

A Book Review of “Rest is Resistance” by Tricia Hersey, Turned Manifesto

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Abstract

“A Book Review of Rest is Resistance, by Tricia Hersey, Turned Manifesto,” is a narrative written by Elizabeth Williams Wesley, a fierce advocate for educational equity. In her narrative, Elizabeth describes the impact of burn out on a Black woman educator and as the first DEI practitioner at an anti-Black, elite institution, with a predominantly white teaching staff serving a majority student of color population, after the uprisings of 2020. Elizabeth describes the conditions that brought her to burn out, leaving her spiritually, emotionally, and physically depleted- exacerbating already existent physical health conditions and causing mental health distress. Elizabeth discusses how burn out impacted her, leading her to take a year off for a “Restoration to Health” sabbatical to rest and heal. She describes the struggle and guilt associated with resting. She briefly introduces and reviews Tricia Hersey’s book, Rest Is Resistance, and how that book influenced her rest practices, transformed her mindset towards work and instilled the ideology of rest as a practice of liberation, and how those practices offer her relief from current and future burn-out. She highlights her plan for her sabbatical to build sustainable healthy habits that would fortify her mentally, physically, spiritually, and emotionally; consisting primarily of exercising and going to therapy, but that it flourished into much more. Elizabeth offers a critique and solutions to the sustainability of the teaching profession. Then, she describes how she rested during her sabbatical, what she learned through rest, and how rest allowed her to envision what education could be in her vision of a new school.

Keywords: *Black educators, burn out, healing, wellness, anti-blackness, equity, wholeness*

Am I doing this right? Am I making an impact? Am I the best person for this job? What if everyone finds out that I have no idea what I am doing?

In 2020, I faced crashing waves of stereotype threat, identity-threat, racial stress, imposter syndrome, and pressure in my new position as, at that time, the only school district teacher in the role

of Director of Equity and Inclusion (DEI) at a public magnet school. I became a target as the first teacher in this position and a Black woman who was charged with implementing change as determined by our Black students. I was in constant survival mode, and hypervigilant in this

role. These thoughts and feelings were unlike me, and my anxiety intensified over time.

I also knew my physical health was in jeopardy when after a summer of organizing and protesting for Black lives, I experienced vertigo from September to December in 2020. My high blood pressure skyrocketed. I was put on another blood pressure medication and was also diagnosed with stage 3 chronic kidney disease due to my kidney atrophy. Still, I pushed through the unrelenting mental and emotional re-traumatization of my K-college schooling that I experienced just by listening to the students I organized with express their own racialized experiences.

The following school year, during my second year as DEI, I prepared to conduct student selection for admissions and increase the numbers of Black and brown students attending our public magnet school just as I had done the year prior. After a month of going back and forth with administration, I realized that they did not intend on including me in this process. That was when I knew that I was not going to be respected in my position as DEI and needed to go on a sabbatical.

All of this was compounded by an inner conflict that was taking a toll on me. I knew firsthand from my own experiences that the culture and climate of the school was toxic and needed work before Black students' geniuses could be recognized, and before they could feel a sense of belonging. To feel the same pain as the pain that I see in the faces of my students as I'm trying to protect them has a certain type of psychological effect. This must be what my ancestors experienced as they tried to protect their children. As Dr. King had expressed, I felt that I was "integrating my people into a burning house" (Belafonte & Shnayerson, 2011, p. 346).

The central issue is that the school is anti-Black as frequently illustrated. One incident transpired

during my first year at the school as an African American History Teacher and Varsity Basketball Coach. I was dressed in one of my many African skirts, earrings, necklaces, and bracelets, and a white-presenting teacher microaggressed me with a scoffing remark in front of a white woman teacher, "Gosh, Liz, can you be any more African?" They both laughed. I recognize this as the typical textbook and pervasive anti-Blackness that the school perpetuated as the norm.

In another instance, a white woman administrator allowed a white male teacher to have coffee that was left over from an alumni event, but physically blocked me, telling me that I could not have any because it was not for me. This same administrator rushed to tell me that one of my white girl basketball players would not be at practice due to a conflict with another school activity, instead of encouraging the athlete to speak directly with me as the head coach. Another white woman administrator, in catering to a white girl's tears, asked me if there was anything that I could do in teaching African American history to make this student feel more comfortable. I then answered her question in earnest, emphasizing the importance of the critical content of this course, particularly for white students—she changed the subject.

There were more incidents, numerous incidents, with white parents demanding entitlement and privilege for their children. At one point, I went to the only other Black administrator at that time, to let her know what was going on. She dismissed it as just par for the course. I understood then that there would be no protection, that *my* Blackness would not be accepted in this space, and this foreshadowed what my experience would be like at this school. It also confirmed my purpose in that school—to advocate for and to affirm Black and brown students who I now shared these school experiences with.

In this school, overt and frequent, anti-Blackness is tradition. It shows up as deficit thinking, the insidiously inequitable gatekeeping practices by teachers and administrators selecting students for higher-level courses like honors, AP, and the IB program. It is in the respectability politics and the disparate discipline. It is in the undervaluing of HBCUs, the curriculum omissions of Black scholars, authors, scientists, and mathematicians. It is in the ways they dismiss the concerns of Black students and families who are not legislators, administrators, or hold some other title of acclaim or status. It is in the way the school and alumni association treat Black administrators and Black teachers who do not acquiesce. It is in the ways the school locates the “problem” in the Black and brown students when they speak up and out for themselves, and not the systemic and institutionalized racism, described as “tradition.” Anti-Blackness results in students, and myself, facing imposter syndrome, stereotype threat, and identity threat, which are harmful to mental health and detrimental to focus and performance.

By the end of the school year, in 2022, after incurring all of this for five years, I felt spiritually depleted. I needed to breathe new air. The atmosphere was stifling. The gaslighting had me doubting myself into believing something was wrong with me. I needed to create space to think, and be with myself outside of this toxicity; to check in on myself. So, in order to save myself, I opted to go on a “Restoration to Health” sabbatical the following school year.

Sabbatical

The plan for my year-long sabbatical was to build sustainable healthy habits that would fortify me mentally, physically, spiritually, and emotionally; consisting primarily of exercising and going to therapy. However, this proved difficult for me, as I would not allow myself to sit still. The demands of

my position as DEI remained as I felt overwhelming guilt for prioritizing and caring for myself in this way and an intense pressure to be productive over this time. After all, what would I have to show for my time? And what will I say when people ask, “what did you do on sabbatical?” which sounds like, “what did you do with all of that time?” God forbid a teacher wastes time.

Woefully, after the school year ended, my plan immediately pivoted to starting a project based on an idea I have had for years: a program that sends teachers to Africa. Deeply impacted by my own travels to the motherland, and knowing that in order to be responsive to the social, emotional, and academic needs of our students, our teachers need to develop deep love and a respect for Black students and our culture. Too many of us who deem ourselves educators underestimate the necessity of relationship, intimacy—meaning trust, and love, in transferring wisdom to the next generation. This becomes more important when a teacher’s identity does not match that of their students.

I talked to and shared my plan with like-minded folks, near and far. I felt proud, but I was also neglecting myself and my needs. I was supposed to start the research for my program of sending teachers to Africa, but I proved too tired to do this work because my intentions did not align with my present needs. By December, I had not written or researched a word. I grew frustrated and disappointed, slicing myself with sharp, cutting, self-talk. When I spoke to my therapist, she asked why I thought I was having such difficulty. I solemnly stated, “because I am lazy.” She responded, “No, Liz, you are not lazy. It’s because you are tired. You need to rest.” I did not understand. I had taken the year off and had all of this extra time. In my mind I was not *doing* anything, so I *was resting*. Then, enlightenment came as I scrolled social media; a post that simply

read, “Rest is Productive.” Instantly, I was released. That was the answer. This post allowed me to accept resting as my work during this time.

In therapy, I started to reflect on the deep roots of my own exhaustion, anxiety, and depression and began reading the book, *Rest is Resistance: A Manifesto*, by Tricia Hersey, also known as the Nap Bishop of the Nap Ministry. The format is broken into four parts: “REST!” “DREAM!” “RESIST!” and, “IMAGINE!” I was deeply transformed by this book because it allowed me to ease the tension between myself and *rest*, understand my right to rest, and critique our education system more clearly. This book was, and is, liberating.

Rest is Resistance

Rest is Resistance: A Manifesto is a book that has the power to alter our mindset around work-life balance and change the culture of education to a culture of care, starting with caring more for ourselves. A former educator herself, Tricia Hersey writes as an educator, therapist, student, mother, Black woman, and minister. She shares stories in a first-person perspective, of her testimony on how rest saved her life and why it is a must we, people of the global majority, intentionally rest in order to sustain and thrive. She emphasizes that we are not resting to be more productive, but for reparations and liberation from an unrealistic, capitalistic, grind culture that places productivity over people. After reading this book my mindset adapted to a *work-rest balance*; now understanding that work is just a part of life.

This book is revolutionary. In *Rest is Resistance*, Hersey literally “freedom dreams” our beloved community towards liberation. This is a progressive read, pushing us towards radical, mindful, and sometimes subversive self-care of no longer sacrificing ourselves to grind culture. It is

subversive in that it empowers us to take what we need, when we need it, without permission. It shatters the dominant narrative that we are only as valuable as our labor production, and that we seldom *earn* the right to rest. *Rest is Resistance* calls for damn near mutinous periods of, “Get somebody else to do it,” saying *no* when society expects us to do *it*, and otherwise bucking the system to reclaim our humanity, specifically as Black people in this capitalistic society. Furthermore, the book describes how self-care has been co-opted by that very system that is still enslaving people: capitalism. Hersey disrupts the capitalistic notion that resting is only accessible to those who can afford it by means of purchasing vacations, bath bombs, mani/pedis, spa visits, or massages. Resting is not a privilege. We, of the global majority, are the mules of the world and are resisting and resting for reparations. Resting is not a luxury—it is our birthright. As a teacher on sabbatical due to burnout from fighting to end anti-Blackness in school, I was able to find solace in this book.

As a mother and teacher, I interrogated myself and reflected deeply on Hersey’s discussion of my part in the indoctrination of children into capitalism and grind culture. To our babies’ detriment, at home and school, we connect young people’s grades to self-worth and their output to a currency in the form of “allowances. Our children are not their grades or GPAs or SAT scores, especially in this current inequitable system. This was and is difficult for me to unlearn and I struggle with this as a parent.

Many of us: parents, teachers, and school administrators, instill fear of failure, mindsets of scarcity, and notions of competition into our students, replicating and perpetuating the harm of this system as taught to us. After reflecting, I have refocused my energies to the development of their wholeness, self-awareness, self-love, and

happiness. They are more than enough and certainly don't have to grind to be *twice as good*.

As an African American History Teacher, one of the aspects that I appreciated most from Hersey's book—aside from the gentle remembrances of the love and influence of her ancestors, father, and grandmother—is Hersey's assertions from the work of James Cone, founder of Black Liberation Theology, and others. With Cone's teaching that Black Americans are not here to be exploited, but here for freedom, Hersey asserts herself as an activist, weaving the historical context of rest as reparations with liberation proclaiming that rest is how we reclaim our humanity and our divinity. From her background in Black Liberation Theology, Hersey speaks of the spiritual and ancestral wisdom that awaits us in our dreams. This book calls for rest in order to imagine, dream, and create anew with a loving community and with a goal of liberation. She asserts that dreaming and resting is our earned entitlement, divine right, and human right, because our ancestors already did the work. African people laid the foundation for the American economy and we still carry the effects of the violence, human trafficking, and stolen labor of our ancestors in our nervous system. This is why we are due rest now. Rest is justice. Rest is self-liberation. Rest is how we heal. Rest is reparations, and it is empowering to be reminded that we are in charge of our liberation.

Putting Theory to Practice

Here is how I embodied the book, put Hersey's theory to practice, and imagined a new education system.

REST!

“We are barely surviving from our sleep deprivation, worker exploitation, and exhaustion. We must rest” (p. 55).

Rest was literally what the doctor and my therapist called for, and I did just that. I sunbathed on my patio when the weather warmed, meditated at my ancestor altar in the greenhouse, and napped on my couch on rainy days. Thinking. Healing. Reading. Dreaming about what brought me here.

“Yes, the system continues raging...” (p. 59)

I expected to read in *Rest is Resistance* that the educational implications of rest would be to make a teacher's life more sustainable, but the system is not built for what we really need: rest. According to Hersey, as we push to change the systems and structures, we need to sustain ourselves by taking a daily, ten-minute minimum, meditation to connect mind with body. That helps, but I believe we need more. We need smaller class sizes. We need more pay. Most of all, we need deep rest; as in paid time off. Other than a four-day workweek, I would propose the state legislature mandate that teachers take one paid year off, every four years. This is radical, I know. Alas, as Hersey conveys, the system needs us tired and overworked so that we continue to grind, preventing us from imagining or dreaming something new and healthy. This ceases us from moving towards liberation. We deserve more than exhaustion for the purpose of productivity. As it exists in the State of Pennsylvania, teachers on sabbatical are only allocated 50% of their pay. This needs to be at least 80%, that way teachers can actually afford to take a restful sabbatical, and take care of themselves. We, teachers, need therapy, paid for, in full, by the school system.

We need healing, wellness, and wholeness in order to build the healthy and trusting relationships necessary to be an effective educator. As a result of

this investment, the social emotional learning of our students would improve, and teachers would gain positive mental health. With these proposed changes, we would also see better teacher recruitment and retention rates. But first, we need rest.

DREAM!

“For Black people who are descendants of enslaved Africans via the Transatlantic Slave Trade and chattel slavery, consider the fact that your ancestors built this entire nation for free with their stolen labor. Use this knowledge to tap into what they have already done, so you don’t have to grind yourself into oblivion now. Your ancestors want to make space for your ease and rest” (p. 103-4).

My grandmom had a garden. One of my favorite pictures of her is ingrained in my memory of her standing in her garden, wearing a big flowy nightgown, with a cigarette scissored in her fingers. That was her sanctuary. I did not know it then, but it would be mine, too. My husband built my two raised garden beds out of cedar planks about 10 years ago. I have been gardening ever since. This fall, he built me a greenhouse. It is 6’ x 8’ and enough room for an ancestor altar, a raised garden bed, and a chaise lounge. I sit out there, eating my harvested tomatoes, reading, scrolling, looking at the trees, looking at my garden, and meditating at my altar. Listening for a word from my grandmom, and them.

I tend to my houseplants as a part of mindfulness and as a connection to my grandmom, my ancestors, and Spirit. This is what I learned:

1. Be patient, slow down, and be satisfied as I burnt out my greenhouse collards in the fall by over fertilizing them. Had I

waited and trusted the process, I would have had Christmas greens like I planned.

2. Believe in yourself; nothing is more valuable than experience. Also, hone your craft. Ask for help if needed—research.
3. Trust things are happening even if you can’t see them; we don’t have to try very hard. A lot of growth is taking place underground or in soil. It turned out, without trying, tomatoes, cucumbers, and a bok choy plant started growing in the greenhouse. The bok choy seed I spread after the failed collard greens, and the cucumbers and tomatoes were from my compost that I used in the soil.
4. Deadhead and prune- cut off old stuff that is no longer growing and thriving. It is literally dragging you down. Realize and make peace with the end of a season. When you cut off the old, more energy goes toward sprouting new, stronger, and healthier life, in divine time.
5. You cannot sit next to everyone. With some people you will share synergistic experiences, while others will drain you of your nutrients, or give you bugs.
6. Take up space, and also know when to move a few spaces down.
7. Hydrate, properly, thoroughly, and intentionally.
8. Resting with the circadian rhythm is best. Likewise, get 3-6 hours of sun a day.
9. Plants are resilient, just like us. They also offer a lot of grace for mistakes as a necessity for growth, as should we.
10. We live in abundance. Some may die, fall back, or momentarily cease to thrive, but there will be more. Always.

And you have more than enough.
Eliminate scarcity mindset.

Gardening is my joy, peace, rest, and my ease. I grew a spectacular sunflower, kale, spinach, broccoli, cucumbers, tomatoes, and peppers in my garden and juice them. I successfully reversed my high blood pressure. Rest is wellness.

RESIST!

“We have been socialized to believe in individualism and from the false reality that everything must be done right now” (p. 147).

I was intentional about recovering from the trauma of grind culture. I was going to listen to my body. I was no longer going to people please. I create(d) healthy boundaries. I rested and manifested my return to work. I realized that I did not want to come back “stronger,” I wanted to come back *softer*. Softer meaning that I was no longer going to fight to prove my worth; to work twice as hard. I am enough. I slowed down. I read, colored, and found my inner-child, teenager, and college girl. I took social media apps off of my phone. I did yoga and pilates. I observe(d) my thoughts. I repeat(ed) my mantras and affirmations: I am worthy. I live in abundance. I believe that the universe is conspiring in my favor. I meditate(d) and dream(t) to meet with my good ancestors. They told me to “unlearn and unleash.” They want me to use my voice, my gifts, and my talents to serve my community. I am.

By engaging in therapy, movement, and these mindfulness practices, I was able to alleviate a lot of mental anguish. Rest is healing.

IMAGINE!

“Our care and rest will open up a new future story” (p. 191)

I rested and meditated at my ancestor altar, and with their inspiration, I imagined this school.

A school centered on the principles of rest, a framework of healing centered education, and a curriculum of the African Teaching Tradition. I am not all the way there yet. Still meditating on it. I don’t have to have all of the answers right now, but the answer is in me, I’m sure, because Hersey said that my body is a place of infinite wisdom.

Frankie’s Grace: A Community School, is for the education of, and to meet the holistic needs of, the entire family and community: academically, socially, culturally, psychologically, and economically. We will teach the teachers the tenets of liberation with an aim to decolonize thinking. True liberation for Black folks is to just “be” in order to realize our talents. We are not made to live up to excessive standards of “Black excellence” nor do we have to constantly measure our worth under self-esteem crushing practices of respectability politics. Our culture will be centered, valued, and celebrated. We will incorporate African spirituality practices, and community values. We will teach our history with rich detail, as it is motivating and inspiring. It will guide us to liberation.

It will be a safe place; a place of respite for the community, and a place of love and joy where students thrive, because Black joy is resistance. There will be no suspensions, and expulsion lists, because there are no throwaways in our community. Every person is gifted with talents. There will be no standardized testing. No competition. No rugged individualism. No bell curve. No perfectionism. No grit. We will practice truth and reconciliation restorative justice practices. Assignments will be collaborative. There

will be no grades, and no grade levels. Students will decide for themselves how to demonstrate what they have learned. Learning will be practical and based on the needs for our community to thrive.

We will practice cooperative economics for wealth building and mutual aid for the community, and teach the principles of Nguzo Saba and of Ubuntu. We will make space for pleasure, leisure, daydreaming, imagining, and experimentation. We will have a garden and greenhouse to teach plant-medicine and how to be stewards of the Earth. We will employ people from the community. We will be self-sustaining.

We will have therapy to peel back layers of generational trauma experienced individually and collectively. We will practice meditation, connecting our body and mind, and affirmations to counter and deprogram societal messages about who we are. It will be a space of healing. There will be balance. We can continue to imagine and create new ways of existing. No urgency. No rushing. No overworking to justify your worth. No deadlines except the natural deadlines like when it is time to put a seed in the dirt. It will be a loving community where all are welcome. No racism, no homophobia, no ableism, no patriarchy. We live in abundance of time, space, and resources. We aim to recognize and celebrate our genius, excellence, and inherent worth. Rest is liberation.

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Author Bio

Elizabeth Williams Wesley is an educator and education consultant with the expertise of nearly two decades as a teacher of African American history. Her passion lives in healing centered education and her commitment to the wholeness and academic strivings of students. She earned her Masters of Science in Education from Temple University and her Bachelors of Arts in American Studies from Rutgers University. Beyond this, she is a Pan-Africanist, mentor, mother, wife, birth and postpartum doula, world traveler, healer, poet and coach who enjoys gardening in her spare time.