

# Transforming Trauma

---

THE PATH TO HOPE  
AND HEALING

---

JAMES S. GORDON, MD



**HarperOne**

*An Imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers*

*For Gabriel Gordon-Berardi and Jamie Lord: I hold you in my heart  
and  
William Alfred, Robert Coles, Sharon Curtin, and Shyam Singha:  
you lighted my path and warmed me on my way*

Every effort has been made to obtain permissions for pieces quoted in this work. If any required acknowledgments have been omitted, or any rights overlooked, it is unintentional. Please notify publishers of any omission, and it will be rectified in future editions.

This book contains advice and information relating to health care. It should be used to supplement rather than replace the advice of your doctor or another trained health professional. If you know or suspect you have a health problem, it is recommended that you seek your physician's advice before embarking on any medical program or treatment. All efforts have been made to assure the accuracy of the information contained in this book as of the date of publication. This publisher and the author disclaim liability for any medical outcomes that may occur as a result of applying the methods suggested in this book.

TRANSFORMING TRAUMA. Copyright © 2019 and 2021 by James S. Gordon. All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information, address HarperCollins Publishers, 195 Broadway, New York, NY 10007.

HarperCollins books may be purchased for educational, business, or sales promotional use. For information, please email the Special Markets Department at [SPsales@harpercollins.com](mailto:SPsales@harpercollins.com).

Previously published as *The Transformation* by HarperCollins Publishers

FIRST HARPERCOLLINS PAPERBACK EDITION PUBLISHED IN 2021

*Designed by Lucy Albanese*

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available upon request.

ISBN 978-0-06-287072-8

21 22 23 24 25 LSC 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

CLEAN 15	FILTHY 15
Avocados	Apples
Sweet corn	Strawberries
Pineapples	Grapes
Cabbage	Celery
Sweet peas (frozen)	Peaches
Onions	Spinach
Asparagus	Sweet bell peppers
Mangoes	Nectarines (imported)
Kiwi	Cucumbers
Eggplant	Cherry tomatoes
Grapefruit	Snap peas (imported)
Cantaloupe	Potatoes
Cauliflower	Hot peppers
Sweet potatoes	Blueberries (domestic)
Papayas	Lettuce

## EMPowerplus Ingredients

AMOUNT PER SERVING	AMOUNT	PERCENT OF DAILY REQUIREMENT
Vitamin A	768 IU	16
Vitamin C	80 mg	134
Vitamin D	192 IU	48
Vitamin E	2.4 mg	160
Thiamin	2.4 mg	160
Riboflavin	1.8 mg	106
Niacin	12 mg	60
Vitamin B <sub>6</sub>	4.8 mg	240
Folic acid	192 ug	48
Vitamin B <sub>12</sub>	120 ug	2000
Biotin	144 ug	48
Pantothenic acid	2.8 mg	29
Calcium	176 mg	18
Iron	1.8 mg	10
Phosphorus	112 mg	11
Iodine	27.2 ug	18
Magnesium	80 mg	20
Zinc	6.4 mg	43
Selenium	27.2 ug	38
Copper	.96 mg	48
Manganese	1.28 mg	65
Chromium	83.2 mg	70
Molybdenum	19.2 ug	27
Potassium	32 mg	1

After I've taught you how to construct a basic Genogram (there's more guidance in the McGoldrick text listed in the Notes), my friend and colleague Sabrina N'Diaye is going to share hers with you. Sabrina is a fifty-two-year-old African American Muslim woman, a social worker and psychologist. I'll ask her questions about her Genogram, encouraging her to explain when and how it has guided her in resolving past trauma, learning from and dealing with present challenges, and moving ahead with her rich, complex, and loving life. From time to time, I'll pause to let a few other people share stories of what they've learned from their Genogram.

OKAY, LET'S GET STARTED. You'll need a blank piece of paper—ideally 11" x 14", with enough room even for a big family. Actually, you may want two sheets, so you can redraw a rough version more neatly.

You'll want to use a pencil with an eraser, so you can correct and modify as you go along. You'll use the symbols on page 239 to create this schematic picture of your family—your Genogram.

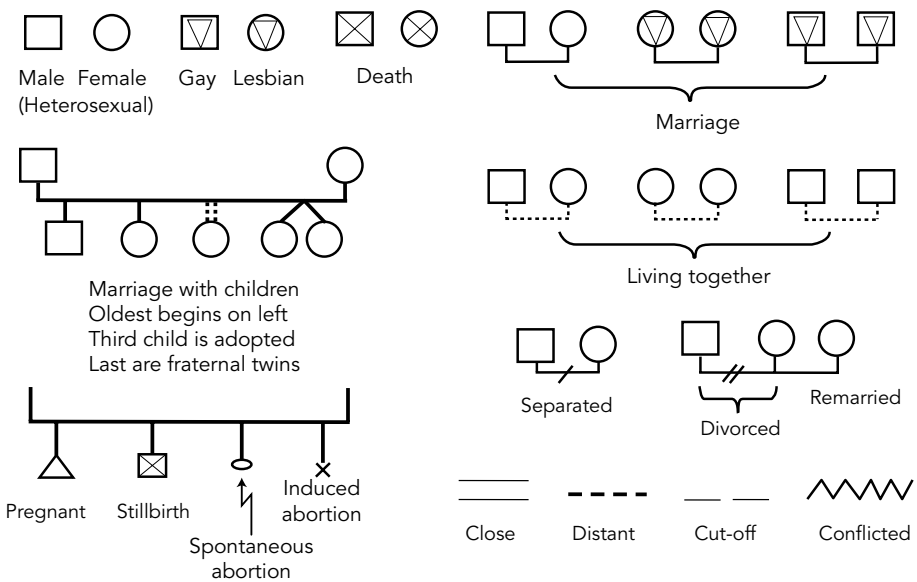
Begin by folding the paper in half horizontally. Now fold it in half again. This will give you three creases and four distinct compartments, like this:



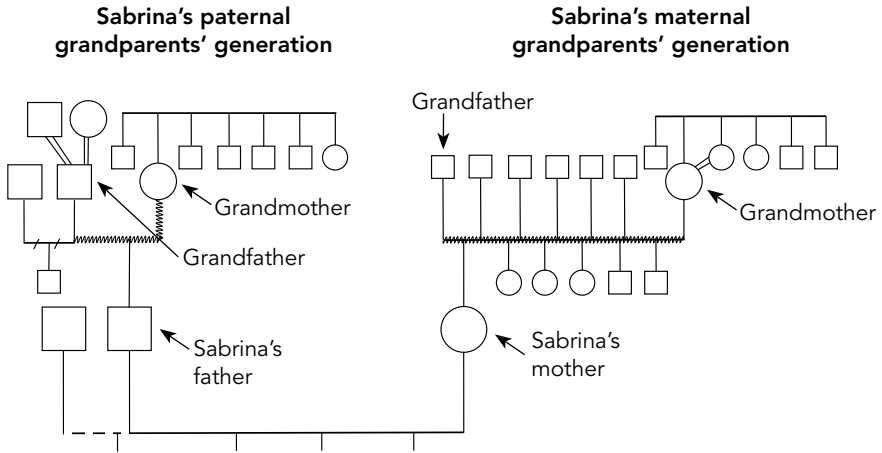
In the topmost compartment on the left, you'll draw your father's parents and their siblings and the connections among them. You'll use appropriate symbols for each person (squares for men, circles for women), and draw lines to indicate the relationship between spouses,

parents, and siblings. Make double lines to show close connections. As you'll see in the symbols below, you use broken, interrupted, and jagged lines to indicate different kinds of disruption in relationships. You'll repeat this process with your mother's family in the top right compartment.

If you know little or nothing about these ancestors or other relatives, that's okay. You can still draw the symbols for them and fill in the picture. The ones you don't know and what you don't know about them are also parts of who you are—perhaps they're also reminders of deprivation or longing or Hope.



Vertical lines of connection will take you to the next compartment below, where you'll locate your parents and their siblings. You'll draw them in order, going from the oldest on the left side to the youngest on the right. In this same compartment, you'll show the connections between your parents and any other spouses or partners, and your aunts and uncles, and their important relationships. Here is Sabrina's Genogram so far.



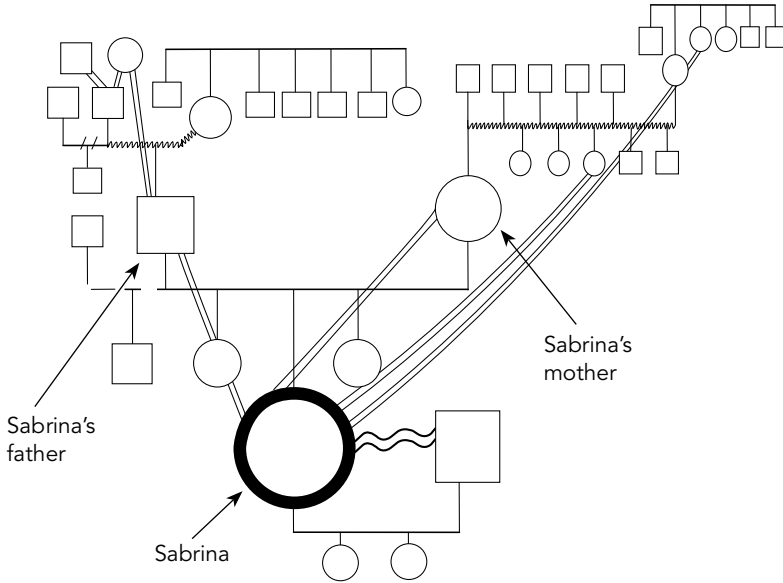
Now it's time to draw your generation. From the horizontal line that connects your parents, you'll draw vertical lines down into the third compartment. One is connected to you and one to each of your siblings. Again, begin with the eldest on the left, and draw yourself and your siblings in chronological order. You'll want to indicate miscarriages or abortions as well as live births. When you draw your own symbol, make it bold so it stands out like this: **●** for a woman and this **■** if you're a man. This will help you focus on yourself and your connections to and conflicts with everyone else.

If you're married or divorced or in a relationship, you'll want to draw that, as Sabrina has done, in the basic Genogram below. If you and your spouse/partner have children, they'll take their place in the fourth compartment. You can put your children's spouses and partners there, too, and your grandchildren.

Sabrina's basic Genogram is on the next page.

When Sabrina looks at it, this is what she sees:

First, her parents: "The most unlikely pair. . . ." She points to her "super smart" father, growing up and out of his own hardship. Com-



mitted from childhood to a “scientific approach to life,” he became the first Black man in his pharmacy school. And then her mother, “just as smart” but because of the educational system’s ignorance, her color, and her wandering attention, “siloed” into special ed classes. She failed to graduate from high school.

Sabrina traces her father’s path ever upward—a “commitment to stability, the first or second Black in his Fortune 500 company.” She taps on the circle representing her mother and describes the red-hot rage she has maintained against the white world of money, power, and bureaucracy—a world that had threatened to separate her from her own mother, brothers, and sisters, a world that had kept her down and feeling down on herself.

Now, as Sabrina takes a longer look at previous generations, “I see the severity of the life of poor Black folks, and also the strength that came from that life.” She also sees generations of men and women whose lives were damaged and shortened by alcoholism and addiction,



a history both Sabrina and her parents have had to come to terms with and struggle against.

And then there's the mystery of repeating patterns. Sabrina's grandmother and mother both pregnant at seventeen. Sabrina's father's mother not wanting him to marry Sabrina's mother, and he in turn resisting Sabrina's future husband, Serigne, for the same reasons: "Too poor, too Black."

"I continue to struggle with the pattern and then break it. Before I met my husband, Serigne, I was with a lot of men who drank like my mother's family. I wasn't an alcoholic, but I definitely was drinking."

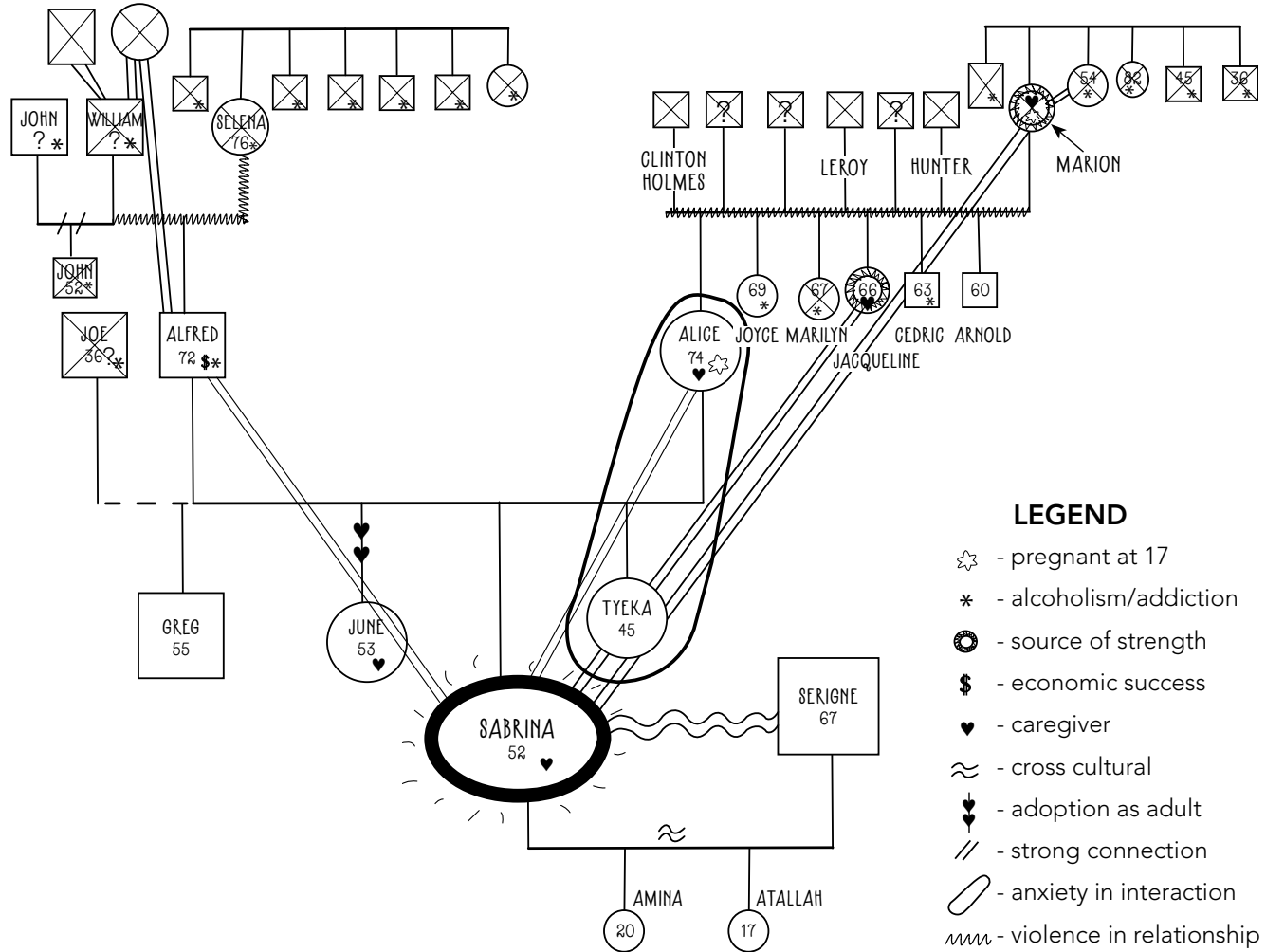
Looking at the Genogram for more understanding, Sabrina can see herself "between two different worlds." On the left, the white, upper middle-class, suburban neighborhood where her father's talent and drive took their family. And on the right, the South Bronx tenements where most of her mother's family still lives. Looking at her Genogram, Sabrina feels heir to both, appreciates both.

The double lines she draws show her the sources of her own strength, in her always supportive, "super-attached" father and her mother's fierce pride: "She let me know that I was gonna be better than any white girl."

Already, the Genogram is revealing powerful life-shaping patterns to Sabrina, and perhaps to you, as you draw yours. And there is much more to draw and learn.

Give names now, and current ages, to the people who've been most important to you. Put Xs in the circles and squares of those who've died, adding their ages at death. As you do this slowly, you may become aware of feelings connected to the people and the relationships you're describing, the deaths you're noting. Already you are well on your way to constructing and recovering the story of your family, to seeing where you come from, how you fit in, and how it feels. Remember, don't worry if you don't know all the details.

Here is Sabrina's evolving Genogram.



Sabrina observes and has given symbols to challenges that repeat, like “alcoholism/addiction” and “violence in relationships,” as well as the multigenerational virtues of “caregivers,” “economic success,” and “strong connection.”

Now take a few deep Soft Belly breaths with your eyes closed. Open them and look at the big picture of your own family. Here are some questions to help you see what you’re looking at.

What are the most important patterns in your family? For example, of illness and health, character and occupation, ethnicity and religion, wealth and poverty, etc. These patterns, and the importance you and your family attach to them, are the form and color of your family portrait. You could be noting three generations of doctors or lawyers, firefighters, nurses, or soldiers; cancer or depression running in the family; several generations in which siblings don’t speak to each other. You might want to create, as Sabrina has, symbols for these characteristics or patterns and put them inside or next to the circles and squares that represent the appropriate family members. Previously unattended patterns of tragedy or talent may also emerge.

Now ask yourself if there are others who belong in the Genogram—people who are not biologically kin but have been particularly supportive or hurtful or inspirational. I always put Bill Alfred, Bob Coles, and Shyam in my Genogram, as well as my godchildren and their children, and my closest friends.

What about pets? Many of us, like Lucy and my brother Jeff, whom you’ve already met, have relationships with animals that may be even closer than with kin. If appropriate, put pictures of four-leggeds on your page—perhaps signifying them with ears and paws, or hooves.

Ask, too, if there are family members who have been ignored, denied, or shunned—a disabled child hidden in an institution, a wayward father banished as a pariah.

Because we humans are so wonderfully unique, there are remarkable one-offs. Several years ago, I found myself looking at David’s

Genogram with mounting distress. The mother that this kind, wise, but worried middle-aged minister pointed to had been a prostitute who had abandoned him days after his birth. His father was then in prison. He described the grandmother who raised him as “an indifferent caregiver.”

“How,” I finally had to ask, “did you get to be who you are?” And then, “Who in this Genogram gave you the strength?”

David paused for a moment’s thought, then broke into a big grin. “It’s not there . . . yet.” He drew and then pointed to an unmistakable form with its label, “Starship Enterprise.”

“Star Trek,” he said. “That was my world.” The Enterprise rescued him, just as it had other survivors on endangered planets. Its crew provided a model of caring and cooperation, a source of inspiration and a family for a sad and lonely boy. Its humanitarian missions showed him heroic possibilities and provided him with an ethical compass to navigate childhood chaos. And then, as a still young boy, he was able to join the real, live, worldwide community of Trekkie communication and gatherings.