

Cara Meredith's storytelling offers moments of revelation that humanize our society's struggles with racial division while pointing toward hope for overcoming our divides. Don't be surprised to find yourself stretched and transformed by her prophetic message.

—Edward Gilbreath, author, *Reconciliation
Blues and Birmingham Revolution*

This candid, thoughtful memoir of Cara's exploration of racial identity teaches us, but it does so through an invitation into Cara's thoughts and fears, bumbling mistakes and earnest reflections, and journey of discovering herself and her history. I am so grateful for the gift of this book.

—Amy Julia Becker, author, *White Picket Fences: Turning
toward Love in a World Divided by Privilege*

Cara Meredith's journey is a challenging reminder that the road to racial justice begins with the tender first step of seeing the face of God in every soul looking back at us, including the face in the mirror.

—Patricia Raybon, author, *My First White Friend:
Confessions on Race, Love, and Forgiveness*

Cara honors the stories and experiences of her father-in-law, her husband, and the greater black community as she traces her narrative and discusses the challenges of her journey. This book is a moving and insightful resource for all of us.

—Ken Wytmsa, lead pastor, Village Church;
author, *The Myth of Equality*

Cara blends personal insights, thoughtful research, helpful lessons, and hope on this emotionally charged subject. Draw close, listen, learn, be challenged and encouraged, and take the next step toward love and justice.

—Vivian Mabuni, speaker; author, *Warrior in
Pink and Open Hands, Willing Heart*

This book advises like a trusted friend, making it an essential contribution to the conversation on racial reconciliation. This book is reshaping my understanding of the *imago Dei*, inviting me to see more clearly the vibrant beauty and rich opportunities of diversity.

—Jer Swigart, cofounding director, Global Immersion
Project; coauthor, *Mending the Divides*

This book is a gift especially to white people like me who are confronting our blindness and pleading for our sight to be healed. Cara's winsome, personal, and captivating storytelling helps pull back our cultural blinders so we can see in full color, leading to redemption for all of us.

—*Jon Huckins*, cofounding director, Global Immersion Project; coauthor, *Mending the Divides*

Cara has written a beautiful, rich accounting of the power of love to bridge the divisions we establish between one another. This memoir is a powerful gift for those who seek hope and healing in a divided world.

—*Deidra Riggs*, author, speaker, disco lover

Cara has given us a way to posture our hearts and minds toward personal and interpersonal considerations of race while holding systemic-cultural considerations firmly in mind. This is a fascinating, challenging, and encouraging record of lived knowledge and practiced wisdom.

—*Justin McRoberts*, author, *Prayer: Forty Days of Practice*

Cara takes us on her journey of stepping out of her protective bubble and running headlong into reality. From the moment I picked this book up, I couldn't put it down. I trust you'll have the same experience.

—*Marlena Graves*, author, *A Beautiful Disaster: Finding Hope in the Midst of Brokenness*

In a world where many folks want to be colorblind, Cara invites us to see the world in full color and declare that every person is as beautiful as God is. She dares us to dream of the world as it should be, inviting us to join her in the streets as we build that world.

—*Shane Claiborne*, author and activist; cofounder, The Simple Way and Red Letter Christians

Cara invites us to join her in a space where the systems that separate us are seen, acknowledged, and reckoned with. Her words are necessary especially for white folks like myself who need help confronting our privilege and finding our way toward justice and reconciliation.

—*Micha Boyett*, author, *Found: A Story of Questions, Grace, and Everyday Prayer*

*The
Color
of
Life*

A JOURNEY TOWARD LOVE
AND RACIAL JUSTICE

Cara Meredith

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*To James, Canon, and Theodore,
the three who hold my heart*



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Foreword by James Howard Meredith

*C*ara is the mother of my two youngest grandchildren. She now faces the reality of raising two nonwhite boys to manhood in America. The problem is generally referred to as the racial problem by the experts. To me, it has always been a simple question: Who in America enjoys the rights of full citizenship?

Sitting on my desk, where I do most of my work, is a picture of my father's mother, who lived the first twelve years of her life as a white woman. Her father had her reclassified from white to colored in 1875 for political reasons. She continued in his plantation school, later becoming the teacher at the school until the 1890s, but she was forbidden to teach her own children. What she did teach her children produced me. My grandmother used the Bible to lay a foundation for her downline, and she taught my father every book in the Bible, and my father taught me every book in the Bible by the time I was twelve.

Ole Miss, 1962. One week after I filed my application to attend Ole Miss, I wrote the Kennedy administration a letter. I asked one question: Am I a citizen or am I not a citizen? If I am a citizen,

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then I am entitled to all rights of American citizenship. Until Cara Meredith asked me to write about her book, I had never answered that question. I have now concluded that I, James Meredith, have enjoyed full first-class citizenship ever since American soldiers entered Mississippi that day in 1962, brought it again under federal control, occupied the university and the city of Oxford, and I walked into the Lyceum building, registered as a student, and walked across the campus and attended my first class. I have enjoyed my rights as a citizen since that time.

In 1966 I led The Meredith Walk Against Fear. It was much more important than one person's effort at Ole Miss. It touched the citizenship rights of every black person in Mississippi, in America, and around the world. I was wounded by a sniper on the second day. That act brought the question of who should enjoy the rights of citizenship to the American public. It brought the entire movement to Mississippi for three weeks under the leadership of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and James Meredith. We changed the wording of the event I was leading from "Walk" to "March" to accommodate the protest movement that Dr. King and others were leading. After all, a walk is the use of highways and byways to move from one place to another. A march is a protest against government policies used to keep some citizens from enjoying all rights of full citizenship, and a march is what we ended up doing.

My position was that there was no one big enough in America for me to protest against because the highest office in America is citizen. I believed then as I do now that I would have all rights of citizenship or die trying to get them.

Cara Meredith's book tells the story of where we were fifty-five years ago, where we are today, and where we need to go to make America right for all of her people, including my grandchildren.

—*James Howard Meredith, October 3, 2017*

Introduction

We're white!" my three-year-old son yelled from the back seat before pausing to shout, "And blue!"

My husband, James, and I looked across the console to one another: *Did he just say what we think he said?* Eyebrows raised, we asked him to repeat himself.

"We're white!" Canon said again, more emphatically this time. "And blue! I already said that, Mama."

"I know, baby, I know," I replied, turning to face him, "but we're white and *black*, not white and blue." My fingers touched the skin of my other arm, and then my husband's, to the dark and light colors of his flesh and mine.

"Oh, yeah, black. Black, black, black." Canon repeated the information to himself, as if solidifying the colors of the rainbow in his head. Nodding, he turned toward the window, his mind already moving on to the next distraction, the next conversation. Our boy had begun to see color.

If you were buried six feet underground, then you might be able to miss seeing color in the faces of this world. Subscribe to *National Geographic*. Turn on the evening news. Or better yet, take a walk in

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your neighborhood, your town, your city. Chances are, you're going to spot someone who doesn't look a whole lot like you, but someone who is just as human and just as divinely stamped as you. You're going to encounter another human who matters just as much as you matter.

In our house, we call this divine stamping the image of God, the belief that every human, everywhere, bears the resemblance of the Creator. You might call it *ubuntu*, a human-to-human honoring that happens because you and I are bound by our humanity. Or perhaps you call it the Buddha nature, believing the seed of enlightenment lives within every creature, from ant to hippopotamus to human beings. We tend to call it the *imago Dei*, the likeness of Christ made manifest, shaded in every color of the crayon box. From black and white and blue to tan and peach and purple, we see this image imprinted within its many hues, each variation an invitation to open our eyes and see holiness reflected back to us.

The homeless man sitting by the road begging for beer money? Christ made manifest. The grocery clerk standing on her feet all day saying a thousand hellos to a thousand different strangers? Christ made manifest. The nun walking through the subway station, the Buddhist monk catching the city bus, the window washer scrubbing the side of a Manhattan sky rise five hundred feet in the air? Christ made manifest, Christ made manifest, Christ made manifest. The image of God imprinted on every human, everywhere—the shiny stuff of heaven made tangible across the faces of ethnicities and cultures and people groups.

I have not arrived, for life is not a train ride with stops, the toot of a whistle signaling my finally reaching the place where I understand everything. But I have been on an adventure of learning to see the *imago Dei* in the faces around me, for this is a story of how love helped me see color and of how love helped me see God in the

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many faces of color. This is a story that looks at the pages of history alongside the pages on the internet. This is a story of the advantages that have been mine since our country's beginning. This is a story of anger and a story of sadness, a story of hope and a story of justice. But mostly, this is a story about two people who were unlikely to fall in love who also came to see what love for everyone is all about.

And this is an invitation from me to you to do the same. This is an invitation for you to *see*.





CHAPTER 1

Beginnings

Some couples meet at bars, while others find their lives intertwined on the first day of college. Some love stories rival the likes of *Casablanca*, and then some tales, like *Sleepless in Seattle*, involve backpack mishaps at the top of the Empire State Building, spurred on by a saddened boy's call to a radio show. James and I give all credit to Dr. Neil Clark Warren, creator of eHarmony.

I was thirty, he was forty-one. Both of us had been around the block, at least when it came to dating, to girlfriends and boyfriends, and to thinking we'd met The One when he or she wasn't actually our one. I had my dog, Mr. Darcy, but try as I might, all the *Pride and Prejudice* references in the world didn't proffer up a man to share life alongside. Unlike some of the other men I'd met, James held a steady job and lived on his own in a little pocket community outside of San Francisco. Plus, he knew the difference between *there*, *their*, and *they're*, had a book collection that extended beyond the likes of *The Left Behind* series, and seemed to spend a fair amount of time under Mother Nature's umbrella. By all outward appearances, he made the cut. After jumping through several rounds of companionability on the online dating site, we made it to the final round of open communication. "Email me," I wrote to him, certain he wouldn't. "Call me,"

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I responded when his email arrived, certain he wouldn't. "Meet me?" I proposed, or maybe the question came from him. Within six weeks of our meeting virtually, we finally met flesh to flesh, sharing a bottle of pinot noir and a plate of Italian bruschetta at a wine bar on the corner of B Street and Vine.

He was already there when I arrived, a table set for two waiting for us. Minutes after we sat down, he pulled his iPhone out of his pocket, intensely focused on the screen before him. I glanced at the menu and looked across at him. My head shook in disbelief. Did he really value an email, a text message, or, God forbid, a Facebook status update more than the woman two feet in front of him? I closed my menu and began gathering my things.

"What are you doing?" James asked, looking up from the menu, a look of confusion spreading across his face.

Indignant that his devotion to an inanimate object wasn't much different from that of the sixteen-year-olds I worked with five days a week, I said, "I'm leaving! Obviously, whatever or whoever's on the other end of your cell phone is more important than me!"

An apologetic smirk spread across his mouth, his doe eyes steeped in laughter. "I was here a couple of weeks ago with some friends," he replied, turning his phone toward me. "We had this amazing bottle of wine. I took a picture of it and wanted to order it for the two of us tonight, but I just got this new phone and can't figure out how to scroll through my pictures any faster."

"Oh," I whispered, settling into the hardback chair. I wasn't going anywhere, at least not yet. So we talked about our vocations, about his work in the financial sector and mine in the nonprofit ministry world. We talked about traveling, how he wanted to visit a close friend from college who now lived in Israel, how I dreamed of spending two months holed up in a castle in Scotland, free to roam the emerald Highlands whenever I pleased. We talked about

the border collie who held the keys to my heart, and about how he had never owned a pet.

“You’ve never had a pet, not even a frog or a cat or a hamster?”

“No pets.”

“But you’re willing to give one a try?” I asked him.

He smiled. “I’m willing to give Mr. Darcy a try,” he replied, clinking his glass against mine for the ninth, tenth time that night. Conversation never waned and curiosity gripped me. We couldn’t be more different from each other if we tried, but there was something about him, something that drew me to him, something that made me want to know more and hear more and learn more about his story.

Three hours later, he walked me to my car. We walked close to one another, bodies leaning into each other, fingertips touching, daring ourselves not to pull away, to stay for just a few seconds longer.

“I have to see you again,” he said, pulling me toward him. I nodded my head. This would not be our last date if I had any say in the matter.

*J*ames was fourteen years old, a freshman at a private high school in Jackson, Mississippi. Not three years before, his mother, Mary June, a lifelong schoolteacher, had died unexpectedly of a heart attack. When she passed, his father knew that James and his twin brother, Joseph, could not get the best education possible if they stayed in Mississippi. Desiring the best for his sons and wanting to honor his wife’s dreams for their educational development, he sent the twins away to boarding school in upstate New York for their seventh and eighth grade years.

After graduating from North Country School, James wanted to experience life on his own, finding his identity as an individual and not as part of an assumed pair. He moved back to Jackson for

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his ninth grade year, determined to live without apology in a place he hoped had changed for the better. But they still called him by the only name their mouths could utter.

“Boy!”

“Boy, watchchu doin’ back here?”

“What’s a black boy like you doin’ thinkin’ you can make some-
thin’ of yourself in New York?”

Their voices were familiar echoes of hate. Within a couple of days, after they spit in his face and refused to call him by his given name, James realized how little things had changed in the great state of Mississippi—at least not for his white classmates who saw him only as a black boy. *If this is what life is going to be like for me in Mississippi, he thought, then I have to get out of here. I have to leave. I have to go where I am seen as a student who wants to obtain a quality education.* He trusted the words of his father, instilled deep within him: he could be and do anything he set his mind to, for he was not just a black boy who lived under a predetermined ceiling set by society.

Desperate to get away, he called Phillips Academy in Andover, Massachusetts, the boarding school he could have attended, where Joseph had already started his freshman year. *Too late*, the registrar replied. But if he could keep his grades up, he could enroll as a sophomore the next fall. So he did the only thing he could do: he focused on his studies and on achieving high grades. He tried his best to ignore their taunts and jeers.

He was fourteen years old, an eighth grader at Whiteaker Middle School in Keizer, Oregon. Some people said middle school is the hardest time of all: “You’ll feel awkward,” they said, all the changes in your body, all the different things that happen to you and make

you feel like you live in the Land of In-Between, where you are neither a kid nor a teenager. “You’ll feel like you don’t fit in,” they said, when you wonder who your friends are, when you can’t seem to fit in anywhere at all. But that hadn’t been the case for me. When Mom and Dad let me get contacts the summer after sixth grade, the scared little girl hiding inside of me—the one they called Four Eyes, the one they mockingly sang “Old MacDonald” to on the playground, because the farmer and I shared the same last name—found she wasn’t so scared anymore.

It made me wonder whether the change was obvious to everyone else when, at eighth grade graduation, I kept going up to the stage to receive awards.

“Musician of the Year: Cara MacDonald.” *Clap, clap, clap.*

“Community Service Student of the Year: Cara MacDonald.”
Clap, clap, clap.

“Class award, voted Most Likely to be a Friend to Everyone: Cara MacDonald.” *Clap, clap, clap.*

I collected thirteen awards that night, from the National Honor Society and the English teachers and even the principal too. Each time I walked up the steps to the gymnasium’s makeshift stage and shook hands with the grown-up who handed me an award, I looked out into the audience at my friends seated in the first couple of rows and at my family, clumped together on the bleachers. My friends yelled loudly, fingers to mouth, calling out nicknames and whistling like their daddies taught them, hands clapping a thousand times a minute. But the faces I most squinted to see were the four clumped together on the bleachers: Dad, proud smile spread across the width of his face, hands balanced on air, stilled in a shrug. “That’s my girl!” I imagined him shouting. Mom, who beamed from ear to ear, wiping tears from her eyes between bursts of more clapping. And Brandon and Aleah, my younger brother and sister, who nudged each other

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with their elbows, giving high fives to everyone around them as they joined in the catcalls too.

If this was a taste of the life set before me, I had nothing to lose. *Bring it on*, I whispered, a three-word dare to my future and maybe even to the world. I could be and do anything I set my mind to because nothing was going to get in my way.



CHAPTER 2

More to the Story



Four days after our first date, James and I made plans to see one another again. Although I was moving earlier in the day, my mind swirled with the stuff romantic comedies are made of: sitting on the floor sharing pizza, unopened cardboard boxes decorating every corner of the room. When a handful of friends helped me move six miles south on the San Francisco Peninsula, from San Mateo to San Carlos, I told my friend Jenn a guy was coming over for a visit later that night.

“A guy?” She exclaimed. I could tell my words caught her by surprise.

“Yeah, a guy. You know, like a man, a suitor,” I replied, giggling.

“Have you met this man before?” she asked, her jaw hanging open.

“We went out a couple of nights ago. But we’ve known each other since the beginning of September. We met online.”

“Cara, are you kidding me? You’re having a guy over to your apartment whom you met on the internet, whom you’ve seen in person one time? What if he’s a dangerous criminal, a murderer, a rapist, a stalker?”

“He’s not,” I replied, pausing. “He’s different. I really like him.”

“Did you kiss him?”

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“No, but when he kissed me, I gladly kissed him back.” I did a little dance in my newly acquired living room, Mr. Darcy barking and jumping in excitement: *Play with me, play with me!* At the end of our conversation, Jenn and I made a deal: I promised to call her in the event of an emergency, acknowledging that James was still a stranger to me (albeit a most delectable stranger). In exchange, she would unpack some of the boxes in my new home so it would be presentable to a guest. I never did call her that evening, but I did send her a thank-you note. After all, her eye for welcoming a stranger into my home yielded me another kiss at the end of the evening, and yet another giddy schoolgirl dance when I closed the door behind him.

Late the next afternoon, I drove sixteen miles north to the place where James lived. If I could host him five hours after moving every box of books and clothes and piece of secondhand furniture I owned, surely he could host me for an evening too. Soon enough, we settled into a simple dinner of pasta, salad, and the same pinot noir we’d shared on our first date. He moved through his place with ease, turning up the volume on the deep bass of a Marcus Miller album, gliding over hardwood floors his feet knew by heart. As my eyes followed his every move, my inner feminist seethed against my newly romantic self, upset by so quick a refutation of the values I’d long espoused. *Women don’t need a man. A grown woman like myself can get by just fine on her own. Jerry Maguire doesn’t have anything on me: I don’t need someone to complete me.* But the more I stared at him, the more each bulletproof point failed to prove itself evincible.

Three dates in and I was nothing short of smitten. His speech, his actions, his mannerisms, all so different from my own, intrigued me. Captivated by our differences, I couldn’t get enough of him. He was black, I was white. He was left brained, I was the epitome of

right brained. He chewed his words softly, deliberately, sometimes passively; I spit sentences out of my mouth without a thought, too often asking forgiveness instead of permission. Eleven years my senior, he had graduated from the most elite high school in the United States, just as I was entering the second grade at a low- to average-performing public school. He said he liked to raise his hands when he worshiped God, maybe by culture, maybe by preference. I was drawn to candles and quiet chanting, prayers prayed round the world for thousands of years by thousands of tongues. Already I could tell he had a propensity for moodiness and melancholy, while I leaned toward optimism and sunshine, almost to a fault. On paper, we didn't stand a chance, but somehow our differences melded us in a way neither one of us could explain. We fit. We made sense. It was like the contrasting parts of our identities became our binding glue.

"There's something I want to show you," he said, interrupting my reverie. I turned to where he was standing in the living room, a number of books spread out on the coffee table before him. We sat down on the couch at the same time, cushions bursting upward, a shock of electricity shooting through my bones when our knees touched. What the man did to me with a mere bump of his leg! Flipping one of the photography books open, he turned to an earmarked page of Martin Luther King Jr. standing alongside a handful of other African American men.

"This is my father," he said, pointing to a grainy black-and-white picture.

"Your dad is Martin Luther King?" I replied, incredulous.

"No, *this* is my dad," and he pointed to a man standing to King's right. King was immersed in conversation, lips pressed together, head leaning in closely to the man walking beside him whose fingers gripped a walking stick. A straw sun hat covered King's head, an African pith helmet topped the other man's head. Although

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sunglasses covered their eyes, the photographer captured a moment of intimacy between them, not unlike our own. I looked at the caption at the bottom of the picture: “Martin Luther King Jr. and James H. Meredith, March Against Fear, 1966.”

“Um, who is he, James?” I whispered.

“His name is James Meredith, like me,” he replied. “He was the first black man to graduate from the University of Mississippi in the early sixties.”

I could feel him watching for a reaction as he said these words, waiting for my response, for who I’d be on the other side of the telling. Would I be like some of the women he’d dated who had wanted to be with him only because of his father’s historical significance? Or would I swing like a pendulum to the other side and claim indifference, choosing not to fully understand the weight of his father’s actions? The worst I could do was to leave his place later that night unchanged by the fragile piece of history that lived within his heart.

Shame about not knowing who his dad was washed over me, gulps of embarrassment sounding in my throat. I had probably heard of and studied James Meredith in my eighth and eleventh grade US history classes, just as I had likely read about him in college, especially in the education classes necessary for my teaching credential. But the information had gone in one ear and out the other, the advantages of not knowing and not remembering a luxury all my own. As a white person, it had been my luxury to remember crucial facts for a history exam because I deemed it the right thing to do, because we had to study and memorize the stories of significant African Americans every February during Black History Month. But now, as I sat beside a man whose father had left an indelible mark on the pages of history, I wondered what all I had missed, what all I hadn’t learned, what all I hadn’t committed to memory because it hadn’t mattered enough for me to remember.

“This is huge, James. Your dad is a really big deal,” I finally said. I flipped the pages of the books laid out before me: “James Meredith, escorted by US Marshals, on the way to registering for classes, 1962.” *Flip*. “Jeering students wave the Confederate flag.” *Flip*. “Two hundred people arrested in ensuing riots.” *Flip*. “Kennedy sends 30,000 National Guard troops to Ole Miss.” *Flip*. “James Baldwin and James H. Meredith, in front of a New York City brownstone.” *Flip*. “James Meredith becomes the first African American to graduate from the University of Mississippi, 1963.” The photographs blurred together, seemingly endless snapshots of an era so far from my comprehension. As James went on to explain, and as I saw in the pages that followed, his father’s actions helped pave the way for equal opportunities and voting rights not only for African Americans but for every American citizen, of every skin color. One man’s decision to integrate set the trajectory of his life and, as I soon learned, of his sons’ lives too, garnering him status as a figurehead of the civil rights movement. This was the family, the father, and the legacy of the man sitting next to me, and I was utterly clueless to it all.

I could feel my heart pounding as history danced with the present moment, intermingling with possibilities of him and me and the life we might share. Had all of this not mattered to me because it hadn’t affected me personally? Had I not cared about issues of race and justice and civil rights because I was white and he was black, because although this was a part of his history, I hadn’t believed it a part of my history? Surely this hadn’t been my fight to fight, my responsibility to bear.

But as I sat there on the couch next to a man whose differences I found irresistible, I wondered whether I’d gotten it all wrong. I wondered whether there might be more to the story than I’d been told, more to the story than the memories of my childhood held.