
Book review: Collecting Courage: Joy, Pain, Freedom, Love

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Collecting Courage: Joy, Pain, Freedom, Love, edited by Nneka Allen, Camila Vital Nunes Pereira, and Nicole Salmon. Gail K. Picco Books, Civil Sector Press; 2020; 203 pages; ISBN 978-1-927375-63-1

Collecting Courage shines a spotlight on the painful experiences of Black fundraisers working in the charitable sector in Canada and the United States. The book features 14 personal narratives that expose the dark side of the “nice sector” as the writers call out anti-Black racism at every turn for the beast it is. With this book the toothpaste is out of the tube, though on the front line it has been out of the tube for a long time for Black folks working in this sector.

Still, the book holds out some possibility for hope.

I started my career in the charitable sector in fundraising almost 20 years ago; I have shifted now to communications, project development, advocacy, and member services – all still adjacent to the fundraising world. The stories here resonate, and as a reader, I found courage to reflect on my own personal experiences. This book was more than just stories for me: there were many “aha moments.” I often found myself thinking, “Oh my gosh, that’s exactly what happened to” ... “is that what was going on with me?” ... “that’s the word for it.”

Collecting Courage feels like a healing circle that gives space for discussion with colleagues who bravely share their hurts, their celebrations, and their hopes. It also reads like sitting in a master class with some of the continent’s most successful fundraisers. I mused on their collective impact: the millions they have raised, the major projects, the capital campaigns, the

number of scholarships tied to students who would otherwise not attend post-secondary education. There is so much expertise in these pages. But this is not a textbook; it is a truth book. One that peels back the curtain. I would gladly give it to a young Black person considering a future in fundraising.

Nneka Allen has written a strong introduction. She sets the tone and dispels the myths of Canada as a country known for its nice people, international peacekeeping, and culture welcoming to everyone. She reminds readers of the shared North American legacy of slavery and colonialism and prepares them to hear about the lived experiences of Black professionals in Canada and the US. Delusions that the bad stuff doesn't happen in Canada are dispelled early on.

The chapters are assembled into sections called "Pain," "Joy," "Love," and "Freedom." Focusing on these themes, the experiences shared in these compelling stories can prompt anything from a pause to reflect to jaw-dropping astonishment (I had the second reaction several times).

The stories that feature writers' lived experience of microaggressions, being infantilized and undermined by coworkers, overlooked and judged by leadership, and dismissed by donors have the greatest impact and are the most powerful. For those who are new to these stories, they are a great way to walk with these writers and your Black colleagues. Familiarizing yourself with these accounts may mean a Black coworker doesn't need to step up to educate colleagues about anti-Black racism they have experienced. That's a good thing, because being the only Black person at the table is tiring. If it is hard for you as a reader to digest the pain, sit with it, because for your Black colleagues this is real and familiar.

Assimilation is a common theme in *Collecting Courage*; writers unpack what it means to navigate white spaces, to leave your Blackness at home, to not show up as your own authentic self. This is an important theme: how many of my Black colleagues continue to code switch, wear masks and recite mantras and use tools to get by in this space where "whiteness is the standard for office behaviour"? As Muthoni Kariuki writes, "The message we receive as Black people is 'you are not valuable, you have nothing to contribute, you cannot be here unless you give up your identity and act like us.'"

Though the issues raised in many of the chapters are familiar, some of the accounts are shocking. I was taken aback by the irony of "Africa-saving" charities headed by Afrophobic leaders that is recounted in one contribution. What the authors share through this book goes beyond pouring out their pain, with writers also giving readers their coping strategies for getting through the day and for dealing with systemic anti-Black racism.

Mide Akerewusi writes about volunteering on projects where he could use the skills that were not being used in the workplace. How many of us have used a voluntary project as an outlet to rebuild our belief in our skills and abilities?

Niambi Martin-John speaks to the importance of gathering, building supportive networks no matter how much it disrupts or upsets:

The fear that such a coming together will upset the imbalance of things and actually challenge the sector to see Black people as competent, capable and worthy of leadership and power is

palpable. As more of us step forward to help shape the sector, some are transitioning out of it, exhausted from the work of either constantly proving yourself to retain roles, or being excluded from roles that we are more than qualified to have.

These conversations are breathing life and healing back into our communities.

The final chapter, “Our Love Is Our Only Freedom,” is a beautiful love letter from Nneka Allen. By the time you get to this story, it is so needed – like the self-care at the end of a challenging day that helps you regroup and face the next:

I esteem what we have achieved by surviving in a world that dishonours and discredits Black voices. As you read my words, may you remember our ancestral bonds that illuminate our boundless affection. May you remember the supernatural love that has been cultivated in our lives through our ancestors. The love that has survived atrocities and yet still abounds.

While I don't want to downplay the negatives, perhaps it is appropriate to end on a positive note.

Much like a number of the writers in *Collecting Courage*, I think there is a deep residue of love, hope, and belief in the charitable sector in Canada. What's more, we are in unprecedented times. Many Black-led organizations have stepped away from the table, away from white spaces, to create our own spaces. I am excited, for example, by the work ahead for the Network for the Advancement of Black Communities that will build from the report [Unfunded: Black Communities Overlooked by Canadian Philanthropy](#). The possibilities of the recent budget announcement of \$300 million to support Black-led community organizations are exciting for our communities. As we look forward to addressing anti-Black racism and building Black community organizations, I hope that the recurring theme of love in *Collecting Courage* will continue to resonate.