What histories and names are you remembering? What are your stories that demonstrate this world was not built for you? What did your ancestors have to survive for you to draw breath?