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Self of the Therapist – Reflection Paper
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My childhood home stood resolute, like a fortress fit to protect everyone inside. However, fortresses keep as much in as they keep out. Unsaid words and unprocessed grief haunted every corner. I learned quickly that in our household, expressing our emotions was a weakness. I knew better than to cry in my father's presence. My mother lacked the language to describe her own emotions, so she ignored mine. We operated under a strict regime of survival. While my brother chose rebellion and escapism as his way of coping, I chose submission. If I could fit their picture of the 'perfect daughter', maybe I could earn the love, tenderness, and care I saw reflected in those perfect families on TV. I would be seen. Yet, what I failed to understand at the time is that as the 'perfect daughter', I must shrink so small to fit their narrow standards. I made myself so small that the weight of their expectations crushed me, but those expectations emerged from a long family history of survival.

My parents met in their early twenties, both having immigrated from Haiti as teenagers. They became parents to my older brother at 23 years old. Eight years later, I was born into a household governed by survival and my father's philosophy, "In this world, all you have to do is be Black and die". We existed at the intersection of being Black, Haitian, and working class in America. My parents stressed the importance of appearances. This included dressing well, excelling academically, and making our Haitian-ness palatable. I was consistently reminded that the world would try to break me down. I had to work twice as hard because not only am I Black but I am also a woman. This manifested itself into the harshest and strictest set of expectations placed upon my brother and I. Only later did I understand that their 'helicopter parenting' was more so about ensuring our safety and teaching us how to survive in a world that they knew would be hostile to people who look like us. I was provided with the only tools my parents had. Although they have overcome so many obstacles after immigrating here and building their lives from the ground up, they also experienced so much trauma. The things that I was told in order to ensure my safety, like to trust no one outside my family and never to fail or make mistakes, are the same things that broke me.

During my time as an undergraduate, I took a women's and gender studies course called Diversity and Difference that changed my trajectory as a student. After engaging in deep conversations with peers in my class, I felt brand new again. I spoke with people who confronted their emotions head on and did not shy away from open dialogue around tough topics. It inspired me to be open to challenging my parents' beliefs and find my voice. Growing up, words died before they reached the tip of my tongue, suffocated by the fear of stepping outside of their boundaries of acceptability. I learned that the way my family navigated the world was not the only way. It was not easy to forgive them for their shortcomings. I held onto the resentment for quite some time. Through my early work in mental health, I began to understand that their

limitations reflected their own unhealed trauma. I eventually learned advocating for myself was not a betrayal. It was simply a different kind of survival.

Entering the marriage and family therapy field, I carry plenty of strengths and vulnerabilities that influence who I am as a professional. I have an intimate understanding of how certain family dynamics and generational trauma can exact psychological costs. My lived experiences allow me to have a closer understanding when sitting with families who are navigating similar tensions. I understand the guilt of children when they feel like they outgrow their parents' dreams, and the grief parents feel when they watch their children become American in ways that are difficult for them to understand. I can help families value the sacrifices of the older generation while still being open to the younger generation's individuality. One of my strengths is my ability to hold complexity and sit with the emotions that come out of it. I was able to see my parents' limitations without dismissing their love and challenge harmful patterns while respecting our cultural values.

However, my strengths are also a reflection of my vulnerabilities, like when empathy becomes countertransference. I have to be self-aware about overidentifying with clients whose stories mirror my own. Working with controlling parents may trigger me to think about my own experiences and rehash old wounds. Sitting with children of those parents may give me the impulse to rescue them rather than empower them. I will need to consistently check in with myself to make sure I'm not imposing my version of freedom and healing because healing looks different for everyone. My most valuable strength is that I know what it means to go from surviving to thriving. I experienced what it likes to go from constantly seeking approval to claiming my authenticity. My healing journey is not linear, and I know I will have hiccups throughout the process. Yet, this journey is what allows me to be person-centered and trauma-informed when working with clients.

I am learning, slowly and with intention, and I believe that reflects in my work.