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**Cortina Jenelle Caldwell, M.A.**

*Organizer, Facilitator & Entrepreneur*

*My first love was words. I understood their power, presence, and possibility. They have the power to create new worlds and shape our experiences. These are the words that make the canvas of me.*

## **Who Am I?**

### **I am courage and humility.**

I came into the world at Grace Hospital in Morganton, NC on July 21, 1986. My mother and I had a full summer month together before she had to return back to high school in the Fall. I remember sitting in my high school Economics class the day that September 11, 2001 descended on the world, wondering how I could be in a place called Freedom (High), and feel that I had no say in what went on in the world around me. What was freedom? Freedom was not my home life—riddled with drug deals, cries of agony and pain from fists landing all over the body, the uncertainty of if we would have food, or hot water that night. Freedom was learning how to make my own clothes, learning to cook, and seeking out enrichment programs to put me around other dreamers and doers. Freedom was a rite of passage for my independence, a hand of cards that, if played carefully, could lead to my getting out of Morganton and not becoming a statistic; a space to liberate myself from the stronghold of poverty and oppression that had intoxicated my entire family. More importantly, freedom looked like breaking the silence and daring to dance in my light. In Asheville, 61%, or 2,264 single black mothers, live below the poverty line (American Community Survey), and for our small town roots in Morganton, there was deep judgement about the lives and livelihoods of single black mothers, leaving only the jobs that the white working class did not want. The humiliation of my mother became my humility and I was determined to let no one write my story for me, but me. Come Spring semester of my senior year, I had designed a new plan for my life and earned a place amongst the Class of 2004 Gate Millennium Scholars, a program of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Marianne Williamson said in *Return to Love*, “Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, ‘Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous?’ Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously

give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.” I was now 1 in 1,000. I was on my way to becoming a trailblazer and artistic revolutionary.

I wonder if the world will ever realize that we can design the new thing.  
I hear mycelium growing beneath our feet, stretching for connection.  
I see the dawn of a new era where the artists lead the way.  
I want what comes after hope.

### **I am the descendant of Appalachian, Southern, West African, indigenous creativity.**

James Baldwin once said, “To be a Negro in this country and to be relatively conscious is to be in a rage almost all the time.” How do I stop being enraged? How else can I be using my energy? Over the last 5-10 years, I have been on an internal and cultural pilgrimage to understand my origin story and the connection of experiences and legacies that had to intersect and flow to form my personal reality today. Growing up in the poor rural South, I saw myself as a human being, but often felt alien in my beliefs about what was possible for my life in spite of being Black. While I still carry that same notion of oneness and humanity at a deeper level of my existence, I also realize the reality that in the world we live in I do not have the luxury of not recognizing my Blackness because others have historically made laws to limit and govern my Blackness. And furthermore, that every comment or snide remark someone made to me as a child about what was or was not “Black”, was simply regurgitating some internalized oppression. Those individuals had themselves received a limiting definition of what it meant and looked like to be Black. There was a period in college and in early adulthood where as I was going through my “coming out” phase; I identified as an LGBTQ person first, before my Blackness, but then being in mostly LGBTQ spaces and seeing how lacking Black or Brown folks were in those spaces, those same old conversations about what was and was not for my (Black) people came flooding back in.

This is when I made a clear decision that I was going to move through the world as a whole, integrated person and that I was tired of leaving parts of my identity behind.

My great-great-grandmother was a Black indigenous Cherokee woman living in between the borders of North and South Carolina in rural Rutherford county. Although I do not yet know her name, the desire to know her and her story—therefore my story—catapulted me on a journey to uncover my lost origin. I knew I was born to a teenage mother, but that was not the full sum of all of my parts, and certainly not good enough for this curious-minded scholar. In my search, I found that most of the African Americans that have called North Carolina, South Carolina, Maryland, and Virginia home have ancestral ties back to West Africa, in areas that we know as Nigeria, the Republic of the Congo, Republic of Cameroon, Ghana, Ivory Coast, Benin, and Togo. Through those studies, I uncovered that my personal lineage is comprised of 50% Nigerian roots. Although the enslaved life was the case for those who were brought to the region, others came as indentured servants to the region, and even a few more had gained their freedom. The treatment of Black Americans by their white counterparts was fueled by the fear of their power, and there were very intentional acts to suppress their rights before and after emancipation. Resilience and the daring act to exist and create a life was the Black community’s response to being shut out of education, suffrage, and daily freedoms; thus the community created new and

unique forms of self-expression. Religion became a pathway to literacy and music was a form of communication, through freedom songs, hymns, even drum rhythm-like movements intended on simply keeping the people connected to the Motherland, but ultimately sparking the creation of many musical genres that persist today. I challenge people to expand what it looks like or means to be a woman, to be Queer, to be Two-Spirit and/or androgynous, and for the sake of all of my ancestors who have given their lives to be seen as fully human—I dare to live by my own definition of what it means to be Black.

I understand that Black lives matter.

I say that in order to change something, we must be the ones we need.

I dream that we see beyond what's comfortable and embrace the radical.

I try every day to begin anew, and always do my best.

I hope that I leave the world better than I found it.

**I am courage and humility.**

My ancestral roots tell an important story, and are just as relevant to my present as they will be to my future. I come from people who were artists, farmers, musicians, educators, organizers, innovators, entrepreneurs, and what the world would call radicals. There is nothing radical about choosing how you want to live your life, and the fact that autonomy and agency can be perceived as radical should be telling about the rigidity and limitations placed on lives thought to be “inferior” to the majority. My family roots tell the story of what not to do, and give examples of what it looks like when you surrender to your limiting beliefs. My educational roots started when I fell in love with words as a young child and stayed with me as I completed my Bachelor of Science in Education, Business & Social Science, and then went on to earn my Masters of Art in Management & Leadership. These roots served as my foundation to name and tell a new story; all there was left to do was to create it. My entrepreneurial roots and facilitation roots were planted early by the fearlessness I witnessed in my grandmother's journey to starting and running a successful business, as well as my own need to mediate conflict and hard conversations with others around me. Since 2007, I have designed, produced, or facilitated hundreds of trainings, workshops, programs, and community events centered on authenticity, community building, creativity, entrepreneurship, innovation, and leadership across the Southeast. In that time, I have worked alongside nonprofits, entrepreneurs, educators, community leaders, artists, festival producers, conference organizers, small businesses, and activists alike. Each day, I rise and am renewed in my breath that has not yet been stolen, in my hope that has not yet been squelched, and in the love I have cultivated for all my parts, and in the firm knowing that I am descendent of a free, beautiful, and powerful people. I am Black. I am human. I pretend to dance through the sky with wings when I need upliftment.

I feel the rhythm of the stolen drums calling us home.

I touch ancient history when I lean into the forest.

I worry that the Earth may eject us for mistreating her resources.

I cry like a mother who feels her children in pain.

**I am courage and humility.**