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On the Study/Action

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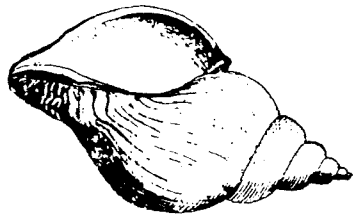

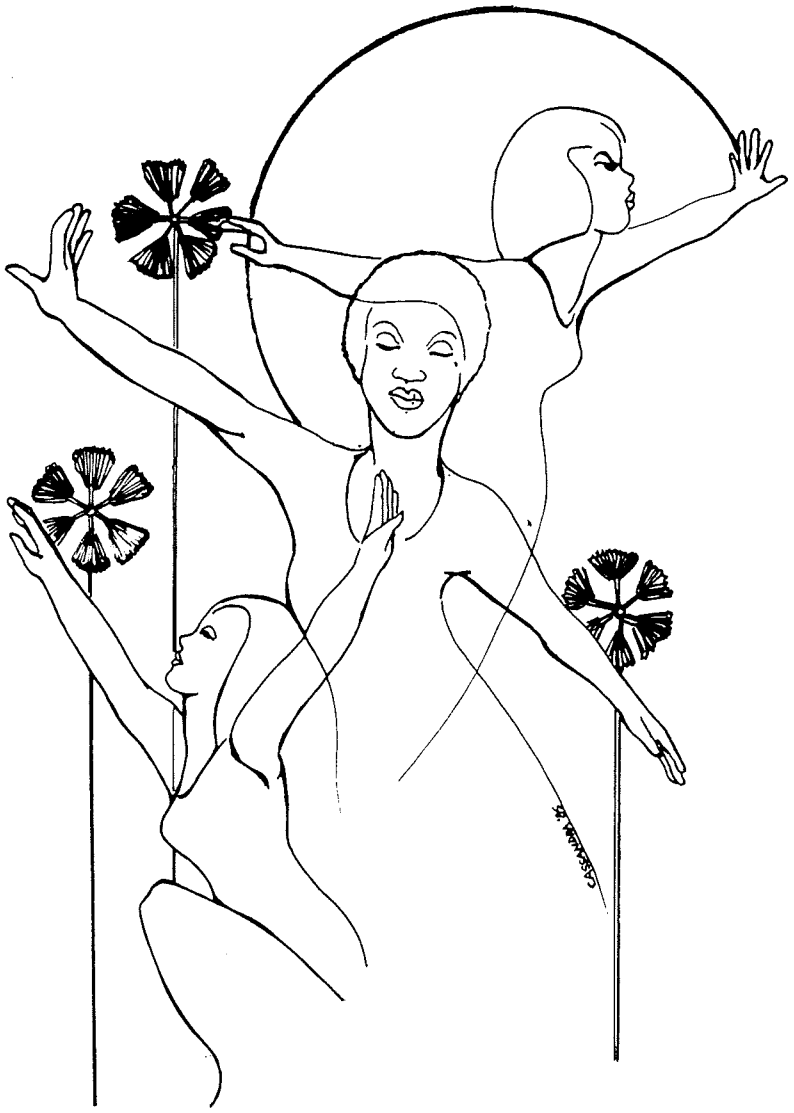

The Women's Theological Center: Learning and Acting for Justice

by Nancy D. Richardson

What is Sisterspace about?

To some degree it's about cutting up cheese, arranging crackers, serving food, cleaning floors and toilets, refilling toilet paper dispensers, handing out toothbrushes and soap and towels.

But what Sisterspace is really about is relationships. It begins with learning names: Peggy, Annie, Cynthia, Andrea, Liz, Marianne.

It's about going on to hear people tell parts of their stories and about wondering how much of those stories are true.

It's about wondering what comes first: homelessness or paranoia?

It's about wanting everyone to like me even though many have no reason to.

It's about watching caterers perform their "mission of mercy" in fear and/or arrogance and about despising them because I see both tendencies in myself.

It's about seeing a sea of named and unnamed faces on the other side of the counter and about wondering when I will feel free enough to spend some time on that side.

It's about wondering whether or not I could ever hug the woman who smells of rotting urine.

It's about creative loitering in the foyer in an effort to check the tension levels among the guests there.

Sometimes Sisterspace is about being trashed by named and unnamed faces. Trashed, ordered around, yelled at. And somehow feeling that I deserve this for having closed my eyes for far too long to the injustice that surrounds me and that I contribute to. But it's also about knowing that I am entitled to respect and dignity, too.

And sometimes it's about having a good laugh. "Who do Polish lesbians fall in love with, Meck?" asks Ruth, who I know is both Polish and lesbian. The answer cracks us both up: "Men."

When I sit in my dorm room on a rainy Sunday, Sisterspace is about wondering where these women go to stay dry and warm. It's about shaping a play in my head about homeless women because I want the world to meet them -- these incredible survivors.

But mostly Sisterspace is about wondering where my anger is. Where is my outrage at a society that allows its people to wander the streets? Why can I only cry? When will the rage begin?

Meck Groot wrote this reflection on her work at Sisterspace, a temporary shelter for homeless women, during the third week of a nine-month internship at the Women's Theological Center Study/Action program in Boston. She was responding to questions about embodiment: How do we understand our body/selves as historical beings? Where do we put our bodies? Who else is there? What does being there mean -- for us and for others?

Another alumna said the program "touches the heart and raises the questions and makes people feel uncomfortable." The tough questions that emerge from passionate hearts and times of discomfort give shape to the WTC's feminist/womanist approach to theological education, which is committed "to the liberation of women, beginning with the poorest, most oppressed and most exploited." It intends to enable women to find their voices and a language with which to express their faith, to explore the multiple sources of oppression and privilege in their lives, and to claim the authority of women's collective experience. It challenges participants to develop analysis and strategy for effective social transformation.

The WTC was formed in response to the Vatican's 1976 declaration on the "Question of the Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood," which rejected the ordination of women on the grounds that women do not bear a "natural resemblance" to Christ, for "Christ himself was and remains a man." Helen Wright,

SND, of the Washington Theological Union, Margaret Farley, RSM, from Yale Divinity School and Elizabeth Carroll, RSM, from the Center of Concern, a Catholic educational center in Washington, DC, were meeting at the Center of Concern when the declaration was made public in January, 1977. They immediately began to discuss this document's implications and decided to develop a women-defined approach to theological and ministerial education. They invited 14 other women, Catholics and Protestants, clergy and laywomen working at seminaries, churches and community ministries to explore with them alternative models of theological education form women. To counter the misogyny that has been thinly disguised as Christian theology by traditional theological education, the group decided to take women's experience as a beginning point. Meeting in six consultations that were funded by a grant from the Association of Theological Schools, the group designed a one-year program that they proposed to enact in the Boston area. Boston offered opportunities for engagement with organized groups for the poor and women, and affiliation with a woman's college and a seminary.

The implementation of this proposal required a Boston-based coordination committee. Francine Cardman, a member of the group of 14, called together a group of African American and white women who agreed to coordinate the next phase of the project.

They chose to name the project Women's Theological Center -- *women's* as opposed to *feminist*, to avoid excluding women who are interested in issues of women, faith and social justice but who would not identify themselves as feminist. They developed a resource center and proposed an internship program. The Resource Center opened in September 1982, a year before students enrolled in the first year of the study/action program.

The WTC program of theological education is based on the participants' experience in working for justice: at shelters for homeless and battered women, with women who are imprisoned, and in communities struggling with poverty and systemic neglect. The students' critical reflection on their placement teaches them about the inadequacies of Western white male-dominated culture and about the race and class biases of much of contemporary feminist theory. Such critique provides the basis for a genuinely liberating theology. It pushes participants, both students and faculty co-learners, to examine the systemic exploitation of women as well as their own internalized oppression and complicity with unjust structures. It challenges them to take their tears and rage seriously as calls to move beyond victimization and complicity and toward transforming action.

According to feminist/womanist perspective, a liberating theology is not an academic exercise for the educated elite. Therefore, the WTC's study/action program seeks participants with a broad range of experience, including women with no formal theological education or ministerial experience as well as seminary students and lay and ordained parish and community ministers. In addition to working as an intern at least ten hours a week at an agency that addresses issues of justice for women, participants take courses on feminist theology and theory, liberation spirituality and social analysis and ethics. Courses are developed collaboratively by faculty and students, to reflect concerns they bring to the program and that emerge from the internships. Through this process, involving women from very different backgrounds, theological assumptions are challenged. How have the circumstances of our own lives shaped our understanding of God, human life and society? How, in a prison, do we support the feminist value of the right of autonomy over one's body, when physical contact with another person is prohibited, and a woman with a headache must have permission to take an aspirin? What does mutuality mean in such a context -- where we as WTC interns can leave, but the women we work with cannot, and where poverty and racism determine in part who leaves and who stays?

The WTC study/action program, using feminist/womanist analysis, challenges the assumption of conventional theological education that white Western male experience is universal. It provides a setting where women can freely explore questions of meaning in theology and ministry without having to translate or resist the presumptions of white-male culture. The academic establishment's apathy toward women's perspectives often causes women to "internalize

the mind of the oppressor", as Paulo Freire says in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Herder & Herder, 1970), and to devalue their own experience and silence their own voices. Alternative theological education is designed to break that silence.

That task is not easy. For many, silence is a well-developed mechanism for survival in the face of violence, abuse and oppression. For others, it is the price paid for success in traditional educational settings. The WTC program provides structured opportunities for participants to look critically at their lives, and to name their experience. This is an essential first step to what Freire calls critical consciousness. Critical consciousness is not merely an intellectual ability to analyze a situation; rather, it requires participants' action for justice and reflection on that action's implications for their lives and their understandings of their own oppression and privilege.

In internships, students explore women's experience as *women*. They look, for example, not only at the meaning of homelessness, but at women's experience of homelessness. Homelessness in general involves such issues as poverty, gentrification of urban housing, conversion of low-rent apartments to condominiums, and bank mortgage policies. Women's experience of homelessness, however, is affected also by the fact that women are the primary care-takers of children, and that women are frequently the victims of violence. Many landlords discriminate against women with children, and affordable, accessible, quality child care is still rare. Some women turn to the streets because they know of no other way to escape domestic violence -- indicating that the police, courts, laws and social services do not adequately address this problem. Being homeless is a much different experience for women than it is for men, and these differences are usually ignored in conventional approaches to the problem.

WTC also leads students to examine women's collective experience, in an effort to challenge the dominant culture's ethos of individualism. Participants are urged to take the particular experience of each woman seriously *and* relate it to other women's experience. Such reflection means examining differences of power and privilege, especially as the students compare their experience to that of the women they work with at their field placements. Participants are also asked to examine their own experiences of privilege and oppression. Some find it easier to criticize privilege, and avoid the pain of facing up to their oppression. Others have struggled against oppression all of their lives and have trouble looking at their privilege. To acknowledge both is essential for women seeking to build a collective power base that can resist competitive claims to the "worst oppression", and that can be strengthened by rigorous analysis of the way oppressive systems work together. An alternative educational method is needed to enable women to identify their own experience, and in so doing formulate a model and authority for defining reality and meaning. On the basis of this authority, women can help address the fundamental questions of education: What do we need to know? How do we learn it? For whose benefit and for what purpose do we learn and how? When women ask these questions of their own education and the institutions that affect women's lives, they can break the silence of internalized oppression, develop a language with which to express their faith, and act effectively for justice.

This article first appeared in the February 1-8, 1989 issue of *The Christian CENTURY.*

Women and Theological Education: Changes in the Past Decade and New Questions

by Pui Lan Kwok

In the past decade, we observe an increasing enrollment of women in theological schools, and the number of women faculty steadily increasing and becoming more vocal and visible. There is also a growing body of feminist literature in religious studies and the field is expanding constantly as women redefine our religious traditions.

In the midst of all this ferment and excitement, I also discern a discontent many women feel towards the kind of theological education we are receiving. One of the key issues is that the insights and visions of feminist theology do not find embodiment in the institutional structure of our schools. For instance, feminist theology emphasizes that theological reflection beings with women's experience, but our experiences are not valued in the classrooms. We still find our schools working in the traditional mode of training men as clergy and rabbis. Women students want to find enrichment and empowerment in the learning process and feel frustrated when this does not happen.

A group of women theological educators came together in 1977 to address some of these issues and their vision has been crystallized in the formation of the Women's Theological Center (WTC), a program whose goal is to search for a women-defined approach to theological and ministerial education.

The [nine-month] program has two components: working in the field sites and the three inter-related courses. We ask participants to work for ten hours each week in a field site which serves the needs of women -- women who suffer from mental illness, imprisonment, battering and homelessness, as well as the particular needs of women who are new immigrants from South-East Asia and Latin America. We believe that the theories we study need to be radically tested in the concrete struggles for justice, and our own perceptions need to be challenged by the harsh reality that some of these women experience.

The three courses offered by the WTC are Feminist Theology and Theory, Liberation Spirituality, and Social Analysis and Ethics. Students can also take one other course per semester through the Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge. We have found that a pre-planned syllabus is not helpful, for participants should also help to determine what they wish to learn. In the feminist theology course I facilitated with Carter Heyward, we formed an on-going planning group of six persons to decide the themes and plan the process for each class. As one faculty commented, "This 'making the road as you go' process is arduous, but I think, rewarding. It says something very important about how feminist theology should be done."

From my experience with the WTC and as a doctoral student at Harvard, I want to highlight a few issues we need to address in our search for a new vision of theological education for women:

(1) As both a student and faculty at the same time, I am concerned about the bonding between women students and faculty. What kind of new self-image do we as women faculty have of ourselves?

In the WTC, we refer to students and faculty as co-learners to stress the point that we are learning from each other. There are certainly tensions in this process of redefining our roles. Some students would like to see the faculty and student co-learners participating in the same way; others see faculty as resource persons with special gifts to share. We are struggling very hard to break away from a hierarchical teacher-student relationship in which students think they are dependent on the teachers. On the other hand, we also want the faculty/facilitators to be able to share their expertise to enrich the whole group. I believe the basic issue is a question of power: participants need to decide what they have to learn and how the faculty can best help them to learn. We want to promote a sense that our learning is self-motivated and we are all responsible to make the learning process fruitful and

beneficial.

(2) The second issue has to do with the search for a feminist pedagogy. The WTC is committed to search for a pedagogy that integrates (a) content and process, (b) intellect and emotion, (c) theory and practice. While the goals are clear, how to go abut them is fraught with difficulties. We value the experiences of the participants, but we also do not want to stop only at the personal experience level without learning some tools or theories to analyze or integrate our own experiences. There is always tension in this. A lot of this tension comes from the strong reaction of some participants to the more traditional education they have received such that they tend to view any disciplined study and analysis as a "male model" of learning; others become frustrated with what one student described as "emotional bathos, that depresses without enlightening". We are still searching for a process that can integrate the academic and experiential dimensions. We are also trying to integrate our passions and emotions in the learning process. We are not accustomed to hear people cry or express their anger in class. And we are aware that intense emotions can both be constructive and destructive. We are hoping to create a context in which women feel a sense of trust and openness so that feelings can be surfaced and acknowledged in order that they can be channelled to promote solidarity and sisterhood.

The field experience is one resource for this integration process. We set aside particular times to focus on field sites, addressing participants' questions about the systemic causes that lead to the oppressions faced by women in the field sites, and struggling very intensely with participants' class, race and sexual biases as they arise among the participants themselves.

(3) The last issue concerns the need for a cross-cultural approach to theological education. As an Asian studying in the Boston area, I am really surprised by the parochialism of some of our theological students. Our feminist religious vision needs to be challenged by women of the Third World. Our spiritual quest is disembodied if we do not address the needs of women under multiple oppressions. Our constant shout for "global sisterhood" is a ridicule if we do not commit ourselves to learn about the lives of other women.

As an Asian, coming from the East Asian culture, I wish to underscore the fact the the US has been involved in major wars with the East Asian people: China, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam. We just can't afford to be ignorant about each other any more. The peace movement many feminists are involved in should not just be concerned with stopping the arms race, but also should be concerned to promote goodwill and understanding of peoples. A cross-cultural approach in theological education can help to challenge some of our hidden assumptions and to expand our narrow parameters.

I am excited about my work at the WTC because there is space to explore the possibility of a women-defined theological education. It is my hope that our experience can be shared so that we can begin to address these issues and new questions with a wider community of concerned theological educators.

***Pui Lan Kwok** was a WTC Study/Action facilitator in the 1986-87 academic year.*

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Study/Action Graduation Address, May 12, 1988

by Demaris Wehr, Study/Action Facilitator, 1987-88

When I was first asked to give this speech, my strong inclination was to decline. But then I realized that this was my opportunity to speak about what the WTC has meant to me this year.

Donna Bivens and Nancy Richardson, the Co-Directors, deserve special appreciation, first for having the courage to help develop this kind of revolutionary learning program, bringing such diverse women together and trusting that we will learn to conflict healthily with one another, that it will go somewhere good, and that our relationships as well as our understanding of each other will be strengthened. Second, they deserve a great deal of appreciation for being able to stand with ambiguity. Academia generally hands out answers. This is a first rate graduate program in theological education for women in which the Directors set an example for all of us by trusting the questions and the process.

What a relief that title "co-learner" turned out to be! As a new person in the Boston area, still in recovery from a traumatic move to the area and knowing little about the communities of which Boston is composed, not being expected to "know the answers" is hard to believe, but comforting. My year at the WTC has been important in weaning me from the arrogant belief that I, as the teacher, have to know the answers -- or if not the answers, exactly, that at least I have to know more than you do! The WTC has taught me what I already knew down deep -- that you know/we know together/we learn together by sharing, by tussling, by fighting about it but staying with it and coming back to see if each other is still there. The WTC has taught me what I always knew -- the student is the teacher. And you have also taught me that even that isn't completely true, since the traditional power dynamic between students and teachers cannot be eradicated by a simple sleight of hand or of language. What all of you have taught me is different from what is usually taught in academia, the fundamental message of which is that there are some people who know things (have access to esoteric knowledge) and others who aspire to that knowledge, and if the second group make it into the first, they will do so by acquiring the methods, language and skills of the first. It is an indoctrination process. What you have taught me, if we can shed the shackles of internalized oppression -- especially as it applies to and is embedded in the prevailing educational models -- is that we learn best when we are who we are, with no or few pretenses, bringing our whole selves to the task before us, angry, confused, sad or tired and saying so. By bringing our whole selves to the classrooms, the field sites, and the retreats, some of the blocks to learning are dissolved, I think, and we take in what we take in at more than a conscious level. That is perhaps the main reason why the learning this year has been tremendous! I cannot name it all, nor do I imagine, can you, but I know that it has been on many levels. The content too, of course, has not been negligible, and cannot be divorced from the process by which we learned it. It would not surprise me if this learning ends up in revolutionary new concepts culminating in some of your lives in academic papers and/or books. It would not surprise me either if it culminates in life-changing jobs for others of you. The effects of this year will live on in each of us for a lifetime.

And finally a word about fish, lions, owls, tortoises, foxes and other creatures. Nancy [Richardson] said early on, "Watch that exercise and take careful notes, because it is a good predictor of what will happen through the year." Looking back on my notes, I see that one lion who did not want to be one really was not one most of the time; a fish turned into an owl; tortoises came out of their shells; elephants stayed elephants and donkeys stayed donkeys; and some unique combinations of animals, like say a lion/owl/tortoise combination subtly, but substantially shifted in terms of the preponderance of one of these animals over the other. Truly, in this program the lion lies down with the lamb.

An Epoch-Making Event

by Noriko Okada, Study Action Student 1986-87

My experience in the Study/Action program in 1986-87 was the epoch-making event in my life. I am not exaggerating when I say that this program changed me enormously. I will focus on three points which I think are quite important.

First of all, I would like to ask, "Who do you think does theology?" Back when I was in seminary, students studied theology as if we were the puppies who collected crumbs from the "great theologians' dinner table." Of course, most of these theologians were German or North American male scholars.

The WTC, however, seeks to create alternative theological education for women, among women, and by women. Feminist/Womanist/Mujerista theology starts from critical reflection upon women's experiences. This means that you come here as a person who does theology, and as a creator of your own life. In the S/A program, students take up the responsibility and right of being subjects of their own theology, and join with the faculty, who are co-learner, in developing/creating women's liberation theology. The process of learning (how we learn) has much to do with the content of learning (what we learn). Through this process, for the first time in my life, I felt empowered to do my own theological reflection and to have my own voice; not just to collect theological information.

The second point regards the issue of communication. When I studied in this program, there were twenty-four members (18 students, 6 faculty) from 8 countries. There were nearly ten languages among us, including several kinds of English. How, then, do we communicate effectively in a diverse community? The issue is not merely a matter of language, but contains very significant implications for language in theology and ministry.

When one comes to the S/A program, one comes to the States where English is the dominant language. There is an old Asian proverb that says that English can be, and has been, a sword that attacks people and opens the way for the holder of the sword -- English speakers. How, then, do feminists learn to recognize both the power and the imperialistic nature of English? Are we going to carry on feminist discourse only in English? If so, we have to be suspicious of the integrity of that discourse. If not, how are we going to listen to non-English native speakers to nurture global discourse and create its theology?

The final point is how we deal with our differences. Although we come here with similar motivations and goals, we find big differences among us. The recognition of our differences may bring us feelings of pain, fear, anger, or of hatred toward the people who are different from me/us. I find that our common tendency is to try our best to iron out our differences by forceful argument and reasoning, without either listening carefully to each other's speech, or recognizing that our differences can be the richness among us.

I confess to you that I "killed" my sisters, and they "killed" me many times in our dead-heat arguments!! I know now that we could have had alternative ways of dealing with our differences. After all, our ideas have to be verified in the Action part of our program. Some issues may unfold their fuller essence for us in the course of several years, and we may find ourselves in completely different places from those for which we fought "at the risk of our lives".

We may have to keep this in our hearts: we are studying and working in order to live fully and abundantly. Life is love.

What you Can Expect to Learn in Study/Action

by Paula Kowalke, Study/Action Student, 1984-85

I was a co-learner at the WTC in 1984-85. It was a very different experience from my undergraduate studies. In most educational settings, there is a body of knowledge to be absorbed by the student -- information, theories, and concepts that one learns, and upon which one is able to expound. In my closet, I have a whole crate of notebooks from college: Cultural Geography, Introduction to Psychology, Educational Theory, etc. I can take out each notebook, look at it and say, "This is what I learned in this class."

If there is a body of knowledge at the WTC that one is going to "learn", it comes in the form of questions. What is the meaning of the lives of women? Who am I as an individual woman? Who are we together as a community of women? I am forty years old now, and I suspect that I will never be finished studying, understanding, or struggling with these questions. During the year, this sense of never finishing often left me very frustrated. But I don't have a notebook labeled "WTC". My year at the WTC cannot be wrapped up in a neat package and stored in my closet.

I continue to learn from my year at the WTC. I have probably learned more from the program in the years since than in the year I was there. I continue to struggle with racism: my own, and my community's. I continue to encounter oppression in the lives of the homeless moms I work with, and in my own life. And I continue to learn.

WTC was not an easy year. We were a small, seemingly homogeneous, group. Even so, we soon discovered our differences -- huge barriers that divided us: class, age, nun-woman/lay-woman, married, single, mothers/not-mothers. Even whether we lived in EDS (Episcopal Divinity School) dorms or off campus. In the struggling with these differences (and believe me, it was a struggle), we laughed, we cried, we shouted, we got defensive, we worshipped, we lost our voices, we found our voices, we sang, we were sad, angry and frustrated. Whew!! All of that ambiguity is unsettling. I think that for me the most profound and amazing reality of the WTC is that we are still doing those things, because somehow, in the midst of it all, we formed a community. A community that has reached from South America to Chicago to Scituate, MA to Boston. A community that still doesn't have the answers, but that is committed to the questions: Who are we as women? How can we be in community together?

My field site experience at Rosie's Place, a homeless shelter for women, enabled me to expand my vision of inclusive community. I see the field sites, and their integration into every aspect of the program, as a vital part of the learning process. I think it helped us to keep our conversations more honest. Our field site experiences kept our doing of theology rooted in the reality of our lives and the lives of the struggling women with whom we were working.

It seems to me that much of what tradition calls "theology" is supposed to happen from the neck up (what is the question about angels on the head of a pin anyway?). What characterizes Feminist Theology for me is the inclusion of the rest of our selves and our experiences in the doing of theology. The real lives of the homeless women at Rosie's, the women incarcerated at Framingham (the women's prison in Massachusetts), the battered and struggling women at Harbor Me and EBECC (East Boston Ecumenical Community Council), forced our doing of theology to be inclusive. It forced us to recognize our diversity, to acknowledge our privilege, and to encompass our hands, our feet, our stomachs and our bodies.

So, what do we learn at the WTC? To ask questions -- which doesn't always mean finding the answers; to struggle with our differences -- which might be painful, but doesn't mean battering; to do theology -- with our minds and our bodies and our experiences; and to build communities that have space for all of us.

Talk About Survivors -- Field Work at MCI-Framingham

by Margaret Beahan and Irma Levesque, Study/Action 1989-90

Our field experience at the women's prison in conjunction with our studies at the WTC has definitely been an action-based education about justice. The WTC's definition of justice involves transforming oppressive religious and social structures. The prison's idea of justice is to isolate, control, and punish women for transgressions against laws that maintain and protect the status quo; women for whom the status quo includes the injustices of racism, classism, and hetero/sexism as the debilitating stuff of daily life.

We find ourselves in a unique and precarious position, negotiating these two views of justice. To gain access to the prison and spend time with the women, we cannot challenge the injustices of the prison system overtly. We, too, are strictly controlled. We must submit to searches of our belongings and bodies, and comply with a whole series of bureaucratic measures every time we enter the walls of MCI-Framingham. To protest would compromise our permission to enter. Even writing this article may compromise that access, depending upon who reads this. The women in prison commiserate with us when we are challenged by the guards, searched, reprimanded for petty violations of dehumanizing rules, or forbidden to do something. This control is common ground we share with the women inside, yet the prison authorities expect us to be their allies. They discourage real connection between women across the wall. Volunteers are "welcomed" as "do=gooders", not as agents of social transformation in solidarity with incarcerated women.

While our justice work cannot be overt, getting to know the women, listening to their stories, learning their needs, honoring their dreams, and sharing our own, we are engaged in a deeply transformative experience. We are making the connections between their lives and our own under oppressive social structures. Their lives and our own provide the living texts that we need to hear, engage, and analyze as crucial steps in any journey of transformation, both of the prison system and of the larger society.

Women in prison are overwhelmingly poor women with educations that have not served them; most have not received a high school diploma. The are unemployed, under-employed, or among the working poor. The majority are mothers of small children. They are disproportionately women of color. Almost all of them have histories of violence against them as women, including physical, sexual, and psychological abuse often beginning in childhood. The number of women from Latin America and the Caribbean is increasing at an alarming rate. This is a reflection of the exploitative political, economic, and military relationships between the US and these regions. Many of the Latinas do not understand English sufficiently to fully understand why they are in prison. Women plead guilty to crimes they did not commit because they are afraid of the police, unable to afford a lawyer they can trust, or simply to get out of the Awaiting Trial Unit and have the freedom of the compound.

In the course of doing arts and crafts programs in Awaiting Trial Units, we are learning why women are arrested and how long many of them wait for trial, often as long as eight months. The vast majority are incarcerated because of crimes related to drug and alcohol abuse; over 90%. Yet treatment is almost non-existent, and of course, little is being done nationally to correct the social conditions and denounce the economic power that promotes drug abuse. Every day we hear about the endless waiting with little to do; the grief over the separations from children, the lousy food, the unavailable lawyers, the chains and shackles they must wear to court and on visits to the hospital. We witness the lack of medical and psychological treatment in the prison. Mattresses line the floor of the overcrowded Health Services Unit.

Women in prison have had lifetimes of poor health care outside the walls. The HIV infection rate is extremely high. We hear about poor diets; anemia is prevalent among pregnant women. Educational opportunities in prison are severely limited. Job training is restricted to stereotypical, poorly paid

women's work: cleaning, sewing (the prison industry is sewing US flags), and typing.

We have learned from the Study/Action at the MCI-Framingham that it is utterly inadequate to think only about prison reform as any real solution. We need to be concerned about the social conditions that caused these women to be incarcerated in the first place. A capitalistic, patriarchal, racist, heterosexist society maintains oppression in part by keeping women of different races and classes separated from each other, and/or in conflicts of unequal relation to each other. The prison system is one level of the hierarchy of separation. To a large extent, women are here because they have transgressed "their place", either through rebellion, desperation or killing the pain of dispossession and abuse through drugs. By our presence there, we cross over the walls of that separation and privilege hierarchy. As much as possible, recognizing that we are, for the time being, not incarcerated ourselves, we cross over the razor wire boundaries to spend time with women doing time, in solidarity and friendship; to hear their stories of struggle and survival against the odds.

Looking at the connections between prison structure and social structure, we have gained an invaluable education about the kind of transformation that justice requires. We have gained information subversively. During arts and crafts sessions, Margaret has asked women in the Awaiting Trial Unit to share their experiences of friendship for a paper she is writing. Irma spends arts and crafts time talking with incarcerated lesbians and Latinas about their particular experiences of incarceration. Some limited action has been possible, too. While conducting a "Survival Group" in a restricted unit, the women wrote letters to Governor Dukakis about their needs as drug addicts for treatment, and we have filed complaints about inconsistent to non-existent recreation time for that unit. Irma has also pushed for the prison newspaper to be published in English and Spanish. Both of us have been collecting the women's stories and poetry, presenting them as a mid-year project among WTC co-learners. These small efforts in our study/action toward justice are potentially dangerous; they represent a challenge to the system that continued to de-value and punish those women whom it has historically continuously exploited; those most affected by race, sex and class oppression in our society, now being incarcerated in record numbers.

Forming friendships in prison has been extremely enjoyable for us both. The strength and hope of the women there has encouraged us in our studies and in the struggle for justice for all women. We truly believe that as WTC participants doing field work at MCI-Framingham we have been challenged as never before to stand in solidarity, in concrete ways, with some of the most incredible survivors in the US -- the women incarcerated at the Massachusetts Correctional Institution in Framingham.

Beginnings

by Esu Lackey, Study/Action Student, 1987-88

Note: At the end of each year Study/Action participants are asked to develop a project that reflects the learnings and changes that have taken place for them during the year. What follows are excerpts from a project by Esu Lackey. The project consisted of color photographs accompanied by brief essays. At the beginning of the project was a photograph of an egg on a large granite out-cropping. The final photograph was of a large apple tree. The following excerpts refer to both photographs.

This year has been the beginning of a lot for me -- beginning on many different levels and in different ways.

I feel like a newly laid egg ready to hatch but my holding place is the granite of the crone. What an amazing combination!

I have come to understand that age doesn't necessarily mean decline and decay into uselessness. It can mean wisdom, it can mean acceptance of the conditions of life, it can mean greater compassion growing out of having lived through more of what life both offers and brings, it can mean perspective. To finally understand that is a gift and a beginning. To identify with the earth's granite feels solid and reliable, ever-lastingly there. To identify with the granite gives me a sense of being part of the on-going process of life, deeply grounded, embedded in all that happens.

And what of the egg? The egg has to do with what is new and young and on the edge of hope. This year has been a growing into the new life of the egg, but held by the reliability of the granite.

I have come to know the truth of a statement I once heard: "You have to stick to your history all the way and you cannot move yourself out of it. It is part of your identity; you never will lose your history. How you related to your history is part, not just of your problem, but part of your promise, too." During this year I have moved much more deeply into my own history and in that process have discovered promise; my history is not longer just a problem. I have been able to put my history into better perspective and have come to know that in some ways it is a gift because it has shaped who I have the possibility of becoming. I like the promise this new possibility offers. I like the values and ways of relating which the promise suggests. I like the meaning the promise brings to life. It feels like a good beginning.

One of the amazing discoveries I made in my journey through this year was about the way my mind worked.

For years my mind has been like a collection of different boxes. Each box held its own conglomeration of information. There was the theology box and the ethics box and the economics box and the political issues box and the career box, to name just a few. Now what I discovered is that the information contained in each box stayed in each box. When I thought about ethics, for example, I didn't think much about political issues or when I thought about the theology box, it didn't seem to have a lot to do with the family box, and so on. I made this discovery with a jolt one day not so very long ago in social analysis class. I was thunderstruck. I was thunderstruck because the impact was in both my head and my gut.

Once the impact was in both my head and my gut, I was in a place where I needed to find out more about it all. What I discovered, not for the first time, but this time in a much deeper and different way, was that it was so dangerous for me to make connections that I had compartmentalized what I know so that I would not, could not become aware. Becoming aware was too dangerous. I could get killed if I put different pieces of information together in ways which allowed me to know. But this is all out in the open now and I have not been killed. Now finally, I am able to open several different boxes of my mind at the same time and let the information in one box inform and enrich the information in another box. I can begin to think differently; I can begin to think relationally; I can begin to ask meaningful, relational questions; I can begin to evaluate the answers I get and let the answers interact with the information stored in several of my boxes all at once and then I can decide if the answers are right for me or if I want to ask more questions. I can begin to think and know in new ways, ways which I choose and which enrich possibility and promise for me.

One of the things that has been key to my beginning new woman is to have been part of a group. I have been part of groups before, but I have often felt isolated within the group and never known why. This year I felt myself part of the group, not

isolated or alone and able to grow in trust. I have come to think that a major part of the reason that I felt so isolated and disconnected in other groups is because I never knew the truth about myself or my life so that I was never really present, not capable of being present because I had no self with which to be present. Only the outside cover of me has been present before -- the part that was sage for everyone to see, that part that covered up and kept my secret safe. It is hard to be part of something when you try form a center that is not true, a center that is not whole but fragmented. For the firs time the "real me" or the "whole" me was able to be present. For the first time I did not have to keep so much of me in hiding.

I feel like the year has been a process of peeling back the layers. I am finding these layers of myself in a new way because until now they have been compressed inside the hard shell of my secret. It is like once it felt safe for me to be here, that then I began to discover who the real me really is. I was able to know, speak and feel what had been compressed within the hard shell of the secret; I have been able to uncurl and to breathe. And I think this process of uncurling and opening cannot be done all by oneself. I, at least, have to feel safe, listened to, and still accepted; being both heard and still accepted has given me the courage to go on to the next layer to see what it is like. You have been the ones who have heard and accepted me as I have explored and spoken my way out of my silence. The real me is beginning to come alive, to come into wholeness, and that has happened not only in but because of this group.

BREAK OUT!!! BREAK OUT!!! This is what has happened for me. Break out of old molds, old habits, old ways of being. Of course, I am only beginning the BREAK OUT, but that is where I never was before, so it is a very big beginning.

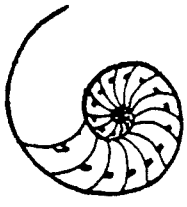
One way BREAK OUT happened for me is in class. I experienced the workings of feminist pedagogy. All my life I have been silent in classes, afraid of being the fool. As I think back over our classes I don't think in terms of a superstar or a superdunce; I think in terms of all of us together working at ideas and issues. We all spoke and it was woven together into a tapestry of meaning and we did it together. No heros, no heroines, no fools, no dunces, but us, together.

The apple tree is sort of like the combination of the egg and the granite, the new and the old together. But this is new life growing out of the old. This is the old bringing forth something new and special. This is the combination of problem and promise. This is where, when one gets new perspective on one's problem, there can be promise, too. I like to think that this new coming out of old is happening to me, that this happening started this year for me.

I like to think that this year has begun a process of beginning to see what I see and know what I know, and that the process of opening the various boxes of my mind has allowed me to put information together in new ways so that new meanings, new values develop. I know this is a process which has barely begun. I know I have a lot of resistance about accepting the consequences for my life of whatever it is that I begin to see and know more fully, more completely. I know growing awareness will require some changes in which I do. And this is scary. And the scariness keeps me doing all of this at a slow pace.

What has become clear, totally clear, is the realization that the values of my family were all wrong, oppressive. I need a new value system. But I also know that trees do not burst into full bloom on the first day of spring. The blossoms come slowly, very slowly, a little at a time -- they sometimes even seem to come to a standstill for a few days if the weather turns cold again. I can learn a lot about process from watching the trees. It is one of the ways the earth's creatures teach us. I can learn that I need to take the time to allow new values to develop slowly so that I don't become overwhelmed with making too many changes all at once. If I went for full bloom all on the first day, I would probably be so confused that I would retreat because I couldn't cope. Each new step has to develop out of the one before it. I don't want to be part of the system which oppresses any more. That awareness is moving like sap in the old tree. The blossoms are still to form; only the buds are beginning to show. But blossoms always follow buds and old trees know how to pace themselves, how to adapt to weather, even how to mend themselves after they have suffered wounds in their bark. We have alot to learn from old trees. And old trees with flowing sap always produce buds and blossoms.

The Study/Action Program and Process



The Study/Action Program and its process are not easy to describe. If you have read the articles which preceded this section, you may have gleaned many learnings about the program already. There are several assumptions about the content and the method of theological education which are embedded in the Study/Action program. These assumptions include the belief that theological education must:

1. Use a collaborative teaching/learning method;
2. Look at what we call God/dess or the holy in our lives from a feminist perspective;
3. Do social analysis starting from women's experience;
4. Move beyond institutional definitions of ministry;
5. Include analysis, critique, and construction in its methodology;
6. Give attention to the creation of a relevant educational environment; and
7. Be grounded in action for justice.

And, as Pui Lan Kwok says in her article (page 10), "The WTC is committed to search for a pedagogy that integrates (a) content and process, (b) intellect and emotion, (c) theory and practice."

Out of these assumptions and commitments comes an educational program which looks different from much traditional theological education. Some of these differences are reflected in the Study/Action orientation process, the three retreats which all participants go on together, the way in which the three courses offered through the Center itself are shaped, the integration of field site experience into course work and vice versa.

What follows in this section is a description -- to the degree that a description of each of these is possible on the printed page -- of various components of the Study/Action Program.

Orientation

Unlike most traditional education, which pulls students further and further away from the earth and the experience of "the common person", the Study/Action Program attempts to help students get closer and closer to the experience of the most marginalized people of society. It is not surprising therefore that some basic understanding of the city of Boston, its neighborhoods, its politics, and its ways is needed in order to ground theory in practice. Part of orientation time is spent therefore in getting to know the city and its environs.

Also included in orientation are visits to prospective field sites, discussions which help students name some of their own assumptions and put forward some of their hopes for the year, and sharing of faith/life journeys.

The orientation schedule which follows is the schedule for the 1990-91 Study/Action Program. It is offered to you as an example of what can be expected in the first month of the program. It is not the schedule for the coming year.

Orientation Schedule - Study/Action Program 1990-91

Friday, Sept. 7	**noon** - Gather at WTC (Administration Room) for lunch, general information and introductions **3:00 pm** - leave for Fall Weekend (bring comfortable clothes, sheets and towels)
Sunday, Sept. 9	**2:00 pm** - leave weekend site
Monday, Sept. 10	**Free**

Tuesday, Sept. 11	**9:30 am - 11:30 am** - Observation skills - How to see what we see (EPM Room, Emmanuel College)
Wednesday, Sept. 12	**9:30am - noon** - mapmaking; planning presentation - a description of Boston from your view Tuesday (EPM Room, Emmanuel) **noon** - lunch (bring bag lunch). (EPM Room) **1:00pm - 3:30pm** - mapsharing and discussion (Emm. Library Conference Room)
Thursday, Sept. 13	**9:30am - 12:30pm** - discussion of Sisterhood is Global articles. Come prepared to tell group how article describing your country does or does not correspond to your view of your country. (EPM Room)
Friday, Sept. 14	**9:30am** - registration at EDS **1:00pm** - Field site introductions (Washburn Lounge, EDS) **6:00pm** - Dinner with WTC Board of Directors **[optional]** (Washburn Lounge,
Mon.-Wed., Sept. 17-19	Visit Field Sites
Thursday, Sept. 20	**10:30 - 11:30** - Field Site discussion and decisions about interview choices (EPM Room) **12:30pm - 5:30pm** - Anti-racism workshop (EPM Room)
Friday, Sept. 21	**9:30am** - Gather at Emmanuel College parking lot for housing tour with Marie Augusta Neal
Monday, Sept. 24	**Free**
Tuesday, Sept. 25	**3:30pm - 5:30pm** - How's it going? (EDS - Washburn Conference Room) **6:00pm** - "What you can expect to learn" - a potluck dinner and discussion with Study/Action alumnae (EDS - Washburn Lounge)
Wednesday, Sept. 26	**Free**
Monday, Oct. 1	**9:30am - 12:30pm** - Identifying questions
Tuesday, Oct. 2	**9:30am - 12:30pm** - Life Journeys
Wednesday, Oct. 3	**9:30am -12:30pm** - Life Journeys
Thursday, Oct. 4	**9:30am - 12:30pm** - Life Journeys **1:00pm - 2:30pm** (over lunch - bring sack lunch) Review and discuss course outlines

Retreats

Three times each year, Study/Action participants go on retreat to a quiet center in the country or on the ocean. Retreats usually begin late afternoon of one day and go until the afternoon two days later. (For example, a retreat might begin Friday afternoon and go to lunch on Sunday.)

Though all retreats have some things in common – sharing meals, walks in the woods, singing and informal talking -- each retreat has its own focus. The first retreat of the year is the springboard into the program. Because it is almost the first thing participants do together, the emphasis on this retreat is on getting to know one another. Exercises and activities are designed around such questions as "What is your picture of the world?", "Can your picture include my picture in some way?", "How does the geography of the place where you grew up shape who you are today?", "How do you deal with conflict?"

The second retreat of the year, held in late January, focusses on a field site project. Students may choose their own topic, but it is understood that each woman will look at some aspect of her field site work in some depth. Some of the topics chosen in former years, for example, include the connection between homelessness and mental illness, the institutional politics and assumptions of a battered women's shelter, the connection between imprisonment and incest, and the exploitation by landlords of tenants from particular racial/ethnic groups. Since the WTC always tries to have more than one student in a field site, students who share a field site usually work on their mid-year project together.

The third and final retreat of the year, held in May, is a chance for each woman to share how she has been shaped by her experiences of the year. Women in previous years have used poetry, weaving, stories, essays, drawings, song, and other media for their end of year sharing. This final retreat is also a time of bringing closure to an intensive year of learning and growing together.

Courses

The three courses which all participants take together and which are offered through the WTC are: Feminist Theology and Theory, Liberation Spirituality, and Social Analysis and Ethics. Each class is held once a week in a three-hour time block.

The content for the courses is compiled collaboratively by each year's participants. Early in the first semester, each participant brings the questions which she wishes to focus during the course of the year. These central questions shape what will be read, discussed and wrestled with for the next nine months.

The questions listed below are an example of the questions asked one year by Study/Action participants. Out of these questions students and facilitators together created a syllabus.

> How do people learn? What are the cognitive issues about how one learns? What alternate ways are there of making sense of what one experiences? What are the pluses and minuses of each? Can we come as fresh learners to these experiences?
>
> Are there alternate or better ways to study theology other than the academic rational approach? What about a theology of people who are not in the church?
>
> How can I honor religious instincts outside of the Christian church membership? Outside Christianity? Outside an institution?
>
> What resources can be found for a feminist lesbian Christian who has been taught the Calvinist separation of body and spirit? How can I take my own life seriously, and be the subject of my own life?
>
> If one steps out in community with others, is an institution created? Are we forced to create institutions? Are there other alternatives? Can we get enough nurturance alone?
>
> Can we create a non-hierarchical collective alternative?

How does class and classism influence personality? theology/spirituality? Where do faith and life options come together?

How can we work to create a language that evokes our living feminist spirituality that is not removed from everyday experience? That's not dualistic and fragmenting?

Is it possible to overcome dualism in western society?

Can I find an analytic method for doing Third World women's theology, which works to eliminate classism, racism, sexism and imperialism?

What is spirituality? What is feministic spirituality? How do you spell it in the context of its Biblical meaning? the meaning of our lives as feminists? How can it come alive in new meaning?

How can I find empowerment again?

Can we talk in the group about psychology, antiracism, what moving between change and status quo is all about?

What is responsible action in the context of each of the four boxes [referring to a diagram which explains the distinctions between the active racist, the passive racist, the active anti-racist racist, and the passive anti-racist racist]. What are the ethical issues from the diagram?

What does Goddess mean? Can/should it be given more than lip service?

Can we learn more from Carter Heyward, Katie G. Cannon, Toni Morrison, etc.?

Can we continue to use non-analytic, visual ways of dealing with these questions?

What does it mean to be in our bodies? What is the meaning of "our bodies ourselves"?

I am hungry for symbols and for rituals.

Can we talk and do something about our sexuality?

Feminist are told to be strong, but not too strong in relationship. Is it possible to be strong and vulnerable both, independent and dependent both? How do you balance this?

How are we brought up as women? What does it mean?

Conflicts with mothers -- how do women become mothers and how do daughters become women? Why do women, especially as mothers, continually betray girls?

How can I fight that consciousness that says that women are by nature stupid?

What is the best strategy to fight against all patriarchy and to lead feminists to solidarity with other liberation movements?

Is there a priority among oppressions: classism, sexism, racism, imperialism?

What is my relationship to my country? What should my political action be?

Are there alternative liturgies?

Is it worth it to try to find an alternative to Christian liturgy?

Is the opposite of fed-up being hungry?

What are the differing meanings of silence?

What do we mean by ritual and non-ritual? What is it? Why is ritual an okay word but institution is not?

Can we find the process of how to make a start of these questions knowing that we cannot find all the answers?

What is evil and what is justice?

How can women be faith-filled political activists and still remember themselves? There is such pressure in political solidarity groups to devote all your time manically to movement -- can one be active without the guilt imposed by movements?

Is change really happening if we are not asking questions of ourselves?

How do we go about healing ourselves and others?


Field Sites

As part of her year in the Study/Action Program, each participant is required to spend 10 to 12 hours each week working at an agency which offers direct service to women in need. In the past, the following were offered as potential field sites:

East Boston Ecumenical Council Community Council (EBECC)
EBECC's commitment is to work primarily among refugees and immigrants. EBECC offers a variety of services including English as a Second Language training, legal advocacy, and housing advocacy.

Just a Start House
Just a Start House is a shelter for pregnant teens and new teen mothers and their children.

City Mission Society Prison Program
City Mission's programs include projects for women in prison and women who have recently been released from prison.

Elizabeth Stone House
ESH is an alternative mental health resident program for women and their children.

Renewal House
Renewal House provides shelter and a variety of other services to battered women and their children.

Connection to Boston-Area Schools

WTC students arriving from outside of the greater Boston area or from outside the halls of theological academia may be quite unfamiliar with the network of institutions in the area which are in some cases formally connected with and otherwise loosely affiliated with the WTC.

The WTC is formally connected with two institutions: the Episcopal Divinity School (EDS) and Emmanuel College. WTC students may take one additional course per semester and have access to the library resources at no extra cost through either of these schools. Those students who elect to take their WTC year for credit can also receive academic credit through either of these two schools. There is an additional fee which each of these schools charges for accreditation.

In addition to formal relations with EDS and Emmanuel, the WTC has informal relations through faculty and programming with other schools in the Boston Theological Institute, a consortium of nine theological schools, as well as other colleges and universities in the Boston area.

Housing

Housing in the Boston area can be very expensive. Sharing an apartment with other people is possible and we sometimes are able to connect women looking for space with people who have space to let. If you are considering the option of sharing apartment space, you should probably come to Boston no later than mid-August. At the moment vacancy rates are higher than they have been in a while, but that might not remain the case.

Another option is renting a room at the Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge, MA. **Please note, however, that EDS does not offer accommodations for WTC students who wish to live with their children. All WTC students who board at EDS** are required to buy a minimum of two meals a day (does not include weekends).

There is only limited kitchen space with minimal cooking facilities available at the dorm, which should also be considered in making your decision. A public hall payphone is located on each dormitory floor. Private phones can be installed at regular consumer rates if you desire. Rooms come furnished with a bed, a desk, a desk chair, an arm chair and a dresser. Each room has a closet. There are communal bathrooms with showers (no bathtubs) on each floor.

Application Process

Our first round of applications will be considered after **March 15**. If the class is not full after the first round, we will run another round after **May 1**. If there are spaces remaining after the second round of applications have been processed, we will consider applications one by one as they come in. **Applications for women from countries outside of the United States will be considered as early as January 1, if requested.**

If you would like to apply to the Study/Action program, please write to us for an application form.

Estimated 9-month Expenses

Tuition	5,800
EDS Transcript Fee*	950
Housing	
Off campus apartment, alone (9 x $650)	5,850
Off campus apartment, shared (9 x $350)	3,150
EDS Dormitory Room, alone*	2,810
Food	
No meal plan ($60/week)	2,400
EDS 10 meals/week**	2,100
Books and Supplies	250
Photocopying (fee paid each semester)	70
Retreats (3 x $60)	180
Health Insurance***	varies
Clothing/Laundry	400
Recreation	350
Dental, uninsured	150
Relocation expenses	varies
Local Transportation	200
Private Telephone	200
Childcard	varies
Incidentals	250

* *Based on 1991-92.*

** *Based on 1991-92 cost of $1,490 for a 10-meal/week plan, plus costs for additional 10 meals/week.*

*** *The State of Massachusetts requires that all students have minimal health insurance coverage. Each student is expected to take care of her own health insurance plan. If you need information, please let us know.*

You, of course, know your needs and spending habits better than we could ever guess. Please make adjustments wherever you feel they are warranted.

If you cannot meet the financial burden of a year at the WTC, you may apply for financial aid. If you need a financial aid application form, please ask us to send one to you.