Take the red pill
Tumbling down the rabbit hole of peacemaking

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The night is dark and rainy. A car pulls up to an abandoned building with water cascading down its façade. Three robotic characters, looking pale and lethal, exit the car. A fourth, a man named Neo, looks unsure amid the ominous surroundings. After ascending a winding staircase, one of the trio—a woman named Trinity—ushers Neo into a near-empty room where a tall Black man in dark leather and sunglasses awaits. Morpheus invites Neo to sit in a worn armchair near a table holding a glass of water and says:

> *You're here because you know something. What you know, you can't explain. But you feel it. You've felt it your entire life. That there's something wrong in the world. You don't know what it is, but it's there, like a splinter in your mind, driving you mad. . . . It's all around us. Even now in this very room. You can see it when you look out your window or when you turn on your television. You can feel it when you go to work. When you go to church. When you pay your taxes. It is the world that has been pulled over your eyes to blind you to the truth . . . Like everyone else, you were born into bondage. Born into a prison that you cannot smell or taste or touch. A prison for your mind.*

Then Morpheus presents Neo with a choice: take a blue pill and continue sleepwalking through life, or take a red pill, wake up, and see "just how deep the rabbit hole goes."[1]

On the surface, a scene from *The Matrix* may seem like a strange framework for describing how I developed a deeper understanding of and commitment to God's shalom. After all, the film revels in violence. Yet Neo's shift—from sensing the repres-

sion in his world, to discovering his physical and mental bondage, to joining the struggle for liberation—resonates with my journey. Over the past decade, I have taken steps away from a narrow view of peace as the absence of war and violent conflict and toward a pursuit of peace that challenges systemic human oppression and embraces forgotten members of creation. This is a snapshot of my story.

"I imagine that right now, you're feeling a little bit like Alice."
When I was ten, my family moved from my rural home in Trinidad to New York City. In Trinidad I did not think of my brownness; I grew up in a context where brownness was the norm. I had much to learn about the ways racial and ethnic categories shape the United States. One lesson came after I won an elementary school tennis match. As I shook hands with my opponent, a white-identified girl from another school, she said, "They only let you win because you're black." Caught off guard, I reacted: "Well, the reason you lost is because you're white." The coaches heard my comment and saw me as the instigator. I realized then that regardless of my identity as a Trinidadian or my character and abilities, I was racially categorized as Black and should expect to share in the injustices that African Americans and other Black people experience here.

Over time, my awareness of racism and other forms of oppression heightened. In high school I had a Morpheus-like teacher whose specialties included telling the truth about the hard facts of American history. He gave an unvarnished picture of European genocide against Indigenous peoples, of European enslavement of African peoples, and of white-identified people's ongoing subjugation of various communities of color. He also inspired us with stories of repressed people's struggle for liberation and equality. A pivotal time in my learning came when MC (as we called him) sent his students to Revolution Books to purchase *A People's History of the United States*. Together we read Howard Zinn's book alongside the state-assigned textbook—an exercise that demonstrated how narratives are shaped by access to socioeconomic power; how our telling of history shapes our loyalties; and how communities are made visible or invisible, essential or expendable, depending who controls the pen.

By the time I went to New York University, I was primed to explore colonialism, racism, economic injustice, and the complexities of life in the Black/African diaspora, past and present. What I had not yet determined was how to bridge my faith with these interests. By my sophomore year, I had been part of three Christian traditions. Yet my faith consistently focused on purity, piety, and personal sin and salvation, resisting secular vices, believing the proper things, and fear of hell. Closely examining and engaging in critiques of oppression was reserved for my liberal arts education.

"You ever have that feeling where you're not sure if you're awake or still dreaming?"

My journey with Mennonites began when a real-life Trinity invited me to walk through doors I did not know existed. Andy was an activist and agitator whose love for Jesus, peace, and justice took him to Fort Benning, Georgia, for demonstrations against the School of Americas; and to Vieques, Puerto Rico, to support local resistance to the US military presence. He was a recent convert to the Mennonite faith whose passion for the Sermon on the Mount, love for John Howard Yoder's theology, and anarchist politics quickly transformed my life. Together, we discovered Manhattan Mennonite Fellowship (MMF), a church of people from various backgrounds who wrestled with faith, church, and what it means to believe and follow Jesus. The group valued mutual care and support, a practice especially demonstrated when our pastor, Arlene Pipkin, died from cancer. Sermons, prayer, and worship highlighted the public, social implications of Christ's boundary-crossing love and the ways he upset the various structures of his day. Being part of this church was spiritually energizing as I met people who added breadth and depth to my Christianity.

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After people flew planes into the World Trade Center and reduced the buildings and their occupants to rubble, the grief of New Yorkers was as raw and palpable as the smell of burning fuel

throughout the city. As I watched the events unfold on television from the safety of my family's apartment, my first words were, "We're going to war." In the wake of the attacks, people at MMF organized a gathering at Menno House, a communal residence that hosts Mennonite Voluntary Service volunteers, provides hospitality for travelers, and contains a library of Anabaptist resources. Sitting in the living room filled with books about peace, people took turns reflecting on the traumatic incident, the pain and shock we were experiencing, and the isolation we felt from family, friends, and others who demanded retaliation. Some of those present described how difficult it was to remain committed to nonviolence and reconciliation when such terrifying violence had hit so close to home. I remember how safe it felt to speak openly about an alternative to more violence and how relieved I was to be among Christians who had not conflated church and state, God and nation, patriotism and the gospel.

When the nation's grief eventually became a cry for wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, MMF became a hub of resistance. Together, people in our church participated in witnesses for peace in New York City and Washington, DC. Prayer times included requests that cooler heads on all sides would carry the day, that we would learn to love our enemies, and that peace would prevail. Announcement times included updates on the human and economic costs of the war and information on local protests. And when I was involuntarily and illegally arrested at a demonstration against war profiteers, it was our interim pastor, Stan Bohn, who supported me. Our rich peace theology enabled us to withstand the tide of retribution when unprecedented violence came our way, and our stance attracted people to our community. When Andy and I eventually relocated to Elkhart, Indiana, for him to attend seminary, it was hard to leave MMF behind. But the move led me to a new and sometimes painful peacemaking adventure: working for positive systemic change among fellow Mennonites.

"Most of these people are not ready to be unplugged."

Although I expected to have culture shock in Elkhart, I was unprepared to feel disoriented within my denominational family. Andy and I arrived during a fever-pitched Kerry vs. Bush presidential race, and lots of people, Mennonites included, seemed

driven to distraction by the campaign. As one who—because of my faith and anarchist politics—does not vote, I felt isolated everywhere from casual conversations to Sunday school classes where the election was the central topic. The pervasive Mennonite name and genealogy games became tedious. These interactions were not meant to be unwelcoming, but they emphasized my racial, ethnic, and geographical differences, and made it hard to belong. Finding a local church also proved to be difficult. Although MMF was homogenous in terms of racial identity, it was an urban church whose members negotiated transition and diversity daily. In Elkhart it would take me eight years to find a faith community—in an African Methodist Episcopal Church, not among Mennonites.

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I have gained privileges and opportunities within the Mennonite church—sometimes because people invited me to exercise my gifts or because a quota had to be met; other times because of my persistence—but I have nevertheless been frustrated by practices that betray the denomination's peacemaking claims. Why is it that the fastest growing churches consist of people of color, but the power bases do not reflect this shift? Why are so many young adults feeling alienated by the church and unheard by our leaders? How can we resist war without attending to the racial and class dimensions of military recruitment and concretely supporting people with limited options? Why do men lead most of our organizations while the "worker bees" are usually women? Why are the people most affected by our policies on sexuality so excluded from the conversation? Why is it that most of the people educating future Anabaptist and Mennonite leaders are white-identified men who have a "traditional" Mennonite pedigree, when worldwide Anabaptist growth has shifted to the two-thirds world? Are these and other similar patterns coincidences? Or are there systemic and personal sins at work that need to be confronted and undone?

Over time, I have observed that many people, even those of us who are adamant in our peace and justice stance, are still plugged into structures that distort the church's mission, weaken our

members, and damage our fellowship. For some, that plug is connected to unearned privileges based on racial and gender categories, age, mental and physical ability, class and sexual identity. These privileges blind us to the ways we wield oppressive power over our brothers and sisters. Meanwhile, others are plugged into sources that diminish our self-worth; undermine our call; limit our access to needed resources; and cause emotional, mental, spiritual, and physical death. Many of us can play dominant and subordinate roles depending on the situations we are in.

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On bad days, the massive task of resisting these sins against healing and wholeness tempts me to take the blue pill! But I remain committed to the cause and rooted in this theological home because of my pre-Mennonite foundation, and because I believe in the peace message that characterizes this tradition. If the arc of the universe bends toward God's shalom, then I want to join in, wherever I am. So I thank God for the opportunities I have had to seek God's peace in this denomination, in taking Damascus Road antiracism training; in developing antiracist communication principles with colleagues at Mennonite Mission Network; in pursuing a degree in theology and ethics at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary; in working for intercultural transformation and undoing the "-isms" at the seminary; and in building relationships with Mennonite and other allies.

"Follow the white rabbit."

Of all the stops on my peacemaking journey, the most surprising has been shifting from a human-centered view of God's shalom to one that includes justice for other animals. This new awareness began when I attended Wake Up Weekend, a vegan gathering hosted at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Although I was already on a mostly plant-based diet, I was still eating fish, chicken eggs, and products derived from female cows. I went to the event without any intention of becoming vegan; foregoing all animal-based products seemed extreme. What I quickly learned is that the real extremism is in the unmitigated violence used to

make even the products I thought were harmless. What is really extreme is the unrelenting cruelty billions of defenseless animals experience as a matter of course in the flesh-food industry. It dawned on me that I—a professed peacemaker—was investing in unthinkable violence at a scale that I could not even fathom. How had I remained so ignorant of such sustained and senseless abuse? How could I say that I was committed to nonviolence and remain complicit in such a heinous system?

Listening to people talk passionately about the plight of other animals, and confronting my indirect participation in the abuse of other creatures challenged me on such a deep emotional and spiritual level that I was compelled to make the switch. But my initial questions were only the starting point in moving toward a deeper consciousness about the intersections of animal ethics, Christian ethics, environmental ethics, and human oppression. For example, "livestock production" not only creates a vast amount of animal suffering; it is also the biggest contributor to ecological degradation, surpassing the transportation sector in its damage to air, water, and soil. Today, people are decimating rainforests and other green spaces worldwide to raise billions of animals to satisfy a global flesh-food fetish. The environmental impact this causes has huge implications for all of earth's residents, but it is especially alarming for the Indigenous people and wildlife in those areas and for those most vulnerable to the effects of climate change. The "livestock sector" also exploits people who are economically poor, lack formal education, and otherwise live in socially precarious situations. Slaughterhouses in the United States are not only responsible for massive animal bloodshed; they are also places where workers—many of whom are people of color and/or immigrants—experience grave injustices and abuse. Violence is not only inflicted on other animals in these industrial hell-holes; it is also internalized by workers who harm themselves and others at disproportionate rates.[2]

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Even if other animals could be killed, eaten, worn, and otherwise used at minimal to no human cost—even if it can be done

with minimal pain and harm to the animal—the question remains: Is the violence legitimate? Over time, I have observed that one's response to this question is determined in part by how one sees other animals. Rather than taking a utilitarian view of these animals as "food," "clothing," or "test subjects," I now see as biological and theological kin the cows, chickens, chimpanzees, deer, mice, and other animals used in our food, garment, medical, entertainment, and military industries. This perspective comes from biblical texts such as Genesis 1–2, Psalm 104, Job 38–41, Isaiah 65:17–25, and Romans 8:22–23. It has also emerged for me through reflecting on what it means to extend Jesus's compassion to strangers and to the least of these—the neighbors we have neglected because they belong to other species.

I have also observed that how people see violence toward other animals is affected by their understanding of themselves as humans. Do they see that they too are animals? Do they see being made in the image and likeness of God as license to overpower creation? As I have embraced peacemaking with other animals as part of my peacemaking identity, I have come to see them as fellow creatures who share in God's love and are also being reconciled to God in and through Christ. With this orientation in mind, my primary questions are: When it is okay to harm my animal kin? When is it all right to cause suffering to my friends? My response is that it almost never is.

A funny thing happened on my way out of the matrix.

When people accept the status quo, they perpetuate violence that is less obvious than planes flying into buildings and bombs falling on cities. The more I realize this fact, the more I believe that peacemaking involves more than resisting overt destructive conflict. Today my peacemaking includes investing in my church families, networking in my community, mentoring youth of color, learning about the prison-industrial complex, and discovering ways to be a better neighbor. It includes writing articles about oppression and resistance, organizing conferences about Christianity and anarchism, and working for racial justice among Mennonites and beyond. It includes making daily decisions about what I eat and wear, thinking and writing theologically about other animals, teaching about and criticizing the flesh-food system, and

"vegangelizing" others to show mercy to all our kin. Like any human effort, these steps are incremental and incomplete, and I continue to discover logs in my eye even as I try to shake the specks from others' eyes. But the call to more justice, grace, equality, and healing remains, and I pursue it alongside others, with God's guidance and by God's grace.

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All these practices constantly remind me that you can't predict where you will land or what will become dear to you when God's vision for shalom takes hold. That I am where I am in my journey never ceases to amaze and delight me. Indeed, I see this diversity of interests as a testament both to the many ways our world is broken and to the many threads we can grab hold of to begin making changes. If there is anything I have learned over the years, it is that rabbit holes are surprising places. Only God knows where they will take us. All we need to do is accept God's invitation, choose to take the plunge, and follow wherever the Rabbit leads.

Notes

[1] *The Matrix,* directed by Andy Wachowski and Lana Wachowski (1999; Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2007), DVD. The movie makes repeated reference to Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*.

[2] Gail A. Eisnitz, *Slaughterhouse: The Shocking Story of Greed, Neglect, and Inhumane Treatment inside the U.S. Meat Industry* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2006).

About the author

Nekeisha Alexis-Baker is an occasional writer and speaker with primary interests in a comprehensive peace theology and ethics toward other animals, undoing racism and other forms of oppression, and connecting anarchist politics with Christian faith. She received her bachelor of arts degree from New York University and holds a master of arts in theological studies from Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary, Elkhart, Indiana. One of her most recent essays can be found in *A Faith Embracing All Creatures: Addressing Common Questions about Christian Care for Animals* (Cascade Books, 2012). A native Trinidadian and former New Yorker, Nekeisha currently calls Elkhart home.