



THE BODY IS NOT AN APOLOGY

THE POWER OF RADICAL SELF-LOVE

SONYA RENEE TAYLOR

Praise for *The Body Is Not an Apology*

“From the moment I met Sonya Renee, I knew my life, my world, and the way I view myself and others around me would never be the same. *The Body Is Not an Apology* is essential reading for those of us who crave understanding and those who are already on the path to learning how beautiful and complex our bodies are. It will empower you with the tools to navigate a world that is often unkind to those of us who whether by choice or design don’t adhere to society’s standard of beauty. Her words will echo in your heart, soul, and body just as they have in mine.”

—**Tess Holliday, plus model, author, and founder of Eff Your Beauty Standards**

“*The Body Is Not an Apology* is a gift, a blessing, a prayer, a reminder, a sacred text. In it, Taylor invites us to live in a world where different bodies are seen, affirmed, celebrated, and just. Taylor invites us to break up with shame, to deepen our literacy, and to liberate our practice of celebrating every body and never apologizing for this body that is mine and takes care of me so well. This book cracked me open in ways that I’m so grateful for. I know it will do the same for you.”

—**Alicia Garza, cocreator of the Black Lives Matter Global Network and Strategy + Partnerships Director, National Domestic Workers Alliance**

“*The Body Is Not an Apology* is a radical, merciful, transformational book that will give you deep insights, inspiration, and concrete tools for launching the revolution right inside your own beloved body. Written from deep experience, with a force of catalytic energy and so much love.”

—**Eve Ensler, author of *The Vagina Monologues* and *In the Body of the World***

“In 2017, #thefirsttimeisawmyself was a trending hashtag and Netflix campaign. As a disabled woman, #thefirsttimeireadmyself may well have been this book. Thank you, Sonya. Bought two copies, one for me and one for my daughter.”

—**Rebecca Cokely, Senior Fellow for Disability Policy, Center for American Progress, disability rights activist, and mom**

“Sonya Renee Taylor is a treasure that this world simply does not deserve. *The Body Is Not an Apology* is the gift of radical love the world needs! We are all better off because of her presence, talent, compassion, and authentic work. Thank you, Sonya, for all that you do.”

—**Jes Baker, aka The Militant Baker, author of *Things No One Will Tell Fat Girls***

“In these times, when the search for answers to the mounting injustices in our world seems to confound us, Sonya Renee Taylor offers a simple but powerful place to begin: recovering our relationship with our own bodies. To build a world that works for everyone, we must first make the radical decision to love every facet of ourselves. Through lucid and courageous self-revelation, Taylor shows us how to realize the revolutionary potential of self-love. ‘The body is not an apology’ is the mantra we should all embrace.”

—**Kimberlé Crenshaw, legal scholar and founder and Executive Director, African American Policy Forum**

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The Power of Radical Self-Love

Sonya Renee Taylor



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For Terry Lyn Hines (1959–2012)

My first and most enduring example
of the power of radical love.

My Mother's Belly

*The bread of her waist, a loaf
I would knead with eight-year-old palms
sweaty from play. My brother and I marveled
at the ridges and grooves. How they would summit at her navel.
How her belly looked like a walnut. How we were once seeds
that resided inside. We giggled, my brother and I,
when she would recline on the couch,
lift her shirt, let her belly spread like cake batter in a pan.
It was as much a treat as licking the sweet from electric mixers on birthdays.*

*The undulating of my mother's belly was not
a shame she hid from her children.
She knew we came from this. Her belly was a gift
we kept passing between us.
It was both hers, of her body,
and ours for having made it new,
different. Her belly was an altar of flesh
built in remembrance of us, by us.*

*What remains of my mother's belly
resides in a container of ashes I keep in a closet.
Every once and again, I open the box,
sift through the fine crystals with palms
that were once eight. Feel the grooves and ridges
that do not summit now but rill through fingers.
Granules so much more salt
than sweet today. And yet, still I marvel
at her once body. Even in this form say,
"I came from this."*

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Prologue

Long before there was a digital media and education company or a radical self-love movement with hundreds of thousands of followers on our website and social media pages, before anyone cared to write about us in newsprint or interview me on television, before people began to send me photos of their bodies with my words etched in ink on their backs, forearms, and shoulders (which never stops being awesome and weird), there was a word . . . well, words. Those words were “your body is not an apology.” It was the summer of 2010, in a hotel room in Knoxville, Tennessee. My team and I were preparing for evening bouts in competition at the Southern Fried Poetry Slam. Slam is competitive performance poetry. Teams and individuals get three minutes onstage to share what is often deeply intimate, personal, and political poetry, at which point five randomly selected judges from the audience score their poems on a scale from 0.0 to 10.0. It’s a raucous game that takes the high art of poetry and brings it to the masses in bars, clubs, coffee shops, and National Poetry Slam Championship Tournaments around the country. Poetry slam is as ridiculous as it is beautiful; it is everything gauche and glorious about the power of the word. The slam is a place where the misfit and the marginalized (and the self-absorbed) have center stage and the rapt ears of an audience, if only for three minutes.

It was on a hotel bed in this city, preparing for this odd game, that I uttered the words “your body is not an apology” for the first time. My team was a kaleidoscope of bodies and identities. We were a

microcosm of a world I would like to live in. We were Black, White, Southeast Asian. We are able bodied and disabled. We were gay, straight, bi, and queer. What we brought to Knoxville that year were the stories of living in our bodies in all their complex tapestries. We were complicated and honest with each other, and this is how I wound up in a conversation with my teammate Natasha, an early-thirtysomething living with cerebral palsy and fearful she might be pregnant. Natasha told me how her potential pregnancy was most assuredly by a guy who was just an occasional fling. All of life was up in the air for Natasha, but she was abundantly clear that she had no desire to have a baby and not by this person. One of my many career iterations of the past was as a sexual-health and public-health service provider. This background made me notorious for asking people about their safer-sex practices, handing out condoms, and offering sexual-health harm-reduction strategies. Instinctually, I asked Natasha why she had chosen not to use a condom with this casual sexual partner with whom she had no interest in procreating. Neither Natasha nor I knew that my honest question and her honest answer would be the catalyst for a movement. Natasha told me her truth: “My disability makes sex hard already, with positioning and stuff. I just didn’t feel like it was okay to make a big deal about using condoms.”

When we hear someone’s truth and it strikes some deep part of our humanity, our own hidden shames, it can be easy to recoil into silence. We struggle to hold the truths of others because we have so rarely had the experience of having our own truths held. Social researcher and expert on vulnerability and shame Brené Brown says, “If we can share our story with someone who responds with empathy and understanding, shame can’t survive.”¹ I understood the truth Natasha was sharing. Her words pricked some painful underbelly of knowing in my own body. My entire being rang in resonance. I was transported to all the times I had given away my own body in pen-

ance. A reel of memories scrolled through my mind of all the ways I told the world I was sorry for having this wrong, bad body. It was from this deep cave of mutual vulnerability that the words spilled from me, “Natasha, your body is not an apology. It is not something you give to someone to say, ‘Sorry for my disability.’” She began to weep, and for a few minutes I just held my maybe-pregnant friend as she contemplated the fullness of what those words meant for her life and her body. There are times when our unflinching honesty, vulnerability, and empathy will create a transformative portal, an opening to a completely new way of living. Such a portal was created between Natasha and me that summer evening in Tennessee, because as the words escaped my lips some part of them remained stuck inside me. The words I said to Natasha in that hotel room were as much for me as they were for her. I was also telling myself, “Sonya, your body is not an apology.”

At every turn, for days after my conversation with Natasha, the words returned to me like some sort of cosmic boomerang. They kept echoing off the walls of all my hidden hurts. Every time I uttered a disparaging word about my dimpled thighs I’d hear, “Your body is not an apology, Sonya.” Each time I marked some erroneous statement with “My bad. I’m so stupid,” my own inner voice would retort, “Your body is not an apology.” Whenever my critical eye focused laser-like on some perceived imperfection of my own or some other human’s being, the words would arrive like a well-trained butler to remind me, “Hey, the body is not an apology.” My poet self knew that the words were demanding to be more than a passing conversation with a friend. They wanted more than my own self-flagellation. The words always had their own plans. Me, I was just a vessel.

I recently listened to famed author and spiritual teacher Marianne Williamson share a talk on relationships. In it, she described the principle of natural intelligence. She posited, “An acorn does not have to say, ‘I intend to become an oak tree.’ Natural intelligence intends

that every living thing become the highest form of itself and designs us accordingly.”² In a single sentence, all in me that felt nameless was named. We have a dictionary full of terms describing our interpretation of natural intelligence. We sometimes call it purpose; other times, destiny. Although I agree with the spirit of those terms, I believe they fail to encapsulate the fullness of what Marianne Williamson’s acorn example illustrates. Both *purpose* and *destiny* allude to a place we might, with enough effort, someday arrive. We belabor ourselves with all the things we must do to fulfill our purpose or live out our destiny. Contrary to purpose, natural intelligence does not require we do anything to achieve it. Natural intelligence imbues us with all we need at this exact moment to manifest the highest form of ourselves, and we don’t have to figure out how to get it. We arrived on this planet with this source material already present. I am by no means implying that the work you may have done up to this point has been useless. To the contrary, I applaud whatever labor you have undertaken that has gotten you this far. Survival is damn hard. Each of us has traversed a gauntlet of traumas, shames, and fears to be where we are today, wherever that is. Each day we wake to a planet full of social, political, and economic obstructions that siphon our energy and diminish our sense of self. Consequently, tapping into this natural intelligence often feels nearly impossible. Humans unfortunately make being human exceptionally hard for each other, but I assure you, the work we have done or will do is not about acquiring some way of being that we currently lack. The work is to crumble the barriers of injustice and shame leveled against us so that we might access what we have always been, because we will, if unobstructed, inevitably grow into the purpose for which we were created: our own unique version of that oak tree.

I have my own name for natural intelligence. I call it radical self-love. Radical self-love was the force that cannoned the words “your body is not an apology” out of my mouth, directed toward a friend

but ultimately barreling into my own chest and then into the hearts of hundreds of thousands of people around the world. Evangelizing radical self-love as the transformative foundation of how we make peace with our bodies, make peace with the bodies of others, and ultimately change the world is my highest calling. Coincidence after seeming coincidence has made that much evident. I don't know what your highest calling is. It's possible you don't quite know either. That is perfect. At this very second, a trembling acorn is plummeting from a branch, clueless as to why. It doesn't need to know why to fulfill its calling; it just needs us to get out of its way. Radical self-love is an engine inside you driving you to make your calling manifest. It is the exhaustion you feel every time the whispers of self-loathing, body shame, and doubt skulk through your brain. It is the contrary impulse that made you open this book, an action driven by a force so much larger than the voice of doubt and yet sometimes so much more difficult to hear.

Radical self-love is not a destination you are trying to get to; it is who you already are, and it is already working tirelessly to guide your life. The question is how can you listen to it more distinctly, more often? Even over the blaring of constant body shame? How can you allow it to change your relationship with your body and your world? And how can that change ripple throughout the entire planet? At the organization I founded, *The Body Is Not an Apology*, we are not saying anything new (see www.TheBodyIsNotAnApology.com). We are, however, connecting some straggling dots we believe others may have missed along the way. We know that the answer has always been love. The question is how do we stop forgetting the answer so we can get on with living our highest, most radically unapologetic lives. This book is my most sincere effort to help us all answer that.

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1

Making Self-Love Radical

What Radical Self-Love Is and What It Ain't

Let me answer a couple of questions right away before you dig too deeply into this book and are left feeling bamboozled and hoodwinked. First, “Will this book fix my self-esteem, Sonya?” Nope. Second, “Will this book teach me how to have self-confidence?” Nah. Impromptu third question, “Well then why in Hades am I reading this book?” You are reading this book because your heart is calling you toward something exponentially more magnanimous and more succulent than self-esteem or self-confidence. You are being called toward radical self-love. While not completely unrelated to self-esteem or self-confidence, radical self-love is its own entity, a lush and verdant island offering safe harbor for self-esteem and self-confidence. Unfortunately, those two ships often choose to wander aimlessly adrift at sea, relying on willpower or ego to drive them, and in the absence of those motors are left hopelessly pursuing the fraught mirage of someday. As in, “Someday I will feel good enough about myself to shop that screenplay I wrote.” Or, “Someday, when