

Dignified and Indignant: Finding acceptance among Black women

I remember the first time my sister ever called me sister.

She was about to give me a facial, my niece came down and asked some question about why my nails were painted. My sister said, "Because she wanted to." And by "she," she meant me. In that moment I felt full.

There's something immeasurable about being seen by another Black woman. Your whole self comes into focus. Your past, your pain, your potential. All the joy hidden in the pockets of your curves, in the kinks of your curls. It's all exposed and bare in her eyes. That reflection can bring the deepest connection, though sometimes we might lash out from the vulnerability of it all. I grew up with my eyes focused on the Black women in my life. I thank God everyday I've been blessed with their beauty. Even when they hurt me.

I'll never forget. I was in Atlanta with my face made, afro out, femme'd to the nines! I ran into at least three Black women on the street with the biggest smiles complimenting my look. My Yankee ass felt more welcomed in the South by these women than by any of the faux trans tolerance that white folks offered me back home. They would never know my name, but still offered me the dignity of feeling whole.

Being trans(gender) means I got to come into my womanhood later than most girls. It also means the dignity of my womanhood has never gone undisputed. I've had to fight every preconceived notion of who I was, from doctors, partners, family and my own upbringing to become the woman I am today. Every time I interact with someone new there is a negotiation of my womanhood, and whether today I will be respected, tolerated or despised.

In truth this makes me no different from any Black woman. Our womanhood — our dignity — is constantly in dispute. By the white systems we live in or by the men in our own families. By beauty standards and double standards and the burdens loaded on our backs. Sometimes by each other, too. How would you name the grace it takes not to raze this world to the ground?

*My therapist asks how I'm doing. "I'm feeling **dignified** and **indignant**."*

I've determined that Black women do not owe the grace we give the world. A grace that's rarely extended to us without guilt or self-interest. But we continue to hold our neighbors, our sisters and our brothers, and our cousins and their children. We share our unrequited love because we believe others may one day share it with us. We speak out against injustice not just for our own seat, but demand places at the table for everyone to eat. We are dignified in our compassion. We are righteous in our indignation. We march toward liberation no matter how long it takes others to join us.

Years ago, there was an older Black woman helping me at a store. I don't remember all that well now, but I know I wasn't looking that girlish. She looked me in the eyes and called me "ma'am." It was that look, you could tell she chose to use the word she did.

So many Black women throughout my life accepted me, even at times I wasn't fully accepting of myself. And there's that grace again. The choice to treat others with a dignity that is rarely returned. Black women don't sit around waiting for the world to accept us. We offer the acceptance we have in our souls without the expectation of mutuality.

One day I hope the world will accept me the way my sisters have. When the dignity Black women offer is finally reflected back to us, we will be able to build a world of rest and care and joy for every person in our midst. Until then, we'll keep our strut with our heads held high, dignified and indignant, holding each other as best we can.