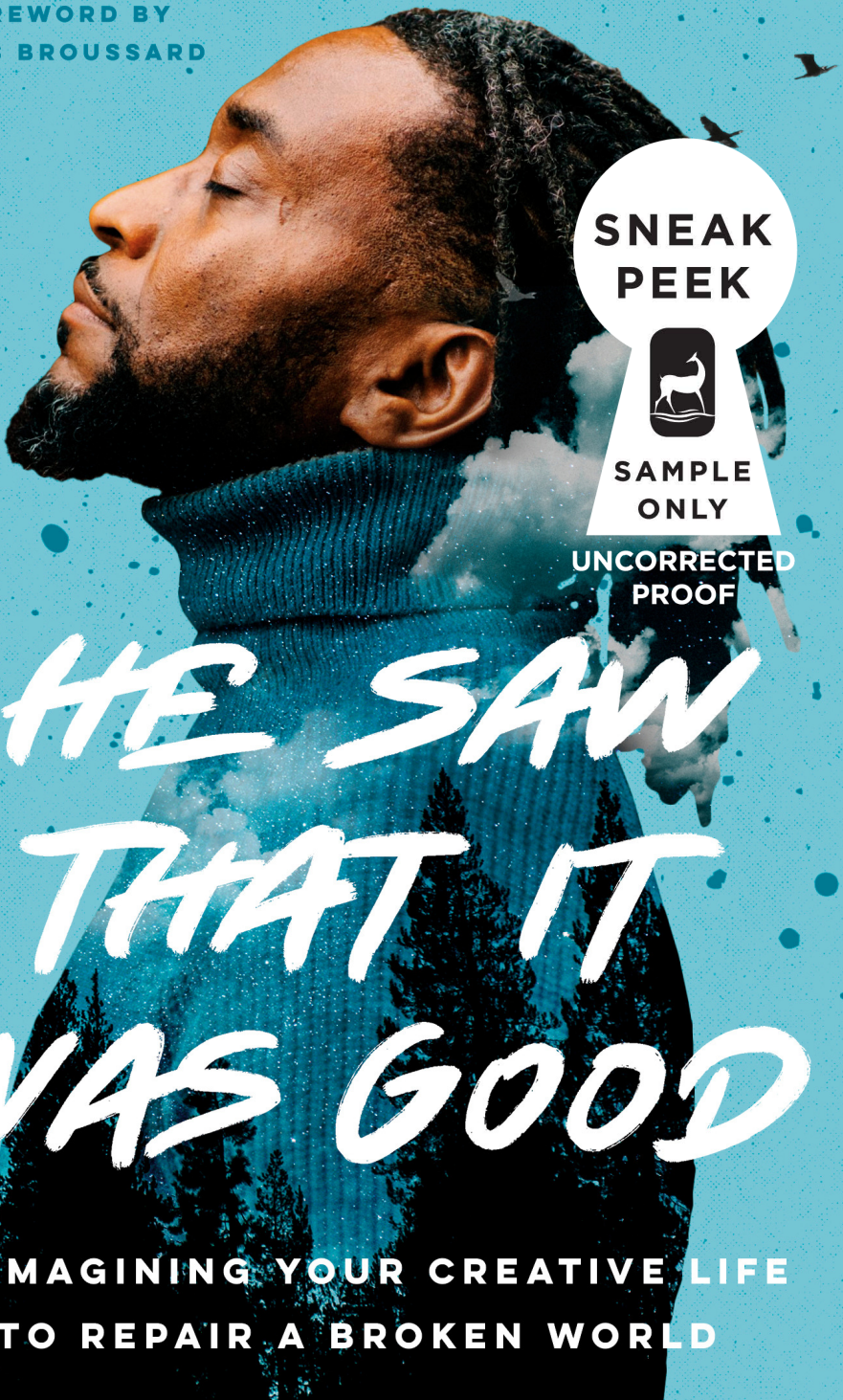
SHO BARAKA

FOREWORD BY
CHRIS BROUSSARD



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HE SAW THAT IT WAS GOOD

REIMAGINING YOUR CREATIVE LIFE TO REPAIR A BROKEN WORLD

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WATERBROOK

He Saw That It Was Good

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First Edition

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For my Queen Patreece and the Royal Court:
Zoe, Zaccai, and Zimri. May we leave a legacy that is easily reproduced but not easily forgotten.

FOREWORD

BY CHRIS BROUSSARD

I first encountered Sho Baraka in 2004 while listening to Lecrae's debut album, *Real Talk*. Nestled in between the hard-hitting wordplay and "dirty South" bangers that lifted Lecrae to stardom was a melodic gem called "Tha Church" in which Sho introduced himself to hip-hop heads across the world. Though unknown, Sho shone like a quasar, rapping that he takes good news to "the streets, even in the alley schooling cats, quoting many facts."

Like any healthy organism, Sho has grown greatly since writing those rhymes. But anyone who has followed his journey over the past decade and a half knows that the last five words of that hip-hop quotable have come to define his career. Whether he's dropping a one-of-a-kind album that manages to simultaneously glorify God, celebrate African American heroes and heroines, and address America's vexing racial problem—all while making your head nod, of course—or he's dressed dapperly on the

lecture circuit, Sho Baraka *schools*. And he schools with *facts*.

As I'm writing this, Sho's latest lesson over beats is *Their Eyes Were Watching,* an ode to the enslaved ancestors of African Americans and the liberating power of Jesus, who enabled many of them to sing spiritual masterpieces with hope and verve. In this album, Sho sounds like a hip-hop version of Richard Allen or George Washington Carver, vowing that White supremacy can neither cripple his soul nor hamper his creativity. In many ways, *He Saw That It Was Good* is *Their Eyes Were Watching* in book form.

In this canvas of a book, Sho takes you into his world—a place of honesty, transparency, grace, mercy, spirituality, victory, history, and humility. Oh, and, of course, as much as anything, *creativity.* At his core, Sho is an artist, and *He Saw That It Was Good* is both essay and poetry, literally and figuratively. While there are poetic stories that serve as interludes, the rhythm doesn't start or cease with them. Sho's writing style is musical. Better yet, it's jazz: unencumbered, sophisticated, forceful.

You will learn from this book. You will learn the power of stories—positive stories, negative stories, true stories, false stories, unspoken stories—and how they influence you and society. You will learn the power of identity—how it can cripple you when rooted in the wrong thing and bathe you in peace, love, and security when rooted in your Creator. You will learn the power of humility—how considering and understanding the viewpoints and circumstances of others can help you forgive, grow, and move on. You will learn the power of Black history when told from

the perspective of equality and normalcy; for in this writing Sho doesn't shout from the rooftops and "announce with trumpets" that he's going to use Black stories, Black legends, and Black culture to bolster and illuminate truth to all people. He simply *does* it, like a White American might use Abraham Lincoln or the Revolutionary War when illustrating a point. It's the difference between teaching African American history during Black History Month and teaching it year-round alongside the record of other races and ethnicities, as if it's equal and supposed to be there. Trust me, it'll strike you.

And along the way, you will learn the power of creativity. You'll see how we rob ourselves and the world of beauty, joy, and wisdom when we shackle ourselves and others to cultural conformity. Sho teaches this from experience. I'm a witness that we are all better off to hear Sho's full and honest voice. Now in his rhymes, and in this book, Sho shares the good news in all its power and glory, testifying of the personal liberation that comes from the King, as well as the social implications that said freedom is intended to have on our world; you know, justice, freedom, equality, compassion . . .

Ever since Sho released his groundbreaking third studio album, "Talented 10th," in 2013, I've been saying he should be as common and as recognized in traditional Black churches as Martin Luther King Jr. hand fans. Black preachers should use his music to teach congregants—particularly those who were raised on a diet heavy in hip-hop—the splendor of God's love and that the sky's the limit regardless of racism. Black professors in universities should use his work as a teaching tool when discussing the

potency of art to celebrate and critique the Black condition, challenge the status quo, and speak truth to power. And Black theologians should highlight his tracks as the hip-hop epitome of true Black liberation theology. No, he doesn't mimic James H. Cone but rather Absalom Jones, Sojourner Truth, and Henry Highland Garnet. As he once rapped, he is indeed "Frederick Douglass with a fade."

Sho's words, whether rapped or written, are the literary embodiment of the Black church. Combining the unswerving faith and evangelical fervor of the Church of God in Christ and scores of independent Black churches with the cries for biblical justice common to many well-heeled African Methodist Episcopal and Baptist churches, Sho brings the good news in all its fullness, application, and creativity. Regardless of your race, tradition, or background, when you're done reading this book (and perhaps rereading it), you and your soul will no doubt proclaim, "It was good."

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THE HIGHEST DIVINE

In a time now long forgotten, in a territory uncharted on our maps, lived a tribe of artisans. The people of the tribe trusted their eyes above all. Beauty and aesthetic were the currency of the land. Presentation was their beginning, and polish was their end.

The people of the tribe made it their tradition to sit in the grand company of the griots and poets. The raconteurs would tell many compelling tales. One that provoked much debate was a mysterious tale of the highest Divine.

Not until the bronze bards could touch the still evening air did the people turn their ears to listen. The anticipation was long, like the sun climbing down into the desert's dusk. When the light and dark met perfectly in balance, the song began:

Of allure, of reverence, also in pride sat the chief,
As bearable as one wearing a crown could be.
Prioritizing memories, not the present, his aim
Gentle, not for charity's sake but for his own name.
His imagination soared. His veneer blocked the skies
in plumage beautifully arranged; he lusted for eyes.
Many honors he held, yet one he could not own:
To make his name eternal and outlive his throne.

A decree caressed the mountains and kissed the
barren flats,
Tempting the skilled to a spurious act.

The chief knew his tribe loved the gods above all,
And to build idols of gods was the highest call.
He sought to find favor with such a request
That though he may die, in memories he would rest.
"Paint the image of the highest Divine.
And ere'where thy kingdom stands, thy face shall fly."

His seat was swarmed. Works, both fair and foul—
None were shy, neither adult nor child.
Behold a brave soul kneeling before the royal line,
Hoped to bring rapture in painting the highest Divine.
The painting evoked the mystery of the Divine's nature
Of fire, of spirit, of water, of vapors.
The face was absent, but the presence bold—
The proudest cloud would envy the complex mold.
Though it had courage and precision in craft,
The chief found it a puzzle, familiar to daft.
It took no form like kings and queens,
lacking splendor. The chief was not pleased.

Then approached another with craft on trial,
Aiming to raise the sun to a smile.
The highest Divine was peaceful and still,
A giver of life and a healer of ills.
The painting was spangled with love and fertility.
Surely the highest Divine knows civility.
The chief loved her meekness; her face was quite kind
but much too soft to be Lord in his time.
Though her welcome was warm and her invite was wide,
He could not see this work as the highest Divine.

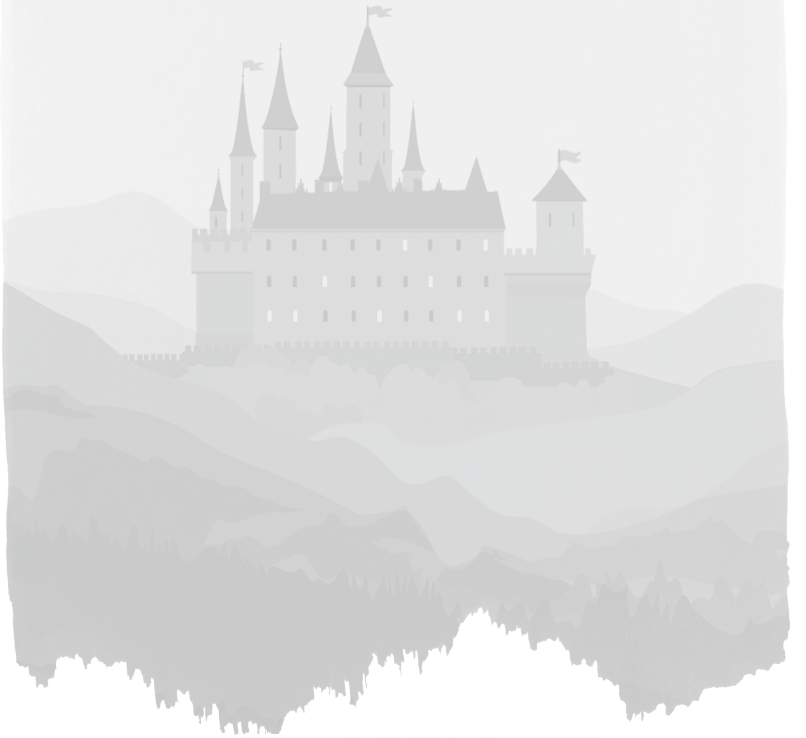
While defeat escorted many, at the throne waited
chance, to acknowledge the work of an artisan's
hands.
A portrait presented a soul lacking fear,
wearing conquest like braids, tossing flames like
spears.
Aggression in grin, dominion in laughter,
requiring praise from palace to pasture.
The chief had no quarrel with his enemies' fate,
but that alone does not a highest Divine make.

Just before the sun set on the ambitious decree
came one last portrait for the chief to see.
The craftsman presented it with elated belief,
for he knew his work would please the chief.
He removed the veil for the spectators' eyes,
endorsing vanity with fawning surprise.
"Mansa, if you seek imagery of the Highest above,
Why turn our gaze from the chief whom we love?
Thy rule is a lion; thy face is a lily.
Thy name will be praised from city to city."

His smile mimicked the sun; his eyes were ivory tusk—
He as the highest Divine, his solitary lust.
Forever immortal, his image in the heavens.
Nor death, nor successor will erase his reverence.

The chief now is in the company of gods.
Few in the tribe found his praise to be odd.
Lo, all did not swoon before the portrait and lie;
The wife of the artist had just and true eyes.

She honored the chief and knew the work of his hands,
But why make him a deity? She did not understand.
She knew purity and piety, and this she did not laud.
"Though your soul is beautiful, love, you paint an insufferable God."



INTRODUCTION

THE GOOD LIFE

I'ma test this out right quick on y'all
Now keep in mind that I'm an artist and I'm sensitive . . .

—Erykah Badu

By the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.

—Romans 12:3

We discover an immeasurable amount of good in our lives when we truly realize the depths of our depravity and indifference. We would each like to think we are part of the solution rather than the problem. However, our story is, of course, more complicated.

There are degrees to how we contribute to the decay of

society. Passivity and avarice are dangerous contagions. We fall prey to them when we assume that our lives and work have no adverse impact on the people around us. Add to that assumption our arrogance in thinking our ideology is inevitably right, and we have . . .

. . . A *problem*. So before I begin to talk about how we can each richly contribute to the flourishing of a blessed society, let's get centered. Let's see ourselves rightly, not thinking of ourselves more highly than we ought. Only then will we know our real ability to give *good* to those around us.

What is good? How do we center our creative contributions? God has told us what is good. Those good instructions are "to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God."[1] He gave more instructions too—"love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself."[2]

These instructions have two facets: inward devotion and outward duty. The Christian faith is one both of mind and of body. It is cognitive and corporeal. No one is excused from these commands.

The command to love—in all the fullness and justice of that word—is laid on all, from politician to painter. With every policy pushed, every stroke of the brush, we put forth what we believe about God and about good. With what we make, we affect the world. For better or for worse.

To build a good culture, you need a good memory. To be a good artist, you honor the past and learn from those before you. Strangely, this sense of where our culture has been sets us free to chart our course into the future. *There*

is nothing new under the sun . . . , except those who are renewing their minds under the Son. When "progress" rejects the past, we all lose.

In this book, I am sharing from my journey of integrating past, present, and progress. We all want our work to matter. We all want to create from a deep place, a *good* place. And this is how we start well: It should be a daily practice to look back with wisdom while looking forward with optimism. That perspective helps us ask the important questions: *How can knowing history help me make better contributions tomorrow? Do I use my work for good, or is the outcome avarice, shame, or demoralization?*

Each of us is creative. Each of our lives becomes a canvas displaying what our idea of good is. But without humility, we make terrible gods. The same talent that can help us shape the world for Christ can be used to carve dark idols. We all live with an image of the Chief of the tribe. Sometimes that image is just a slightly bigger effigy of ourselves. We all have gold and shadow—the light and the dark sides of our creativity. We are all like Miss Badu in that we carry a bit of sensitivity about our work, beliefs, and identity. We desire to create a world that would honor and protect those aspects of us. That desire is often admirable, but our methods can be dangerous.

The creative life seeks to produce or restore the blessings of a truth that benefits more than just ourselves. It seeks to reform our souls and society. It recognizes the evils around us while not allowing them to paralyze us. To do this work well, we must always be doing inventory on our hearts and hands. *Why* are we making, and *what* are we making? The creative life honors the Spirit that inspires

us while fixing our eyes on a redemptive future in which God has invited us to participate.

Again—we *all* are creative in some way or another. No matter the work, it can contribute to the good of society. But we still need to ask how we can fully live into our creative calling, how we can find transcending principles that will help mature our creative life.

And that is what this book is all about. If I can make it plain, as my dad would say, "All money ain't good money." Dare I say it?

All work ain't good work.

I live in America—a beautiful and messy motley of tribes tossed into a melting pot. The minorities of this country have historically been the fuel used to heat the pot—burned up to keep the whole thing cooking. But in this cruel crucible, creativity and goodness have managed to take root. The image of the Creator has been glimpsed, often where those in power would never think to look.

The griots* and singers, preachers and prophets of these marginalized tribes have given us an imagination that could make this place better. We cannot ignore their work. We use our past and present to form our future. We hope to construct a new normal with truth and righteousness. We are new griots and prophets sent to speak new tongues, tell new stories, and present new ideas.

My social and spiritual liberation is accredited to the

* A storyteller, bard, and poet in some West African traditions.

artists and movements that left a legacy before me. I learned old poems and turned them into raps. I heard Negro folklore and flipped them into new narratives. These individuals showed me how their faith and art could bring benefit and pleasure to the world in chaos. I praise God for his Spirit working through creation.

You do not have to be a scholar to contribute to the ongoing scrutiny of racism and other ills in American history. Most rational people will admit that it is filled with vileness and the abuse of power. However, a debate rages in society as to whether or not those historical ills have any real detrimental effects today. Should institutions or individuals in history be placed on a scale to see whether their good work outweighs their evil? How are we to judge and honor individuals in retrospect when values and virtues evolve?

I reminisce on the spring of 2017 when I was the lone westerner in a cypher of African minds brilliantly dialoguing about global issues. The rhythm of the conversation moved from African identity to Black American privilege to colonization. The rhythm would soon shake the foundation of a historical figure I hardly viewed as troublesome. That historical figure was Shaka kaSenzangakhona, better known in the West as Shaka Zulu. Shaka Zulu is mostly known to the West as an innovative war chief of the Zulu tribe who demanded the respect of colonizing Europeans. However, one of the bright minds in the room began to

critique Shaka as a colonizer himself. Many scholars and armchair critics charge him with enslavement, devastating the tribal population, and slaying pregnant women and their husbands in psychotic rage after the death of his mother.[3]

I'm sure Shaka believed his work was noble. Some people, in history and today, would agree. There is an airport in Durban named in his honor, as well as an amusement park. Scholars debate the details and legacy of his life. It's completely reasonable how the oppressed people in South Africa created a heroic narrative around a historical figure who would affirm their inherent dignity even if that individual moved with a looming shadow. We celebrate his gold in battle while ignoring the shadow of his tribalism. I experienced no emotional trauma when laying my eyes on the airport or amusement park bearing his name while I visited Durban. However, I imagine someone does. Everyone's hero has the potential to be a villain to others. Work that seems good to you may be a curse to others. We must understand the complex composition of our lives. We have the propensity to be both heroes and villains. It is very possible for you to be an oppressor and a liberator.

This forever shifted my idea of cancel culture. We sing the songs and praises of David. We read the gems of Paul. However, I'm sure Uriah's relatives felt anger at the very mention of the king. I'm sure the family members of those persecuted by Paul had some contempt for his letters.

Individuals are complex, and their legacies are complicated. How we tell their stories can have a bigger impact than the bloodshed itself. Those stories have a very real

possibility of contributing to future bloodshed. In the wake of the emancipation, if the stories told by the South (with the aid of Northern political expediency) had been better, America would most likely have a better racial union. Legacies wouldn't have been embellished, and bigotry would not have found a home in public policies.

I dare not make any false equivalence, but I must also recognize that some of my favorite thinkers can be chided for their shadows. G. K. Chesterton was hesitant to support the suffrage movement.[4] Alexander Crummell held discriminatory views of Native Americans.[5] Martin Luther King Jr. was outed by the FBI as a womanizer.[6] W. E. B. DuBois wrote a glowing eulogy for Joseph Stalin despite his atrocious war crimes.[7] We should not ignore the shadows of those we love. This is not an endorsement or a condemnation of iconoclasm, but I hope it's a sober reminder that we are messy people living in a messy society. When our humility is low, our anger is high and we are certain our ideology is right; we are capable of doing substantial damage.

As you actively engage the coming chapters, I hope you think critically about your own life. How do you define *good*? How does that definition compare with the Bible's grand narrative of creation, redemption, and justice? How have stories shaped your identity? Do you contribute to biblical liberation or cultural restriction? Do you live with fear and pessimism or with empowerment? Is your faith

one that incorporates the mind and body, self and community? What does it mean to be centered in a culture that lives in the extremes?

As we acknowledge our propensity to vacillate between extremes, our earnest prayer is that the gospel of Jesus Christ will center us. There is a reason God gave us repentance. That repentance aims to repair the societal brokenness created by others and ourselves. We do not have a faith that is selfish.

This book wrestles with the complexity of humanity and finds redemption in the dysfunction. It is a book that wants to recalibrate us. All told, I think this is a book about honesty.

There is much to mourn in this world and in myself. But I have resolved that I will not live in despair. Nor will the deplorable acts of the past define me. My present is centered in a redemptive narrative. My future is full of hope. And I pray you have similar resolutions.

I stand here because of the resilience and hope of those heroes who've gone before me:

The organizational skills of Richard Allen.
The leadership of Harriet Tubman.
The passion of David Walker.
The intellect of Anna Julia Cooper.
The imagination of Phillis Wheatley.
The foresight of Alexander Crummell.
The wisdom of Frederick Douglass.
The creativity of George Washington Carver.
The courage of Fannie Lou Hamer.
The relevance of Tom Skinner.

Jesus walked with them. He walks with me.

He walks with you.

And I believe that, together, our creative life can repair this broken world.

Will you join me?

1

YOU LOOK GOOD IN RED

Tell your children of it,
and let your children tell their children,
and their children to another generation.

—JOEL 1:3

Inheritance.

What my grandfather left, my father gave to me. What my father left, I have to bequeath to my children.

But what I pass on to my children is more than wealth (or debt) or these Adonis-like features. Inheritance is about more than those things. I pass on ideas. I pass on virtues. I pass on values that help form their concepts about the world.

What others pass to us shapes how we see the world. It shapes how we see *ourselves*. When I was an impressionable young boy, my mother once told me I looked good wearing the color red. At that point in my life, I didn't have much fashion sense. I didn't know which colors I hated or which I loved. But I cared about what my mother said. It

carried weight. Suddenly *I looked good in red.* That was more than a compliment. It was a scientific truth.

But the story doesn't stop there. I grew up in Southern California, in a suburban community that was known as a Crip neighborhood. Wearing red was more than simply matching colors or exercising your freedom to explore the color wheel—to the wrong eyes, it meant an affiliation with the Crips' rival gang, the Bloods. In the wrong spot, red could get you in serious trouble.

Looking back, I wonder at the power of my attachment to the color red. I've had friends killed because of gang violence—many of them with no gang affiliation. Wrong place, wrong time. In hindsight, I could have died more than once for wearing the wrong color. But I was willing to be confronted, picked on, and insulted because of a simple affirmation that my mother spoke to my adolescent imagination. *I looked good in red*. To this day, if you ask my favorite color, I'll tell you "Red."

If our lives are music, stories are the instruments that arrange it. A simple compliment from my mother quietly became a *story* I heard about myself. A story that shaped how I lived, including the risks I took to believe that story, to act on it. It became an image for how a simple word can shape someone's world.

Today I am a storyteller. I am employed for my imagination. In my art and performance, I can construct worlds. I can rearrange reality. I can tell the truth. My vocation is a vessel, allowing me, in a way, to time-travel. Part of this storytelling work is learning the stories that have already been told, both good and bad. Part of the work is trying to understand how our culture and faith and very lives have

been shaped by the words of others. I dig for the gold of the past. I also try to trace its shadows. And in both the light and the dark, I am learning about myself, about *us* today.

To be a good storyteller, you must first be an honest observer. No matter what you're cooking, honesty is the best ingredient.

History is about telling narratives. And the honest communication of those narratives has the power to shape our future. But there's more than one way to get a story wrong. Popular historian Howard Zinn critiqued the way many historians mismanage the past: "One can lie outright about the past. Or one can omit facts which might lead to unacceptable conclusions."[1] Both can result in misshapen stories.

This book is about many things. But at the core it's about how the stories we live shape the world around us. How we can use our creativity to bring gold or shadow into reality. There is no word or story too small to matter. Not mine. Not yours. But like the power of my mother's compliment—*"You look good in red"*—we must consider the power of the narratives we live.

Stories have the ability to cultivate societies. Or to kill them. The ethnic lies accepted by the Hutu and Tutsi peoples in Rwanda (lies engineered by German colonizers generations before) were the roots that gave rise to the 1994 genocide that killed over eight hundred thousand human beings.

So, as we embark on this journey, let's start by considering our stories.

The story seed that rooted the Hebrew people was

planted in one of the first stories of the Bible—the Garden of Eden. After God made the cosmos, what he said about humanity is one of the most profound statements possible about our identity: *"Let us make humankind in our image."*[2] From the beginning, God saw us to be evidence of his existence. His *image*. Furthermore, God blessed that image by stating that we are "very good."[3]

He saw that it was good. In that simple statement, we can find our beginning and our purpose. And this purpose begins with us being like God. These are positive affirmations. His creation would start running the marathon of existence knowing they have dignity, purpose, and support. Our heads are up, our eyes are focused, and our hearts are filled with confidence. We have been given a gift that is priceless and a world in which to use it for God's glory for all eternity.

But if only it were that easy. Of course, it isn't. Because of sin, the creative impulse can be cloaked in shadow. A simple story can be a seed that grows and produces the manifestations of evil deeds.

We are shaped by our stories, and we are given our stories by our tribes. There are no blank slates. We get our gold and shadow, our centering, and our creative life from our tribes.

We each belong to a tribe in some capacity. Our tribal associations span the spectrum from nations to families. But no matter what tribe you come from, one thing is constant. *Every* group is fashioned by a story.

What is the story of your tribe? It's one of the most important questions to ask. The answer has likely defined you long before you were aware of it.

The stories we accept about our tribes have lasting impact on how we see ourselves. In my song "Kanye, 2009," I made an observation about the common mistake of tethering African American identity to slavery:

> *Why does Black history always start with slavery so even when I'm learning, they're still putting those chains on me?*[4]

Do you follow? To believe my identity as a Black man starts as a seed sprouted from the ground of slavery suffocates my dignity. It tells me something false about my purpose. Is oppression what defines my narrative? If oppression is at the center of my formation, then the implications of that oppression will inform what I love, who I love, and how I love. Until new stories are told, your whole identity is in bondage.

The deepest roots of my story matter. What if there is a deeper truth about me? Something that runs beyond generational pain into something richer and older and more beautiful?

Even the shadows of our stories are powerful. In our search for honesty, it's possible to cultivate pessimism or even self-contempt, *if* we don't go back to the true beginning of our narrative—made in the image of God. Made to help create the world. Able to tell a better tale to anyone who will listen. Able to be liberated and to help Jesus liberate others from the stories that confine and oppress. My identity is not chained to the oppressive actions of any nation or individual. Neither is yours. If we let that

happen, we lose our rightful gold in the shadows of a small and dangerous story.

As we understand our creative potential as image bearers of God, *we need to understand our stories.* Especially the stories of our tribes. In *Outliers,* Malcolm Gladwell popped one stereotyped story by observing that people of Asian descent aren't good at math because of genetics. Rather, a common cultural or family disposition to work hard tends to create communities of students who value hard work and excel in the classroom.[5]

Frank Smith, an expert on language and formation, would call this learning process "the classic view of learning." It holds that "we learn from people around us with whom we identify."[6] This means we are learning even when we aren't aware of it.

Those "people around us" make up our tribes. The tribes we belong to teach us how to paint God. They shape our values and imagination. They give us the colors . . . the canvas . . . the backdrop . . . that we apply to our creativity, to our liberty, to our shaping of a good life. One tribe's God might look like a 1970s hippie. Another tribe's God may be fashioned like a Maasai warrior.

As part of our growth, we all have to begin questioning the stories we were given about ourselves, about the world, about God. We have to compare what we've inherited with the stories Jesus told about a humanity being redeemed. What does your tribe say about the poor? What does it say about sex and relationships? Whether you come from a conservative village or a progressive metropolis, odds are that you have assumptions about your narrative. How might those assumptions be shaping

your creative life right now? How might they be imprisoning you? And most important—*how do they compare with God's image in you?*

Storytelling isn't always intentional. In fact, it's often most powerful when it's not—like my mother's simple comment that I look good in red.

Many of us are blind to the storytelling we do as we travel through our personal narrative arc. The decisions we make communicate our beliefs about the world. But do we see the story? Rarely. But we are still living out a story—a plot with setting, characters, conflict, and (maybe) resolution. We are participating in the creation of our narrative, either passively or actively.

The question we must ask ourselves is, *What is the story I'm telling with my life and work?* Or asked another way, *How do my life and work paint what I believe about God?* You see, we live the story we believe. If we passively float through life, reacting only to the actions of others, our story is likely to be far from its full potential. But if we believe what God said about us, how we were made in the image of the Creator himself—well, wouldn't that change everything? Wouldn't that set us free to live our true story, our true creative life?

Great stories have heroes and villains. In the myths and movies, it's usually easy to tell the difference. But the stories of human life are usually more complex. Here our character is not fixed, as in a comic book, but is shaped by the acts we do in our daily lives. Many of us are both part of the problem and part of the solution. Part of the broken world and part of the hope of new life that can help heal it.

The book of Romans states, "There is no one righteous, not even one."[7] This is the human condition. We all can become the very thing we fight against. The economist can advise a company toward great financial gains while ignoring the effect her work will have on the poor. The activist for justice can be so consumed with outrage that he slowly slips into a version of the moral despotism he opposes. The theologian can conveniently emphasize principles in her teachings that fit comfortable cultural norms while ignoring points that challenge them.

Cartoons and comic books benefit from caricatures of heroes and villains. They are simple stories. Kids have limited capacity to interpret the abstract. We need to make it clear to them who the bad guy is, so we drape him in dark colors, make him unpleasant to the eye, and give him a sinister lair and few redeeming qualities.

But in real life, if evil were so easily discernable, no one would fall for it. In the real world, heroes cast shadows. Villains can have admirable qualities. (Just read the stories of Moses, David, or Solomon in the Bible.) We ourselves can blur the line between the two with how we think, act, worship, and create. We swing constantly between the reverent and the repentant, between living in

the big story of God's good image and in the many smaller, twisted stories that we've been told since Eden.

If an honest story is the foundation of how we understand ourselves, then it's also the starting point for living and creating as people made in the image of God. But keeping our stories honest is almost as tough as finding the true story in the first place.

One of the great obstacles to telling an honest story is *manipulation*. As a child, I would sometimes manipulate stories because of my deep desire to be in the middle of the action. It's embarrassing now, but I would sometimes lie about being present at events I was nowhere near. Someone would ask, "Did you hear about so-and-so?" and I'd respond with details I either heard or invented, believing they would add to my overall plot. It was not that I enjoyed lying in the least. I enjoyed being involved. I wanted to feel important. My manipulated scripting helped satisfy my social yearnings. (I outgrew the bad habit!) In those early, awkward retellings, I was experimenting with how it felt to shape a story.

Of course, the stakes in such manipulation can be much higher. We see this in the words of a certain snake in the first chapters of Genesis. The serpent retold a very important story—*just* close enough to the original to be recognizable but with the key details all twisted. Satan told Adam and Eve a dishonest story about their self-importance in the ecosystem of Eden. Satan intoxicated them with ideas of their own supremacy—suddenly they were the

central characters, and God was a withholding villain.

You will be like gods . . .

The irony is that Adam and Eve already had what the snake was lying about. They had intrinsic immortality that would soon be jeopardized because of their desire to stand equal with their Creator. Their identity was perfectly sufficient already. They had been made in God's own image. They had been invited to fill the world with him through their creativity and productivity. But after the serpent started talking, it wasn't enough.

And isn't that the core of our temptation? To put ourselves at the center of the story while pushing others to the margins. While we are hoarding spaces, we fail to recognize that there is enough affirmation for us all. Our disobedience is the product of impulses detached from God. Self-interest seeking satisfaction. This is precisely what happens when peripheral players attempt to replace the main character in the story—which always has been and always will be God.

When we lose the story, we lose ourselves.

In 2012, I found myself at a creative and spiritual crisis. At one point during that year, I was in New York City, attending an IAM (International Arts Movement) conference. I was searching for meaning in my creative calling.

During that time, I began to see that I'd been working from an incomplete story. What I believed about theology was affecting how I created. I began to realize that my

work held a theological pessimism, and it was beginning to ring hollow.

The Christian message that I was taught as a young man stressed sin and brokenness. The point was clear—humanity had sinned, and Jesus was acting to redeem. A true story! But not the *whole* story. I realized that a gospel story that begins in the New Testament makes our activity the primary problem. But when I went back to Genesis? It was our *identity* that was the primary problem. And our deepest identity?

He saw that it was good.

Now, sin's vital to talk about. We need to be (kindly) reprimanded for our failures. But is our failure the whole story? No. And if we believe it is, we are in danger of being manipulated. The recipients of our message can easily be misled—by their own misunderstanding—to believe that the message of redemption is about performance. About doing. The story has gone wrong!

The roots of our identity are so much deeper! We are made in the image of a righteous and creative God, and Jesus is restoring that fallen image through his redemption. But that restoration often means we have to examine the stories we've believed.

In Matthew 19, Jesus was approached by a rich young ruler who had a question about eternal life. After Jesus told him to keep the commandments, the young man let him know that he had. Yeah, he *had* kept the requirements of the law. The rich young ruler believed this pious faithfulness, this performance, should grant him entrance into the kingdom. From the outside, his story seemed to be right on track.

But Jesus saw through this man's righteous activity into his heart. And the narrative there was different. Jesus gave him a command that would challenge everything he identified with. Jesus told the rich young ruler, "If you want to be complete, go and sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me."[8] The man left distraught. Why? His story had been shaken. He was unwilling to abandon whatever narrative he had constructed about himself to follow after Jesus. No matter how good-natured or wealthy he was, Jesus had implied that his *identity* was incomplete.

Our creative life isn't just about what we do. It's about who we are. I believe the gospel isn't just a redemption of our activity; it is ultimately a redemption of our *identity.* If we never tell our deepest story honestly, then we can never truly reform.

In the Georgia community I live and work in, I don't have to convince people that they are sinful or that the world is broken. We can see it around us. Humanity is fragile. Our inability to uphold a righteous moral code is obvious. Our shortcomings show themselves in crime, questionable government policies, malignant marketing, and fractured relationships. Look out the window. The story's all twisted.

Our challenge is to believe the other side of the equation. We need to accept that our humanity has intrinsic worth—a goodness far beyond the self-centered gratification we experience in everyday activity. Our

deepest identity is *good*. I am committed to spreading this part of our deeper narrative because I know how powerful it is for our beliefs and our creativity.

This shift in worldview forever changed me. I no longer see the gospel as a weapon that forces people to confess their moral criminality. We've gotten it all backward. Sure, confession of sin is necessary. But I see the gospel as a portrait—a picture of God's own image that offers a return to our intended wholeness. Once we see a flawless portrait, we will see the deficiency in our own paintings. Then true confession will overflow because we see the deeper goodness that our sin holds us back from.

Art is not a tool for evangelistic chastisement. Too often Christians have used creativity as a tool for tearing down when it was always meant as a tool for construction. The question becomes, Will we be able to build with an honest vision of our deepest identity in God?

For our Creator *saw that it was good*.

Dishonest stories haphazardly paint bull's-eyes on the backs of others. The transmission of tropes and harmful ideologies can have a massive impact on how people view themselves and their world, especially when the targets don't have equal opportunity to form narratives. In *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks,* Donald Bogle detailed how Hollywood has perpetuated negative racial tropes.[9] These caricatures have been a cultural pillar to help uphold racial injustice in America. Many people today

would be shocked to discover how Negro dehumanization in the false narratives of vaudeville and Hollywood fueled and funded much of America's early entertainment.

In the early nineteenth century, minstrel shows were America's preeminent entertainment contribution to the world. It's significant that this country's entertainment was built on degradation and bigotry. Which makes me ask, How can we expect honest stories to come from a machine that was built on radical racial dishonesty? We are still feeling the effects of that dishonesty today.

Our world shapes the stories we tell. Then the stories we tell shape our world. Narratives that are successful entertainment are also beneficial for politicians. Why? *Because they shape how we see ourselves.* In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, negative Black stereotypes leaped from the vaudeville stages onto the campaign trail, with responses changing from laughter to angry jeers. They depicted the newly freed Negro as lazy and ignorant. Negroes were not the only victims of cruel and cartoonish portrayals. Immigrants were harshly satirized to promote political agendas. Chinese workers were depicted as violent and filthy. The Irish were cast as primates and political radicals. Women who supported suffrage were consistently painted as unloved, manly, and unattractive.

Dishonest narratives are employed because when comfort or tradition is threatened, it is not enough to challenge a legitimate political or social stance. Rather, you must dehumanize your opposition. You can sway opinion by exaggerating differences. And you can do it not with civil debate or discussion but with *stories.*

Dangerous narratives come in many forms. But they all shape our identity. In American storytelling, you can learn a lot from what the storyline neglects to mention. Our identity is not always formed by what is directly inserted into a narrative. We are also formed by what is omitted.

Black people, among other minorities, have often been shaped by these omissions. In his book *The Mis-Education of the Negro,* Carter G. Woodson quoted an abolitionist as saying, "The portrait of the Negro has seldom been drawn but by the pencil of his oppressor and the Negro has sat for it in the distorted attitude of slavery."[10] The point? That often the minority story is secondhand—and distorted.

Certainly, dysfunctional systems and racist ideologies are to blame for this. Yes, our world is broken. *But we must look inward and realize that no matter who we are, we have the ability to tell a better story.* We have been created to create. We have power—from the image of God—to challenge these omissions in the most beautiful ways.

I remember reading these liberating words from my favorite novelist, Toni Morrison:

> [The] function of racism . . . is distraction. It keeps you from doing your work. It keeps you explaining, over and over again, your reason for being. Somebody says you have no language, and so you spend twenty years proving that you do. Somebody says your head isn't shaped properly, so you have scientists working on the fact that it is. Somebody says that you have no art, so you dredge that up. . . . None of that is necessary. There will always be one more thing.[11]

These distractions can create an identity of pessimism. We begin to turn the pen against ourselves. Our music becomes jaded, then misogynistic and unnecessarily violent. Colorism runs rampant in our films and social settings. Anti-intellectualism can be praised in lower-income communities. Furthermore, White supremacy becomes a troll of the mind, obstructing our bridge to every conceivable opportunity. No matter our background—but especially if we are from communities whose stories have been oppressed or omitted—we *must* believe in the power of our pens. In our ability to use our creativity to truly change things—even if the horizons are small.

I say let these false narratives drown with the ships that brought them across the Atlantic. There is a better way, and I mean to live it.

When my daughter was seven years old, she approached me and said that she did not like her hair or skin color. I was caught off guard. I'd hoped this was a scenario we would never have to experience. My wife and I *constantly* affirm our children's beauty and intelligence. My daughter sees affection and affirmation reciprocated in her parents' marriage. We've been told that our house is nothing short of an African American museum with a plethora of Black art and images displayed. We have done our best to tell a full story about that skin color, about the beauty and heritage of that hair. She had attended a school that was 99 percent African American. I knew we were raising a secure

and confident girl. With our hard work to celebrate her unique beauty, I'd hoped we would avoid the messaging that could prompt disgust about it.

After making her watch seventy-two hours (I'm joking—it was eighty-two hours!) straight of *Eyes on the Prize, Roots,* and *Doc McStuffins* without sleep, food, or water, I began to investigate the cause of the dilemma. Do you know what I began to realize? That no matter how much affirmation my daughter received from her parents or school, we couldn't avoid the overwhelming and biased stories in popular culture.

My daughter was struggling to see beauty in something dismissed by or invisible to so much of the rest of the world. I learned that she is being formed and informed by voices all around, many of which are telling and selling incomplete narratives. From cartoons to merchandising, stories were being told—so constantly and urgently that even the environment of our home could not be a perfect shelter.

Identity formation is not a closed gate but a revolving door. Many times we are unaware of who enters the corridors to instruct us. But neither are we aware of the impact of *our* contributions. The power of our own creative impact on the world. We don't always see it—at least not immediately—but that doesn't mean it's not there.

In February 2018, the world was introduced to Marvel's film adaptation of the comic *Black Panther.* The film quickly became a cultural phenomenon. Critics and fans alike praised the movie—and it went on to become the third-highest-grossing film of all time in the United States. But it was more than just a film. Across the globe, the

movie became a celebration of the Black diaspora. People caught a vision.

Not only did the opening week boast high attendance, but it also became an atmosphere for cosplay and Afrofuturism. It was the first time I had ever witnessed a mass movement of Black moviegoers participating in costume, *joining* the story they were there to see. A mythical country in Africa called Wakanda suddenly felt like a real place.

It was all the more astonishing when compared with films like *The Last of the Mohicans, The Last Samurai, The Great Wall,* and *Dances with Wolves.* Those past blockbusters had spotlighted an indigenous or "other" people group but centered a White male lead. The choice was naive—and it was harmful. While honoring another culture on the surface, Hollywood had embraced the belief that Whiteness must be centered (and heroic) in order for consumers to care.

Of course, *Black Panther* struck back hard at that assumption. But for me, what is most significant about this film is not the 2018 smash. It's what took place about fifty years before.

It was 1966. America was fresh off the heels of the Civil Rights Act and still consumed with the Vietnam War. One year after the death of el-Hajj Malik el-Shabazz (Malcolm X) and two years before the death of Martin Luther King Jr.

In the midst of political and racial turmoil, two brave gentlemen figured it might benefit the world (and their profits, I assume, as not all good work is charity) to create a comic book hero from an African nation. It was a creative risk. This Black protagonist would defend his country

against supervillains and White supremacists. Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, two White men, had the courage to give the comic book world a hero like they had never seen. It would be fifty years before that choice had the impact we all felt, but they made it. They told a better story.

Telling honest stories takes courage. And we never know what the outcome of that creative bravery will be.

In January 2013, I released an album titled *Talented 10th*. This was my first solo project after my departure from Reach Records. My departure was already something of a stumbling block for those who couldn't comprehend why I would leave such a successful record label. (I will speak more about that departure in chapter 5.)

Talented 10th was no doubt my most liberating project up to that point. Although I was completely happy with each of my prior albums, something about them felt incomplete. I did not feel free to speak to certain more controversial topics that were dear to my heart. I felt that I was expected to chastise the Black community about fatherlessness and high rates of crime but remain silent about the racial injustices that create cycles of poverty and violence.

Looking back now, I realize that I was ensnared by what I call "the evangelical edit." I was constantly bumping up against walls and expectations—some overt, some invisible—that sought to shift my story from truth for the sake of others' comfort. I was encouraged to entertain

youth groups with hip-hop music and culture, but I was not allowed to call them out on cultural insensitivity. Even in Black churches, I felt the edit. Many churches employed me to engage their youth and young adults while levying ridiculous restrictions that left me feeling like a parody of myself.

This album was a rebirth for me, both as an artist and as an individual. I felt that I had gained my creative independence—that I didn't have to create music solely for the consumption of youth groups. And with that freedom came the realization that we self-edit when we feel we are inferior. We hold ourselves back because we're afraid that if we don't, others will. We stop ourselves from living our full creative life, from telling the stories we were created to tell.

The album was both revered and reviled. One publication gushed about aspects of the record ("challenging, rough, raw, provoking, and stirring"), then turned and immediately dismissed it as being "written exclusively to African-Americans."[12] Although the critic ended his review with praise, that implied narrative haunted me. My previous albums, which reference many White theologians and historical figures, were albums for everyone. What made the difference here? My new reticence to edit myself under the dishonest story demanded by the White gaze? After all, is it only Black people who need to learn Black history?

It is our freedom that is at stake here. It is our ability to participate in the making of a better world, in the seeking of justice and restoration. And often it is our faith that's at stake too. I've had many friends abandon their Christian

faith because of dishonest or dangerous narratives. This matters.

We are not lacking in bad theology or incomplete stories. I don't believe we need a new Christianity, but I think we need *true* Christianity. A Christianity with honesty and dignity. A Christianity that embraces the gold and the shadow of its history. That tells the right story and, rather than pushing us to hold ourselves back, can set us free to unleash our creative gifting, no matter what that gifting is. A Christianity that helps us recover the story of our Creator—and the image in which we were made.

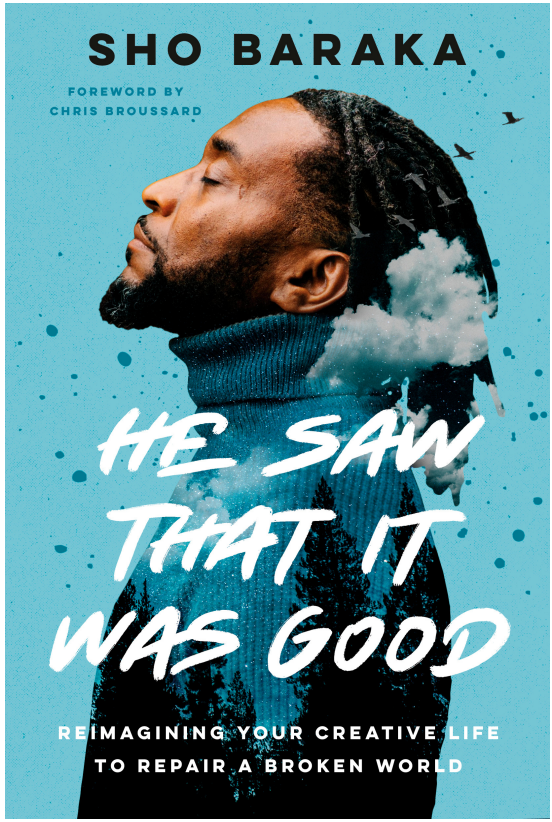
I hope for us to find the *goodness* of God despite false narratives that exploit or restrict us. The Bible is a good story, told honestly. God cares about how we tell stories and how those stories shape the world. A good story benefits all. A good story tells the truth without partiality. A good story is honest and sees the value in others.

The world we live in is a mosaic of our collective imagination. We build it together, one word, one hour, one song or painting or sermon or meal at a time. Will we let this place be shaped by bad dreamers? Will we choose the colors of liberation or limitation?

Let's hear that ancient wind of affirmation—*he saw that it was good.* Let's allow it to guide us through the toughest times when even dignity seems to have deserted us. In that image is our identity.

Oh, and let me be the first to say it.

You look good in red.



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