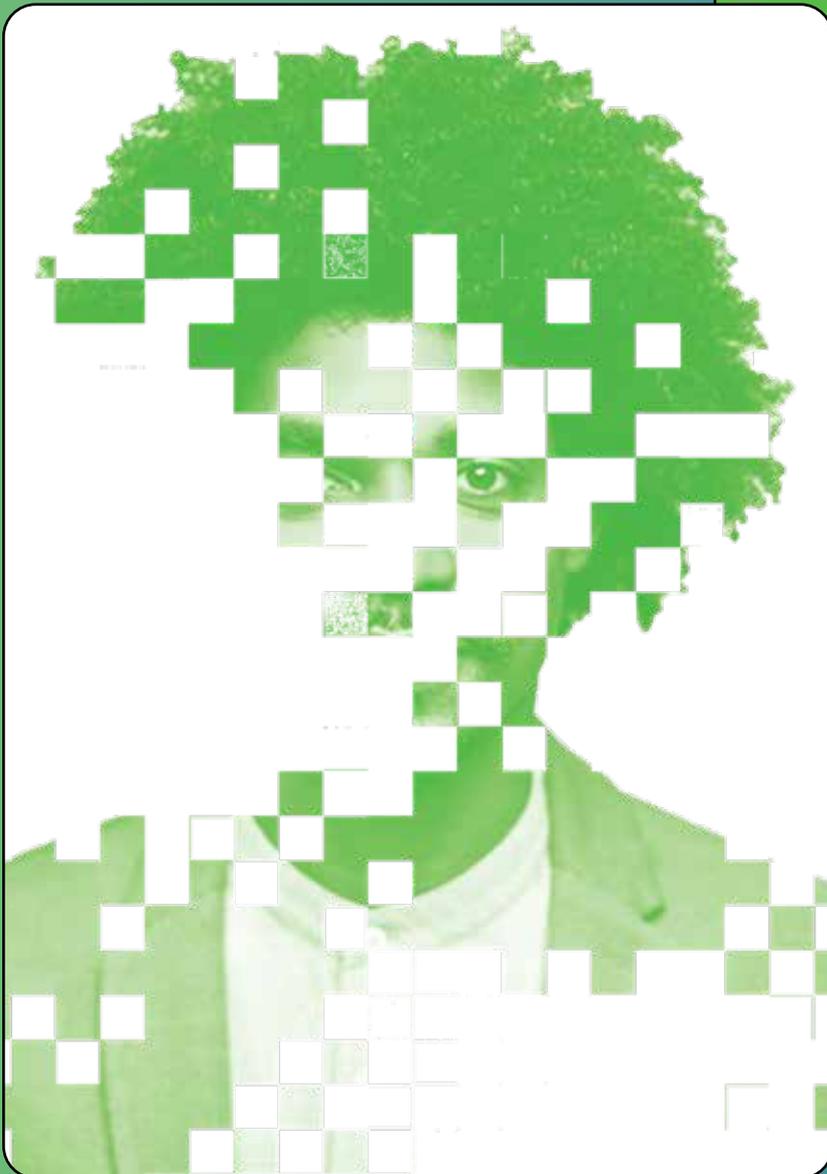
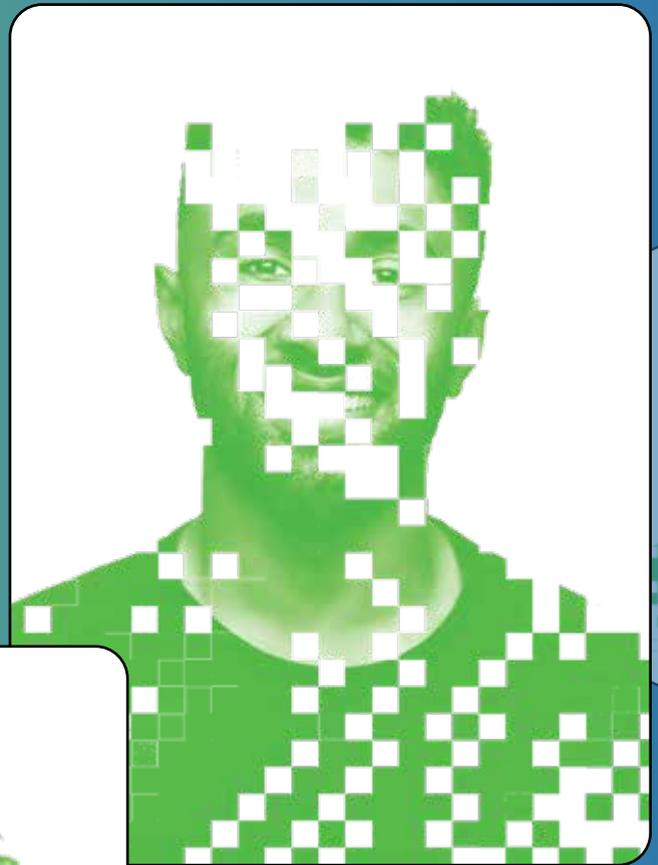
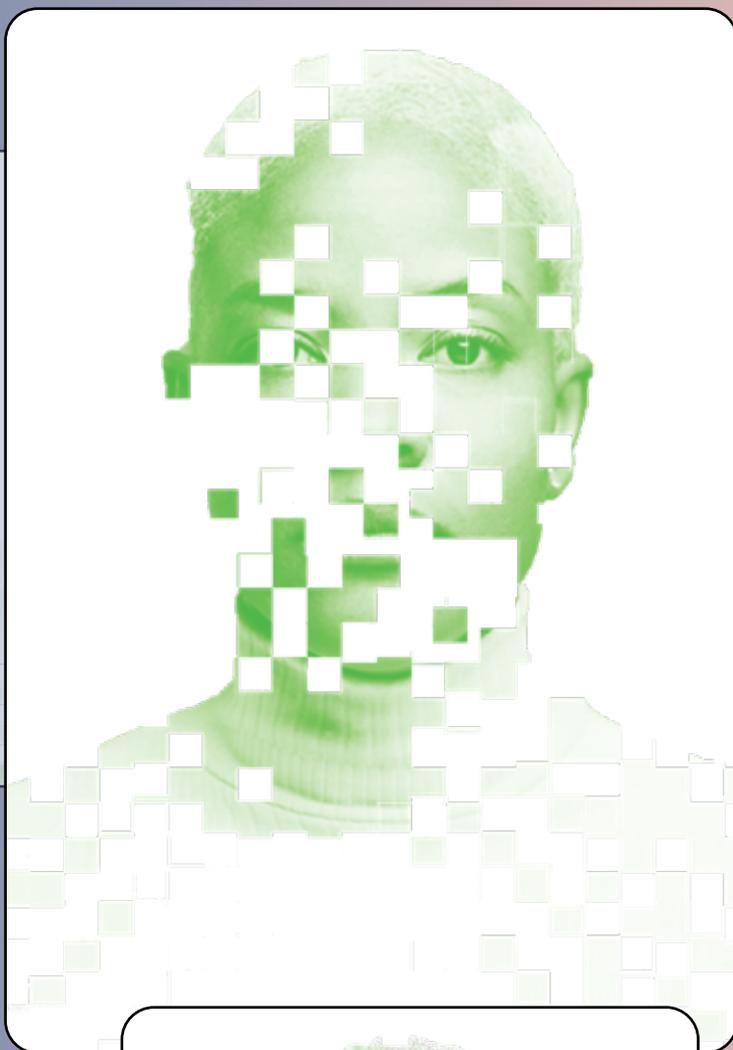
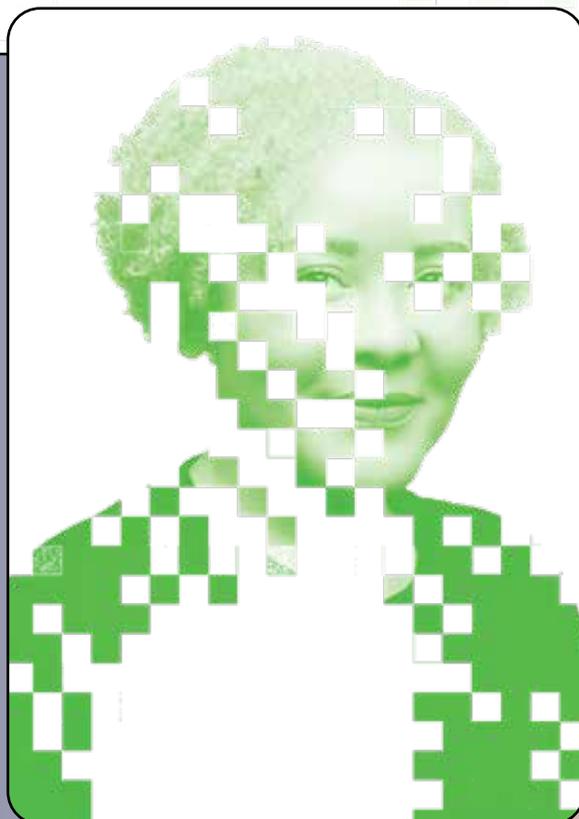
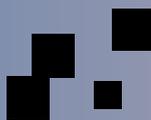


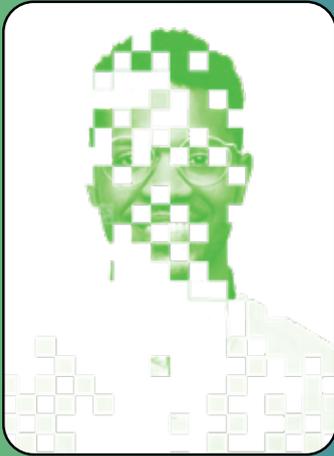
**“SO WHAT
IS IT THEY’RE
ASKING YOU
TO DO?”**





Civil rights activist Ruby Sales sees technology devaluing us and erasing our history. But she believes in young people of faith's ability to promote God's better vision of us.





If asked “What era would you time travel to if you could?”

many young Black and brown and Indigenous people would answer in a flash, “None of them.” Why? We’re too aware of the past and what it means for us today—we tweet about the results of American slavery and can break news of the latest injustice to emerge from centuries-long hatred of nonwhite skin faster than MSNBC. We feel the negative effects of history enough each day to not want to go back there.

But maybe we should. If all we see of ourselves on TV and social media is us sick, oppressed, or dead, what other understanding of ourselves do we miss? How can we remember that we are greater than the damage done—that our history holds more than that and so might our present?

Ruby Sales, founder and director of the SpiritHouse Project, helps young people invested in faith and social justice see themselves through the lens of their divine wealth and boundless potential rather than through eyes dimmed by media and versions of history shaped by white supremacy. Sales, who by age 17 was a Student Nonviolent Coordination Committee member registering people to vote in her home state of Alabama, has a Master of Divinity degree from the Episcopal Divinity School and is a preacher, speaker, and intergenerational mentor on racial, economic, and social justice. I spoke with her in December by phone.

—Da’Shawn Mosley

Da'Shawn Mosley: I watched a YouTube video of you speaking in 2015 at St. Albans Episcopal Church in D.C. and was struck by what you said about today's youth: that the most recent generations have incredible insight but haven't lived enough to have hindsight.

Ruby Sales: Now that I'm working with young folks in my fellowship program and have had some time to weigh how things have changed from the '90s to the 2000s, I think young people lack insight also. When you have been raised in a technological age, when history is no longer lived experience but is created on social media and reproduced through technology, I think that long-term memory is affected, as well as the ability to empathize and connect with human suffering. There is a difference between being able to theorize about human suffering and being able to feel it. All of these are challenges faced by generations raised in a technocracy—the decimation of history, of who we are as a people.

Mosley: Yes. I see that in my own media consumption. I can watch all the buzzy, must-see, "life-changing" television shows and movies and more often than not retain almost none of it. What else do you sense that social justice-minded people and people of faith in general are not picking up or fighting with as much vigor as we could be?

Sales: The social gospel of meaninglessness. We are stuck in it and it does not deal with the issues that are part of the social, political landscape of the 21st century. What does it mean to exist in a militarized state designed to protect the interests of a global elite and decimate our ability to resist and even think critically about the world that we live in? Where is God in all of this? Where is hope and meaning in a life of such insurmountable greed and social malformation? I don't see a social gospel that gives us the good news. Instead, I still hear people calling people marginalized. Yes, you can tell me that I might be marginalized because of the state, but the good news is that I am significant and I am relevant, to my partners, to my family, to my community, and to God. We need a social, spiritual gospel that doesn't consider us just in relation to the project of democracy but as God's creation, that raises people up from being disposable to being essential.

Mosley: When we first spoke, you asked me about my background. I said I come from a low-income family and you corrected me. You told me that I don't have a low-income family, I have a family that has a low income—that there's a difference.

Sales: You described yourself in terms of your lack of money, your deficit. You totally diminished yourself, the complexities of your family, to one word. The social gospel we need is the same good news that Jesus gave in first-century Nazorean culture, that he was raising people up who had been considered disposable, a healing that enabled them to touch their full capacities as human beings and claim their power and not see themselves through the eyes of the empire. I think that many young Black folks, because their associations of the Lord are from the white folks, they tend to see themselves through the white gaze.

Another thing I've discovered, analyzing the values that young people ingest through TikTok and Instagram: How is it that you measure a person's worth? By their money, by their proximity to celebrities, by the fact that this video went viral or the number of followers that they have or the number of likes that they get? And all of those things do not reinforce the efficacy of our human lives. It says that a person's worth is measured by these material realities and that anyone who does not have these things are losers. That means that young Black people—because they have bought into the mythology that all Black people are poor—haven't made the connection: What in the hell have 111 historical Black colleges such as Meharry, Morehouse, Howard Law School, and Howard Medical School been doing for 100 years? Producing a Black middle class, a Black bourgeoisie. And because they have bought into the white gaze that all Black people are poor, there is a subtle contempt that many young Black folks have for other Black people who are economically dispossessed, and for themselves.

Mosley: That is frightening, that even in this "liberated space" we are still turning against ourselves.

Sales: The technocrats have managed to control information in society, to manufacture a false definition of who matters and who doesn't, and often the variables that say who matters are values that underscore whiteness and capitalism and patriarchy and heterosexism.

Mosley: Your mention of heterosexism reminds me of the story you told me about Lucy Slowe, dean of women in the early days of Howard, whom the school's community rose up to protect when her job was threatened because of her queerness.

Sales: Yes, she represented a community project where, given the onslaught and viciousness of segregation and white supremacy, Black people needed all hands on deck, the skills of anybody who could advance the race, educate the children, and preserve our right to liberty. What I was saying is that this whole notion that the Black community is homophobic is to give us what belongs to white people. Because we couldn't even vote, so how the hell could we be heterosexist? Heterosexism is at the heart of that system. Heterosexism means the ability to shape the system.

Mosley: Yes. My faith journey has always struggled because of the narrative pitting me against other Black people of faith, saying, "They're homophobic. They're not supportive of you."

Sales: That's really insidious, because those very same people don't say that you should vet all white people for their racism, including them, do they? They do not tell you to stop breaking bread [with them].

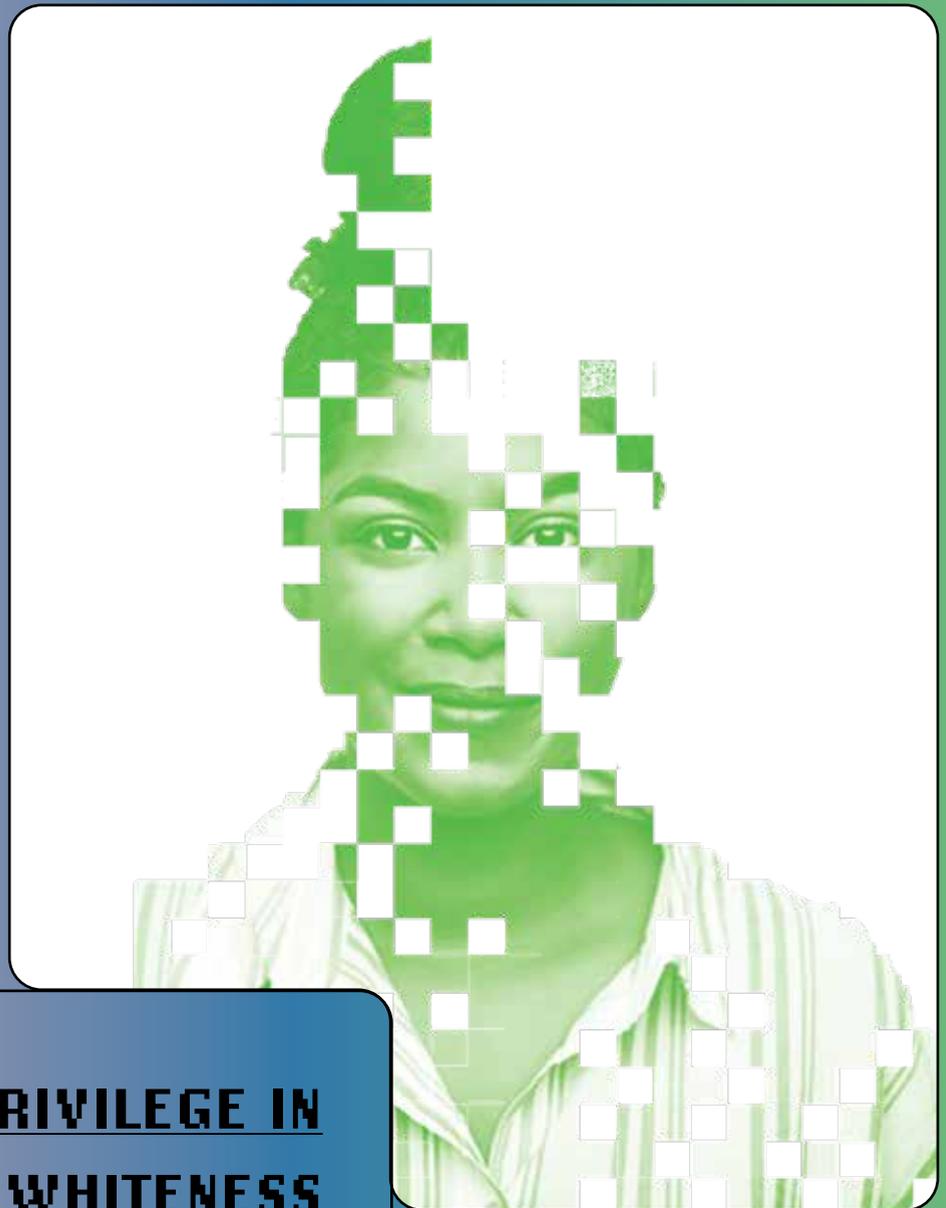
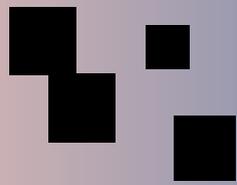
Mosley: That's true.

Sales: So what is it that they're asking you to do? To become a eunuch who is only defined by their sexual relationship and to not have the same judgment against the people who violate your body, who lynch you, who dehumanize you, who assault you because of your Blackness? What makes your sexuality more important than your Blackness?

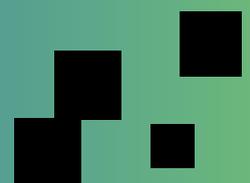
Young Black people, because they don't know the history, they begin to believe that their community doesn't love them. They don't remember that all the heterosexism that gets to be policy in this country is not shaped by what Black people feel, because people in power don't give a shit what we feel.

Mosley: What do we young people of faith in this current social justice movement need to do to stand up and confront all this?

Sales: Ask the question, "What is faith?" Where do you place your faith? I believe that young people place their faith in computers and in technology, and tech-



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nology becomes God. What altar do you bow down to and worship? What does it mean to live in a white supremacist society where white skin is a fetish that we are all asked to idolize? And how do we begin to see ourselves outside of that construct? What does it mean to look at oneself through the gaze of one's own history? And what does it mean to understand, as Ralph Ellison has pointed out to us, that we are more than what white people make of us: We are also what we make of ourselves. I believe that young Black people in communities of faith, as well as young brown and white people, must begin to ask, What is it that their communities have made of themselves as well as other people?

I would also say, for God's sake, stop talking about "community organizers," because that language assumes that communities you are going to work with are chaotic and you're bringing your skills to organize them. Usually you're talking about Black and brown communities, which perpetuates Black people being uncivilized and remade by white people.

So we must begin to interrogate our assumptions about each other and the world that we live in, and ask, "What can I do to cleanse myself of the marks of whiteness?" I worry about young Black people who are always performing suffering for white people in the public sphere and say white folks don't love them, and waste all their energy. I don't get that.

Mosley: I had a conversation about this recently with one of my friends who's also a fiction writer, about the pressures that get placed upon Black and brown and LGBTQ+ artists to write from a position of squalor.

Sales: What I don't understand, Da'Shawn, is why you separate out Black LGBTQ people from their Blackness? Why can't you say that in one breath? That's really problematic. There is no monolithic queer person. That's a mythology. That's like saying there's a monolithic white person and that class doesn't exist. That's like saying all LGBTQ people live the same lives and that class doesn't exist for them, or race.

Mosley: I think I've been conditioned to do that because for myself and the other young people I know, TikTok and Twitter and all these other means sort us out through algorithms and demographics, and we have also filtered ourselves into groups. So even when we are arguing with bigots, saying,

"You're mythologizing us and abstracting us," we do the same to each other. We have a false understanding that there is a unified narrative, and you're right, there isn't one. Nuance is something that the young people I know, me included, struggle with.

Sales: Well, this is what I've discovered with the fellows that I'm teaching this year: the inability to say "Black." They can say "capitalism," they can name class, they can talk about LGBTQ oppression, but it is very hard for them to name themselves as Black. It's almost like there's a fear.

Mosley: I can see that.

Sales: But why is that? Explain that to me.

Mosley: I think there's still an internal hatred being drilled into us. For myself, it's not something I'm conscious of, but when I sit and really examine myself, I realize that, even in this social justice movement where I'm considered woke, I find myself still having to actively remove from myself these white narratives.

Sales: Where do you all get your impression of Black people from?

Mosley: We're getting it through TV and social media. I think there's no thought to history unless it's packaged in a Netflix series.

Sales: Well, you can never be free when you allow your story and your history to be erased and you allow white men to be gods who reproduce and re-create you in the images that they want you to be, rather than the images you are. That's what whiteness is. Whiteness is idolatry. It's white men who want to be equal with God to determine who we are.

Mosley: I've never thought, as an artist, about what it would look like to write a narrative that does not come out of my dearth, doesn't come out of what I lack or what my family lacks, but turns it around and says, "Look at what we have."

Sales: See, that's the thing that makes white people fear us so much, because we have endured and navigated the most heinous modes of oppression. It is that soul force that allowed Black children to face German Shepherds who clawed at their throats during the Southern freedom movement. It was that soul force that allowed us to stand up against charging

horses and bombs and guns and all sorts of weapons. It's articulately resistant.

Mosley: I could cry right now, because you're fleshing out for me what I've heard Toni Morrison say: that it's such a waste of breath for us to continually quarrel with whiteness over why we matter. That we would forever be proving that and never doing the real work we were called to do, never talking about ourselves the way we need to be talked about.

Sales: They've become our significant others. They've become the inhabitants of our dreams, the inhabitants of our frame of reference, the inhabitants and shapers of our souls. If you believe white people hate us because we're unworthy, or they believe we're unworthy and inferior, you begin to feel that way. You have to understand that they fear and hate us because of our ability to make a way out of no way. But that's not what young Black people see. Y'all see deficit. Y'all see deficiency.

I'm giving you this time because I try to encourage young Black artists and writers and historians to begin to look at the world and rediscover themselves through this Black gaze. And to write something, Da'Shawn, where you're no longer in the white gaze. You see, when Black people perform suffering—when we talk about how we have suffered and all of the bad things that we are—that makes white people feel good about being white and it reaffirms their superiority and their power to create Black pain, and that makes them powerful. They become gods who have the power over our happiness, and have the ability to determine our sitting down and our getting up.

Mosley: That makes so much sense. We talk about their privilege, and in doing that we talk about how underprivileged we are and that raises them up even higher.

Sales: What we must say to white people, quite honestly and lovingly, is there is no privilege in a culture of whiteness that requires you to massacre your identity and reduce your life to simply white skin and disconnect yourself from your gender, your sexuality, your class, and your ethnicity. That's called death. That's a death culture. There's no privilege in living through that. You may have rights that we don't have—that's different. But to say there's privilege in being white: That's an affirmation of the social perversity that comes along with whiteness. ✪