

# ON RACE AND RELIGION

My Journey from Jim Crow to Mysticism

Intelligent life on other planets?

Life after Death?

Infinity?

A 4th Dimension?

Eternity?

A Parallel Universe?

COLORED SEATING

LAUREN JOICHIN NILE



ON RACE  
AND  
RELIGION

MY JOURNEY FROM JIM CROW TO MYSTICISM

LAUREN JOICHIN NILE



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# ON RACE AND RELIGION

MY JOURNEY FROM JIM CROW TO MYSTICISM



LAUREN JOICHIN NILE



# FOREWORD

**T**his is my story. It is the story of my experience of race and racism in the United States, and it is the story of my spiritual journey.

My racial memoir is the story of me as a child who grew up seeing both the best and the worst of her country, the United States. On the one hand, it is the story of my seeing, very early in life, a deep desire and attempt on the part of some people to maintain a societal system of birth-based privilege for some and birth-based oppression for others. On the other hand, it is the story of my seeing, at that time, a deep desire and attempt on the part of other people to transform the country into one that lives up to the vision declared in its founding documents, a nation in which all people are treated equally and with compassion.

My racial memoir is also the story of my mother, a woman of principle, strength, warmth and deep compassion, and of a community of adults who were inspiring examples for the children they raised. Finally, my racial memoir is the story of me as a woman who devoted her life to opening minds and softening hearts - to helping people see all human beings as equally deserving of dignity, as members of one human family with many more commonalities than differences, and as deserving love.

My spiritual memoir is my other story, the one that most deeply defines my life. It is the story of my childhood curiosity about some of the deepest mysteries of reality, and the deepest theological questions. It is also the story of my adult quest for the source of my life-long, deep, intuitive feeling that there is something more to the universe than we experience through our senses, and specifically, that that “something” is a loving Divine Creator. It is the story of how very early in life, I not only felt the existence, but also a genuine love for The Creator, and grew up to embark upon a life-long journey to find The Creator. My spiritual memoir is the story of a journey that took me from science to philosophy, and from philosophy, ultimately, to mysticism.

I invite you, dear reader, to embark with me upon an adventure. On that adventure, you will witness first-hand the two themes of my life. The first theme is social justice—my desire for all human beings to be both seen and treated as equally human, worthy of equal respect and love. It is my desire for people to both **want** to do good toward their fellow human beings, and to **do** so. It is, in essence, my desire for humanity to mature. The second theme is my desire for wisdom, Ultimate Truth, and Divine Knowledge—the overriding hallmark of my life. Let us now hoist our sails and commence our adventure!



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# PART ONE

## MY RACIAL MEMOIR

THE MAKING OF A COMPASSIONATE ACTIVIST





I dedicate my racial memoir to my mother, Mrs. Selina Gray Joichin, whose indescribable love and powerful life lessons of compassion, poise, maturity, dignity, citizenship, deep concern for the less fortunate and hope for a just and compassionate world, have been my foundation throughout my life. My mother's example continues to inspire me to this day.



# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I thank my loving wife, Barbara, for her extraordinary patience throughout my writing process. For your understanding on all of the evenings and weekends during which I did nothing but work on this project, and for your faith both in me and in this work, I am exceptionally grateful. I love you, honey.

My sincere gratitude goes to my brother, Lambert, who helped me to fact check my memories of people, places and things from my childhood. You were a tremendous help during all of those long phone calls. Thanks, Lambert.

A genuine thank you to my Aunt Johnnie for keeping and sending me the only picture of Grandpa Jim that survived Hurricane Katrina. For all of our long, delightful conversations about our family history, thank you as well, Johnnie. They mean a lot to me.

My heartfelt appreciation goes to my dear friends, Theresa Sayles and Jack Straton, for agreeing to be my readers on this project. Theresa and Jack's editorial suggestions have been utterly invaluable. Theresa and Jack, sincere thanks. Special thanks to you, Theresa, for the time you spent working with me on all of the edits, and for encouraging me to write this, the story of my racial journey.

I would also like to acknowledge Dean, the staff member of the library of California State University, Northridge, for re-

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searching and finding all of the photos from the archives of the New Orleans Public Library that I have included in this memoir.



# INTRODUCTION



I was born black and to non-college educated parents in the Deep South, New Orleans, specifically, at a time during which the southern states were still enforcing the last legally sanctioned vestige of slavery—segregation. The year was 1953.

I **loved** my childhood!

I was enormously blessed that four extremely fortunate circumstances severely limited the potentially devastating negative impact that the larger society into which I was born could have had on my development as a healthy human being. They were, indeed, my emotional sanctuaries.

First, I was born to a mother and grandmother who showered pure, total and complete love upon me from the moment I was born. Second, in addition to her deep love, my mother also provided me with a powerful example of how to live a conscious life of integrity, poise, dignity, compassion, generosity of spirit and

civic engagement. Third, I grew up in a beautiful, middle class African-American community in which I had many role models of adults who, even while living with the daily indignities of segregation, led lives in which they modeled self-respect, maturity and community involvement. Fourth, I was born with a fierce intellectual curiosity, the result of which was a childhood love of science, and an incredible inner life of fantasy, imagination and wonder. I was, indeed, a little science geek.

Gramzie, my grandmother; my mother's mother (**Miss** Gramzie to all the kids in her neighborhood), told me that beginning as an adolescent, my mother "always" wanted a daughter. My mother, an avid reader, wanted a daughter so badly, in fact, that in high school, she began saving her favorite books for the daughter she dreamt of having some day. After having two sons, my brothers Lemar Jr. and Lambert, born respectively nearly ten and six years before me, and then losing a baby girl at birth, my mother **really** wanted me. She wanted me so desperately, that even though she was a practicing Methodist (and Methodists decidedly do not pray to statues), she made a novena, a special prayer, for a little girl, to a statute of the Virgin Mary every day after discovering that she was expecting me. The story, as Gramzie told me, was that my parents' Catholic neighbor told my mother that if an expectant mother wanted to have a little girl, upon learning of her future bundle, she had to make a novena to the Blessed Virgin every single day without fail until the baby's birth, asking the Virgin to bless her with a baby daughter. My mother wanted a little girl so badly that this, Gramzie said, is exactly what she faithfully did to a little statuette of the Virgin Mary every single day for eight months prior to my birth. Then, two weeks premature, I was born on August 15th, the Feast Day of the Blessed Virgin!<sup>1</sup> It was a sure sign, as my mother saw it, that I was indeed the literal answer to all of her many prayers. And oh my goodness—how my mother loved me.

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<sup>1</sup> Within Roman Catholicism, the Feast Day of the Blessed Virgin is celebrated as the day on which The Virgin Mary's physical ascension into heaven is believed to have taken place.

And I loved her too, more than life. She faithfully recorded all of my infant milestones in my baby book.

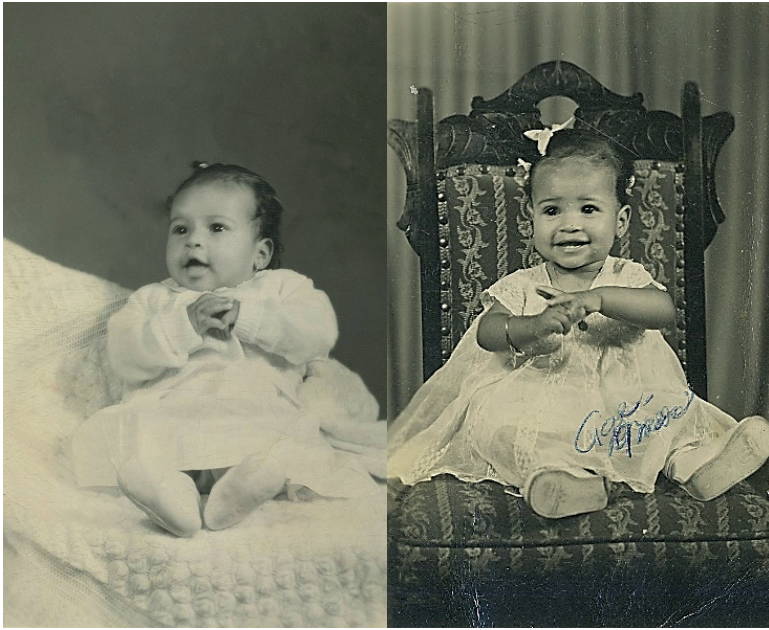


My Baby Book

Gramzie, for her part, had five grandsons before me, Lemar Jr. and Lambert, and my cousins Joseph, Gerard and Drexel, the stepson and two younger boys of Mama's older brother, my Uncle Isaac. Need I say it? Right. From Gramzie, I had a second dose of extreme love, extreme in the sense that extreme sports are extreme—intense, powerful and concentrated. I know, though, that Gramzie didn't love me any more than she loved my brothers and cousins. In watching her with the boys, it was absolutely clear to me how very much she also loved them.

My being her first granddaughter, Gramzie's deep love for me was as much the result of the happiness that my long-awaited birth brought to her Selina, the eldest of her three girls, whom, like her two younger daughters, my aunts Verlie and Johnnie, she adored beyond description. Because my birth so delighted and thrilled my mother, I was also to Gramzie, a blessing from heaven.

So, late on the Saturday afternoon of August 15, 1953 at precisely 4:58 P.M., I entered the world with my very own little personal double halo.



Me at Three Months and Nine Months Old

Despite the fact that I was the little girl my mother wanted so desperately, it was completely clear to me that, like Gramzie, who loved all of her grandchildren the same, Mama loved Lemar Jr. and Lambert every single bit as much as she loved me. I heard her say more than once, “I don’t believe in making a difference between children. I love all my children the same.” I knew that that was categorically true.

My mother and I were **always** together. While Lemar Jr. and Lambert were either at home or with their friends, Mama and I would be together, running her many errands—grocery shopping, buying our school clothes and supplies, getting something for the house, doing Gramzie’s food shopping and picking up her medications, or buying some item for the church, among numerous other tasks that always seemed to need doing. Mama and I were together so much, in fact, that she told me numerous times, “Laurie, you’re my little shadow.”

My mother took surprising pride in my smallest accomplishments. The first time I combed my hair without her help when I was about nine, she called Gramzie and said with such love and happiness in her voice, “Mother, my little girl just combed her hair and put it in the cutest little pony tail, all by herself!” Overhearing that conversation from my bedroom, I smiled from ear to ear, happy that I had made Mama proud.

On the morning of my seventh birthday, my mother woke me, said that she wanted to show me something, took me by the hand to my brothers’ room (the window of which faced the backyard) and opened the curtain to show me, to my utter surprise, the swing/sliding board gym set that I wanted so badly. On the morning of my fifteenth birthday, my mother was already at work, but I woke up to see on my desk, a wonderful surprise that I hadn’t even asked for—a portable, electric, Smith Corona typewriter wrapped in a bright red ribbon with a big red bow on top. Next to it was a beautiful card on which my mother had, as always, written a very touching inscription. My swing set, typewriter, telescope, microscope, piano and bicycle are the surprises that I remember. The many little surprises that my mother often had for me upon returning home from shopping are just too numerous for me to remember.

Shortly after my fifteenth birthday, my mother began having “the talks” with me. At one point during one of those conversations, she asked me what I would do if I liked a boy, was alone with him and he asked me to become intimate with him. I told her that I wouldn’t do it. “Even if no one would know?”, she asked. “**I**d know Mama”, I responded. “I have a conscience.” Within a minute, I overheard yet another conversation in which Mama had called Gramzie, and with her voice trembling from the emotion she was obviously feeling, said, “Mother, I was having another talk with Laurie today and I asked her what she would do if a boy wanted to be intimate with her and no one would know, and you

know what that child said to me? She said, ‘Well **I’d** know, Mama. I have a conscience.’ I was **so** proud of her, Mother”. I’m sure Mama didn’t know that I had overheard that conversation as well, but as I did, hearing how deeply she had been touched, I also became full, my eyes welling up with tears.

During my high school years, after school, I’d sometimes take the bus uptown to my mother’s office at the New Orleans Urban League and then ride home in the car with her. On one such afternoon, I walked into her office when Gloria Bartley, her much younger colleague and friend happened to be sitting in Mama’s office when I arrived. Gloria looked at me, and with a big warm smile, said, “Oh, there she is—Laurie Joichin.<sup>2</sup> That’s all we hear about—Laurie, Laurie, Laurie. Laurie did this. Laurie did that. Young lady, you’re all your mother talks about!” Whether it was the progress I was making in my piano lessons, my ninth-grade science project having been chosen for a regional science competition, getting my driver’s license, or any of my other quite ordinary adolescent landmarks, my mother’s pride in me was endless.<sup>3</sup>

The love I felt so intensely from both my mother and my grandmother when I was a child was powerful. It was tender. It was adoring. That double dose of indescribable love from the two women who directly preceded me in my birth line was unquestionably the source of both the happiness which was ninety percent of the emotional template of my childhood and the strength, dignity and compassion with which I have tried to live my adult life.

My mother’s example, the second thing that helped emotionally shelter me from the effects of the segregated New Orleans of the 1950’s and ’60’s, came in the form of a two-tiered lesson. On one level was her message, very lovingly taught, that it is important

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<sup>2</sup> I changed my last name to “Nile” when I was in my late 30’s. Even though I hadn’t actually done the research to unequivocally establish it, I assumed, quite safely I believe, that “Joichin” (pronounced “Joysin” – the “h” is silent) was the name of one of my father’s ancestors’ French enslavers. I decided at that point, that while I could do nothing to change that tragic history, I did not have to carry its vestige in my very identity. I chose “Nile” as a name that connects me with both the African continent and with the great Nile Valley Civilization.

<sup>3</sup> Lemar Jr. and Lambert were out of the house by then so it wasn’t that my mother wasn’t also proud of them. They were just no longer in our everyday family life at that point.

to have poise, charm, a beautiful smile, and a genuinely warm personality. There were lessons in good good grammar, good posture, and good manners - how to hold a fork (that I received when I was so young that I don't remember ever holding my fork any other way but in the manner she taught me), covering my mouth before yawning, answering questions in complete sentences, and saying, "Yes please", "No thank you" and "You're welcome" among many others. On a far deeper and more important level, however, were Mama's lessons of character. She taught me that no matter how attractive a person may be on the outside, if they have "ugly ways", i.e., if they're ugly on the inside, their looks do not matter one bit. Mama taught me how to be compassionate and empathetic to others—all others, especially those less fortunate. They were powerful lessons—lessons of true character. All of my mother's lessons were powerful for me because she exemplified them so exquisitely herself. Her sincere concern for and kindness to others and her social activism were also profound influences in my life.

My third childhood sanctuary was my neighborhood, Pontchartrain Park, a wonderful African American community named for Lake Pontchartrain which was walking distance away. "The Park", as it was widely known throughout the city's African American community, is recognized as one of the first (if not the first) middle class African American sub-divisions in the country and is a National Register Historic District. The Park was a brand new, beautiful, middle and upper middle class African American community of single family homes with meticulously manicured lawns. African American couples began touring the subdivision's model homes (which were very nice in the 1950's but quite modest by today's standards) immediately upon their availability. Pontchartrain Park was officially dedicated in January of 1955 and was truly one of the most beautiful neighborhoods in the city, black or white.<sup>4</sup>

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4 As an interesting historical note, despite how amazing a place Pontchartrain Park was in which to grow up, it was built for a disturbing, nefarious reason - to keep the city's new and growing Post World War II middle and upper middle class African American population from moving into white subdivisions during the Jim Crow era. Fortunately, as children, we were

Now as for my fourth emotional shelter, that imagination of mine. Consider: On a hot summer day when I was about nine, while waiting my turn at bat during a day camp softball game, I picked a blade of grass from the ground, looked at it for several seconds, and then asked Mrs. Green, the camp director sitting nearby, “Hey Mrs. Green, you think maybe there’s a whole nother universe on this blade of grass, or maybe a whole lot of universes on it? And you think maybe our universe might be on a blade of grass in some other, really big universe?” Mrs. Green turned, and as she looked at me in utter astonishment, responded, “Little girl, there’s that imagination of yours again! I’ve never **seen** a child with such an imagination!” I was a genuine little science geek. Curiosity and imagination truly were my two best childhood friends.

Because of the love that Mama and Gramzie showered on me, Mama’s example, my childhood neighborhood and my rich inner life of curiosity, fantasy and wonderment, I was for the most part, amazingly happy as a kid. The small part of me that wasn’t happy, was the result of my father’s behavior and parenting style. Four things about Daddy made me uncomfortable when I was young and caused me, during my childhood, to never really emotionally bond with or even get in touch with any feelings of love toward him.

First, and characteristic of many men of his era, my father, Lemar Louis Joichin, Sr., was somewhat emotionally detached and unavailable. Shortly after my eighteenth birthday, after several years of wanting to but never having the nerve, I finally asked him, “Daddy, can’t you show any emotion?” “No. My daddy didn’t do it and I’m not going to do it. Men don’t do that.” His response deeply hurt. After that conversation, I lowered my expectations of

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totally unaware of the community’s perverse *raison d’être*. It was also built just behind the all-white Gentilly Woods subdivision. The two communities were by either accident or design, separated by a trench. It was a very clean trench, with thick, neatly cut grass that grew on both sides and the bottom, but it was a trench, a divider, nonetheless. Ironically, in its location, Pontchartrain Park was closer to Lake Pontchartrain than was Gentilly Woods, which I believe made its location more desirable.



my father and never again expected him to be emotionally available. I was very sad, but it also felt tremendously liberating.

Second, despite the fact that he was a quiet, reserved man, my father expressed his anger in bouts of yelling. When something upset him, as when one of my brothers or I had the volume on the stereo too high, he'd stew in bed quietly for as long as he could take it, then suddenly storm into the living room and yell, "Turn that G \_\_\_\_ D \_\_\_\_ music down!" We would, then he'd go right back to the bedroom. The whole thing lasted about five seconds. It didn't happen often, thankfully, but I didn't like it when it did, and it frightened me.<sup>5</sup>

Third, Daddy drank excessively on weekends. He was as straight as an arrow during the week, and went to work every day during the week. (In fact, in all of the years during which he worked as I was growing up, while I'm sure he must have, I don't remember my father ever missing a single day of work from his job as a U.S. Postman.) Then, every Friday and Saturday night, he'd gorge on beer at the neighborhood clubhouse, the Golfers' Clubhouse, qualifying him, perhaps, for the term, "weekend alcoholic". Fortunately though, Daddy wasn't abusive toward my brothers and me when he drank. Indeed, it was after he'd been drinking that he became much more animated in a somewhat pleasant way toward us. He'd sometimes come home and actually talk quite pleasantly with me in a way that he otherwise never did. The end of those conversations was always the same, "Li'l girl, you know your Daddy loves you." Then pointing to his right cheek, "C'mon, give your Daddy a kiss." I would, then he'd smile and give me a five-dollar bill. Those conversations happened perhaps every tenth time he'd come home sloshed. Usually though, he'd just go straight to the refrigerator, and after staring into it for a good five

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5 I'm painfully aware that there is a bit of that temperament in me. While I'm not a yeller, I can be exasperated by a situation. I feel exasperation almost exclusively when behavior that I consider to be absent of concern, understanding and compassion is directed toward either myself or another. When that does happen, I try my absolute best to handle the challenge with my mother's poise. I am not always successful, but fortunately, it is seldom that I'm in that position.

minutes, grab a left-over pork chop or piece of hot sausage, make and eat a sandwich, then go to bed.

I am thankful both that my father drank only on the weekend, and that he was not abusive when he drank, but his drinking nevertheless hurt me deeply when I was a child because I witnessed how much pain it caused my mother, whom I **dearly** loved. I am infinitely thankful that my mother and grandmother's love was for me, an extraordinarily strong emotional counterbalance to my father's weekend drinking.

Fourth and finally, and more than his emotional unavailability, his stints of expressed anger **or** his weekend beer binges, the thing that saddened me most during my childhood was my father's emotional distance toward my mother. She bought him Christmas presents every Christmas, made him a big Easter basket with his favorite candy every Easter, reminded him of their anniversary every July and gave him a birthday card and present every September. I saw my mother trying so hard to make her marriage what she wanted it to be, but never saw my father respond to her in kind. I wanted him to be as loving and as kind toward her as she was toward him. Tragically, he was utterly incapable. His lack of emotional warmth, his temper (expressed toward her in arguments, usually about the fact that he thought she spent too much money on either us or on the house), and his weekend drinking, hurt my mother deeply. It was a very difficult marriage for my mother. I knew that, and because I loved her so deeply, it also hurt me tremendously.

Many years later, sometime in my mid-thirties, in thinking about my father in comparison to the very loving, nurturing fathers of many of my childhood friends, both in my neighborhood and at school, I realized that my father had himself been raised by an emotionally unavailable father. I realized that he was an absolute product of his time, one during which being raised to be a nurturing father, although fortunately not for all, was for many

men, not a part of their socialization. I also realized that he was a very responsible man who provided well for us, and that after I left home, during my young adulthood, he showed, in a number of ways, that he loved me. I realized then that he had always loved my mother, my siblings and me. I also realized—that I loved him.<sup>6</sup>

My father was indeed a very responsible man. The January 18, 1949 official transcript of his World War II military record reads as follows:

- **Civilian Occupation and Number:** Student X-02
- **Summary of Military Occupations:** Cargo Checker—Checked cargo from ship to shore. Kept records and tally sheets of all materials. Turned records in to be filed. Supervised four men working as checkers. Checked all records and tally sheets of men under him to check correctness.
- **Battles & Campaigns:** Normandy, Northern France
- **Decoration & Citations:** EAME Campaign Medal, 2 Bronze Service Stars, Good Conduct Medal and Victory Medal WWII

My father was a young man of 21-24 years old during the years of his military service. He was there, on D-Day, not fighting, but supporting those who did, at the Battle of Normandy.

I am fortunate that even though I didn't have a very close emotional bond with my father during my childhood, because of Mama and Gramzie's powerful love, I nonetheless grew up feeling cherished and adored. It was that tremendous love that I received so early in my life that has in large measure inspired me to write this book, for I have written it out of my great love for humanity, a

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<sup>6</sup> One of the most loving things that my father did for me occurred so early in my life that I do not remember it. My mother told me that I was quite small when I was born, weighing in at a mere 5 pounds, 4 ounces, and that after giving birth to my brothers who were much larger than me, she was actually afraid to hold me, for fear of hurting me! She and Gramzie both told me that it was my father who when I was two weeks old, "handled" me in order to take the measurements for my christening outfit. My father, who sewed quite well on our old foot-pedal singer sewing machine, then made the outfit for my christening the following week.

love which I am able to deeply feel only because of the great love that I experienced upon entering this world and throughout my formative years.

The seeds of *My Racial Memoir: The Making of a Compassionate Activist* originated very early in my childhood, about which you now know a little. I cannot, however, represent that I am its source. It feels far more honest to say that I was merely its recipient, and that its source is far greater than I. My fervent hope is that this work will help to heal our species and to guide us into a future in which racism, all other “isms”, and all other prejudices are relegated to the ashbin of history, where they belong. My fervent wish is to be of service in guiding humanity to a future of wisdom, of compassion and of maturity.

What follows is the story of how the passion to do so was cultivated in me.