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For most of my life, I have heard that Black women are strong. But, rarely do we talk about what has made us so strong. Surely the old adage: *"What won't kill you will make you stronger"* has applied to many of our lives. Unfortunately, many of have not gotten stronger, but have been killed along the way. While our bodies may not have been killed, our spirits, our hopes, and our dreams have been shattered by what we have experienced. We have buried our sons and daughters to needless, thoughtless violence. We Black women have lost husbands, friends, and lovers because of what we have experienced. We have lost our dignity, received black eyes, experienced infidelity, been riddled with insecurity, displaced by unemployment, and devastated by discrimination. Yes, we have been challenged in ways that have destabilized and shamed us for generations.
Although we have experienced the heavy weight of oppression, Black women have managed to not only survive, but thrive. Myrlie Evers, once said:
"I have reached a point in my life where I can understand the pain and the challenges; and my attitude is one of standing up with open arms to meet them all."
It is this sort of resilient and defiant stance that sustains wellness and promotes mental health. In my work as a psychologist, I use an African-Centered Wellness Model that is centered in the value called, Murua (Swahili for "respect"). Having Murua means that a woman respects all areas of her life and seeks to maintain balance within them. Within the context of my model, each individual's personal wellness (as well as the collective wellness of us as African people in the Diaspora) depends on having Murua. Throughout our history, despite multiple obstacles, African American women have made considerable contributions to our communities in the forms of promoting wellness in academic, social, emotional, economic, physical, spiritual, cultural and vocational life areas.

For example, I do not have to tell you that Black folks were legally forbidden from learning to read or write for centuries. Think about it—not decades, but centuries. They told us that we could not read or write….but then we broke out with literary giants like Maya Angelou, Phyllis Wheatley, Audre Lorde, Nikki Giovanni, Alice Walker, Lorraine Hansberry, Toni Morrison and Gwendolyn Brooks. They told us we could not learn, but then we shattered stereotypes when educational institutions like Spelman, Morehouse, Howard, and Hampton Universities were founded. Additionally, we have created intellectual giants like Mary Jane Patterson, Halle Q. Brown, Mary McCleod Bethune, Regina Anderson, and Marjorie Brown-- the one of the first African American women in U.S. history to get a doctorate in mathematics. These women have surpassed the low expectations of many, and have left the entire world asking: *"Black women, what makes you so strong?"*

Furthermore, we can not forget the courageous battles fought for social justice by Black women dating back to Harriett Tubman and Sojourner Truth. Additionally, we can not overlook the fact that issues of civil and social justice have been forged by the fires of resistance by women such as Rosa Parks, Coretta Scott King, Angela Davis, Anita Hill, Daisy Bates, Marian Wright Edelman, Dorothy Height, and Fannie Lou Hammer. Political icons like Shirley Chisholm, Barbara Jordan, Carol Mosley Braun and even Michelle Obama have shown us that our roles as Black women activists also include working within the political arena. Our resistance has been further emboldened by the work of Black female psychologists like Mamie Clark, Carolyn Peyton, and Ruth Howard. Furthermore, the economic presence of creative entrepreneurs like Madame C.J. Walker and Oprah Winfrey has made space for us to know that we can be wealthy and influential in our communities. These women and their fierce commitment to social and economic justice have left many asking, *"Black woman, what makes you so strong?"*

Additionally, our physical health and wellness has been challenged by a society in which Black women are more apt to contract HIV, die of heart disease, stroke and cancer because of poor and inadequate health care. We are often the last to seek help when we are sick and receive the most invasive and least efficacious practices when treatment is given. We are victims of experiments that led to the development of gynecological instruments, HeLa cells, and fertilizations against our will. Yet, we ended up with doctors and scientists like Surgeon General Jocelyn Elders, Mae Jemison, Marie Daly, the first African American to earn a Ph.D. in Chemistry and Dr. Patricia Bath, inventor of cataract laser probe, and founder of the American Institute for the Prevention of Blindness.

Despite the deep pain that has been thrust upon us by our circumstances, our captivity has unleashed the spirit filled preaching of the likes of Black female ministers ranging from Reverend(s) Prathia Hall, Carolyn Knight and Vashti McKenzie to Renita Weems, Suzan Johnson Cook, Ann Lightner-Fuller and Juanita Bynum. These women have taught us that though we may feel puny, we serve a mighty God who loves us and will carry us through. Sometimes, when we get off our knees, we shout of praise and break out into a holy dance. So, there is nobody who can contest the fact that we have grounded ourselves in the deep roots of hope and creativity as exemplified through the exotic and impassioned dance of women like Josephine Baker, Katherine Dunham, Debbie Allen, and Jawole Willa Jo Zollar.

Our soulful ability to translate our experiences to rhythm has produced songstresses like Billie Holliday, Lena Horne, Leontyne Price, Marian Anderson, Ella Fitzgerald, Pearl Bailey, Nina Simone, Gladys Knight, Aretha Franklin, Erica Badu, and Chaka Kan. Then we break out with a Beyonce Knowles, India Aire, Jill Scott, CeCe Wynans, Whitney Houston and Yolonda Adams. Our collective energies have led to women who have acted out our lives in ways that have broken ground in new ways, that are both impossible, as well as authentic and true to our experiences. Women from the likes of Ruby Dee, Cicely Tyson, Alfre Woodard, Dorothy Dandridge, Hattie McDaniel, Whoopi Goldberg, and Angela Bassett to Halle Berry, Queen Latifah, Mo'Nique, Octavia Spencer and Viola Davis—just to name a few! Our songs, our melodies, our lyrics as well as our performances on stage and screen make people ask us: *"Black Women, what makes you SO strong?"*

Just when we finish singing, our stylistic and athletic abilities tantalize others and we engage in

unprecedented ways through sports by producing a group of women like Wilma Rudolph, Althea Gibson, Venus and Serena Williams, Marion Jones, Florence Griffith Joyner and Jackie Joyner Kersee. We fool around and throw down with sisters like Laila Ali, Sheryl Swoopes, Cheryl Miller, Cynthia Cooper, Debi Thomas, Dominique Dawes, and Vonetta Flowers (the first Black athlete to win a Gold Medal in a Winter Olympics).

As I conclude this last article devoted to Women's Month, I want to remind my sisters that when people ask us about the sources of our strength, we have to say that our strength comes from our strong sense of community, our deep faith in God, our integrity, our voices, our minds, our bodies, our hopes, our dreams and our children. The faith that we will live through hard times and emerge resiliently comes from so many successful examples in our history - past and present - that it would be ludicrous to believe that we do not have the same powerful assets as our dynamic sisters. So, now when people ask me: *"Black woman what makes you so strong?"* My answer is:
"I am so strong because I have to be."

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