



THE FLIGHT: RECLAIMING REST, REFUSAL, AND RELIEF

A BLACK PAPER BY KIMBERLY "REESE" WATSON, LCSW
ON BURNOUT, SHORT-TERM DISABILITY, AND WHY STEPPING AWAY FROM
WORK CAN BE A SACRED ACT OF SURVIVAL.

RESEARCH-BACKED LOVE LETTERS TO BLACK HEALING

What Are *Black Papers*?

Black Papers are love letters to our collective healing—research-informed, culturally grounded guides created by and for Black people. They center our stories, our history, and our liberation. Each paper honors the ways we have survived while offering pathways to rest, renewal, and thriving.

Black Papers are in-depth explorations on healing, faith, and liberation created specifically with Black people in mind. Unlike traditional white papers, which often center academic voices disconnected from our lived experience, Black Papers are written through the lens of cultural wisdom, clinical expertise, and a commitment to liberation.

This Black Paper, *The Flight: Reclaiming Rest, Refusal, and Relief*, explores burnout, exhaustion, and the decision to step away from work through a trauma-informed and culturally grounded lens. Centering the experiences of Black people—particularly Black women navigating racialized stress and workplace harm—it reframes rest, leave, and refusal not as failure, but as acts of survival and self-preservation. This Black Paper invites you to consider flight as wisdom: a return to safety, dignity, and life beyond survival.

INTRODUCTION: WHEN STAYING HURTS MORE THAN LEAVING

“Flight is not weakness. It is power. It is saying no to death and yes to life.”
— Kellie Carter Jackson, *We Refuse*

There is a moment when your body says what your mouth hasn't dared to speak aloud:

“I can't keep doing this.”

This moment comes quietly for many of us—on the drive home from work, in the stillness of a panic attack at your desk, in the dull ache of another Sunday night anticipating a Monday that feels unbearable.

If you're Black, this exhaustion is often magnified by racialized stress, code-switching, silence, and survival in environments that were never designed with your wellness in mind.

In her powerful book *We Refuse*, Kellie Carter Jackson names this kind of exit as something sacred. Flight—historically understood as fleeing from harm—isn't just about running. It's about reclaiming life.

It's about refusing to collapse under systems that demand your labor while ignoring your humanity.

This Black Paper is a love letter and a liberation map.

It's for anyone considering leave from work or wondering if they're “allowed” to take space to breathe.

It's for those in search of relief.

It's for those ready to choose flight.

THE HIGH COST OF STAYING

Let's name it plainly:

We are living through a pandemic of burnout—and Black people are disproportionately affected.

- 42% of Black employees say they feel burned out, compared to 34% of white employees.¹
- Black women are more likely to experience “invisible labor” at work, including navigating microaggressions and emotional self-management.²
- Only 1 in 3 Black employees say their workplace supports their mental health.³

In recent years, Black women have also been disproportionately impacted by layoffs following corporate rollbacks of diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives. Reports have shown that Black employees, particularly Black women, have been more likely to lose roles connected to DEI efforts or organizational restructuring tied to these changes.⁴

For many, job loss is not only financial stress — it is the sudden loss of stability, community, healthcare access, and identity in environments where safety already felt fragile. The psychological impact of this instability compounds existing burnout, reinforcing the sense that rest is unsafe because survival feels uncertain.

Remember, trauma is not just what happened to you — it is also what has happened to those who came before you in this country. It is what didn't happen, too — the absence of acknowledgment, repair, protection, or accountability.

And it is what happened inside you as a result of what you had to endure.

When stress and survival go unaddressed for too long, the body begins to speak. Chronic stress contributes to:

- Sleep disturbances
- Immune dysfunction
- Depression and anxiety
- Elevated blood pressure
- Trauma symptoms

And still, we hesitate to step away. Why?

Because the systems that burn us out also convince us that leaving means failing.

FLIGHT IS NOT GIVING UP— IT'S COMING HOME TO YOURSELF

Flight isn't flaking.

It isn't weakness.

It isn't "too much."

Flight is wisdom.

It's the voice inside that says: You deserve to live.

You don't have to wait until you're curled on the bathroom floor to be believed. You don't have to collapse before you're cared for.

"Black people have always fled—slavery, abuse, war, policing, neglect, abandonment. But flight is not weakness. Flight is the art of knowing when to leave and how to survive." — We Refuse

In modern times, taking leave from work—whether through Short-Term Disability, FMLA, or a personal pause—is a form of flight.

It is a resistance to the grind.

It is a practice of sacred preservation.

And most importantly, it is a right.

WHAT IF YOU DIDN'T HAVE TO PROVE YOUR PAIN?

One of the hardest parts of taking leave is navigating systems that were never designed with our wellbeing in mind.

To be believed.

To be protected.

To be seen as worthy of rest.

Many people reach this point already exhausted — not only from the work itself, but from the quiet pressure to justify their pain in ways that feel legible to institutions.

But healing does not begin with proof.

It begins with being believed.

For those considering Short-Term Disability or medical leave, having an assessment process that is trauma-informed and culturally responsive can make this moment feel less adversarial and more supportive — less about productivity, and more about care.

The intention is not to pathologize struggle, but to make space for healing.

You don't have to earn a breakdown to justify a break.

You just have to be human.



WHAT TO EXPECT FROM A FLIGHT- ALIGNED ASSESSMENT

This process should feel human.

Not cold. Not transactional.

The approach centers dignity, safety, and collaboration – recognizing that many people seeking leave are already carrying more than they should have had to carry alone.

Typically, the process includes:

- An initial conversation to explore what's been happening and whether leave may be supportive at this time.
- A comprehensive clinical interview grounded in listening, context, and care.
- Documentation that reflects both clinical need and the practical requirements of employers or insurers.
- When appropriate, limited follow-up communication to support continuity of care.

Each step is collaborative and confidential.

At its core, the goal is simple: to affirm what systems often overlook – that care is something you deserve, not something you have to prove yourself worthy of receiving.

IF YOU'RE WONDERING IF IT'S TIME TO LEAVE, IT PROBABLY IS

Leaving, withdrawing, or needing distance is often judged harshly.

But sometimes flight is the body recognizing what the mind has not yet allowed.

You learned this for a reason.

And learning something new does not erase what helped you survive.

You don't have to wait until everything falls apart to give yourself permission to pause.

Sometimes the signal is quieter than that.

A body that feels tired in ways sleep doesn't fix.

A mind that can't settle.

A life that feels smaller than it used to.

For many of us, especially Black people taught to endure, leaving feels like failure.

But rest is not failure.

Stepping away is not weakness.

And choosing yourself is not abandonment.

It is listening.

You are allowed to choose rest over grind.

Healing over hustle.

Space over survival.

This isn't quitting.

It is returning – to yourself, to your breath, to the parts of you that existed before exhaustion became normal.

And you are allowed to return slowly.

THIS ISN'T QUITTING. THIS IS RETURNING.

References

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About the Author

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For more on Kimberly's work:

