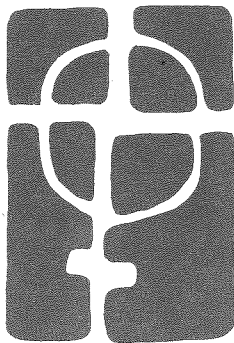


Women's Theological Center



Quarterly Newsletter

September, 1996
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Libraries - \$35



Surviving the Blight:

reflections on spiritual resources for
doing our work in these political times

Maria M. Aguiar

For the past few years I have been pulled toward a greater exploration of sources of spiritual renewal and spiritual strength — perhaps because of these times of political retrenchment of conservatives, under whose protection right wing political forces have been allowed to restore all of the "isms" which represent profound hatred — and in part because of my own place in the life process as I come to terms with the fact that I am now smack dab in middle age.

I began seeking quiet time and seeking support in the writings of spiritual authors of varied traditions. I also began to seek quiet time, or time to meditate each day, to see if I could begin to hear my own inner voice. This process led me to begin to create a discipline through which I could find time each day to connect with and appreciate the grandeur of and the eternal character of the force of nature. I was somehow drawn to create a discipline through which I could stretch and strengthen my own body and begin to connect and draw the energy that is present in the forces of nature as a source of strength for my body and soul.

I found myself drawn toward an exploration of spiritual tradition that was a gift of the African antecedents in my culture of origin, which is Brazilian, and my culture of co-living which is Latin American in general. It was not accidental that while this process was taking place for me here in Boston, it was also taking place for my son who was spending the summer in Puerto Rico with his father. My son was also seeking some spiritual framework to make some sense of his experience as a Latino teenager in a hostile environment. He found this in the spiritual traditions of Yoruba religion practiced in Puerto Rico.

I remember clearly how, twenty years

ago, people in my circle of friends and acquaintances, who were mostly political activists, thought it strange at that time that I hung on to what was considered "superstitious beliefs" of those spiritual traditions in a climate of predominance of dialectical materialist historical thought. Today, many of those same people have



*and she was well kissed by the sun
and well made love to by the moon.*

— Alice Walker

Honor a woman in your life.

Buy a quilt square in her name.

You choose the occasion:
a birthday, an anniversary, a
graduation, Hanukkah, Kwanzaa,
Christmas, Solstice...

We send the woman of your
choice a card with a full-color
reproduction of the quilt on it,
a note about how she is being
honored and a message from you.
Honor as many as 3 women with
the purchase of one square.
The quilt hangs in our offices and is
accompanied by the names of all the
women being honored along with
the names of those who purchased
the squares. Each square is \$50.
(Order form on reverse.)

come around to see the importance of some kind of cultivation of the spiritual dimension and some still have not.

I myself am even more drawn to explore and interpret the world and my life in it in the context of a spiritual tradition which recognizes the importance of dance and music as a manifestation of spirituality as well as a way to pray and give thanks while also giving and receiving energy from everyone gathered in celebration. The stories, songs, rhythms and dances of the orixa deities, each of whom represents a different force in nature and a different characteristic of

QUILT SQUARE ORDER FORM (see reverse for information)

Your name and address:

Name and address of honoree:

(You may honor as many as 3 women per quilt square. If you need more space for more names, please photocopy this form or attach a sheet of your own.)

Occasion (include a date if the occasion is a private one):

Your message (which we write inside the card we send):

(Please enclose your check.)

human emotion, provide a framework through which historical process and human behavior can be better understood.

Although I have not seriously entered into a participation within a specific religious community, I continue to learn about the ritual songs, rhythms and dances as well as other rituals through which thanks are given and through which one maintains a conscious contact with a higher power as a source of strength, renewal and clarification. I have come to appreciate the responsibility of the passing on of this knowledge and tradition as part of a process of spiritual sharing as well as cultural resistance. It has been through centuries of sharing through drum, song, dance and oral tradition that this particular system of spiritual belief has been maintained until today. The fact that the Yoruba traditions have been maintained throughout the "new world", despite centuries of the most severe type of repression, is in itself the most powerful example that I can think of from which I draw strength to meet the challenges of today. #

Noel Doyle

Unquestionably, in my life time, this political climate is the most harsh, the most mean-spirited toward welfare recipients, immigrants, and undocumented persons. The reality is particularly brought home to me in the lives of the young women with whom I work at Project Hope and their children.

More than ever, I find it necessary to turn to a particular array of spiritual resources that are already a part of my life. They are prayer and reflection, friendship and nature, my religious community, and the works of particular prophets, writers and poets. A few words about each...

A daily ritual of entering into a quiet space to pray and reflect alone or with a sister with whom I live is essential to me. Here it is that I encounter God in a special way, where all that I am, all that

I feel, struggle with, question, believe or don't believe has room for expression. Here, too, I try to fine tune my listening skills so that if God calls me to risk more, love more, learn more, I will be able to hear.

"In the living flesh," I am blessed with many good friends, women primarily, with whom I can break through the screen of superficiality and talk with deeply, honestly, intimately. With them, I can share my values, my relationship with God and others, my needs, hopes, questions, frustrations, joys and fears. In their company, I am better able to cope.

"In living color," the splendor of the universe is spread out before me. Incredible beauty surrounds me. Too often, I walk in its presence without seeing, without realizing all there is in nature to teach, guide, comfort and challenge me. In a time where so much ugliness exists, I know I need to tap into the secrets of nature more than I do. I believe nature holds the power, the mystery of how to transform, bring about change.

I spent this past weekend with approximately 200 Sisters of Notre Dame, Boston Province. As a member of this larger body of dedicated women, my spiritual resources are multiplied enormously. The prayer and reflection, music, dancing and many serious discussions and decisions that were made ground me in hope.

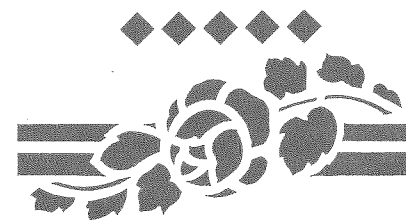
Recently, during a quiet walk through the Peace Abbey in Sherborne, MA, after reading words of non-violence from women and men representing all the worlds' great religions, I paused in gratitude before the name *Jesus* and his proclamation of the Beatitudes. I knew then that I was glad to be called Christian, that Jesus must be for me the Way, the Truth, the Life. This experience has renewed in me the desire to be committed to the reading of Scripture.

Other writers, poets, theologians with a feminist perspective have been a rich spiritual resource to me, especially Joan Chittister and Audre Lorde. In her book *The First in These Ashes*, Chittister sends out a clear call to women to commit

themselves anew to "the intellectual life...a necessary part of our spirituality, living as we do in a period of never ending questions." In another of her books, *There is a Season*, Chittister reminds me that I am born into **these times** and it is **these times** I bear some responsibility to transform.

Another "truth teller"; writer and poet the late Audre Lorde, in her article "Holistic Politics: Our Difference is Our Strength: (Ms, July/August '96) addresses the rock-bottom issue of our future survival. Citing the work of Paulo Friere, she underscores the fact that revolutionary change can only occur when we as women root out internalized patterns of oppression within ourselves. Without this, she says, social change is merely superficial. She urges us to "devise ways to use each others' difference to enrich our visions and our joint struggles."

Our current callousness and hostility toward the most vulnerable, the least economically secure in our country, is nothing short of a statement of our immorality as a nation. In calling upon the spiritual resources I mentioned, with others, I pray there can be created a climate of hope. #



QUILT UPDATE

The following people bought quilt squares in honor of the women whose names are listed in bold:

Virginia Pharr: **Ida J. Thornton;**
Denise Esslinger: **Rose Elizabeth Ullmann, Doris Mae Esslinger, Denise Mae Esslinger;** Carrye Williams: **Gwendolyn Williams, Juanita B. Wade, E. Denise Simmons**

Claudia Highbaugh

My very first deep understanding of "political times", was in September of 1957, the integration of the public schools in Little Rock, Arkansas. This was also the beginning of my second grade year. I listened and watched carefully as a small Black girl, about the same age as myself, was escorted by what seemed to be giant policemen into a red brick school building. The small girl was pelted with rotten tomatoes and eggs, but she held her head up proudly and walked purposefully into the school. I was distracted by the news story, as I turned to my mother who was sobbing as she peeled the potatoes for dinner. Mom said, "I hope that this never happens to my little girl."

In the years that followed my political sensibilities were heightened in the wake of a dozen violent local and national episodes. But I never forgot my mother's reponse to that news report of my childhood. Later, she joined an interracial fellowship that performed a play that recounted the incidents at Little Rock and told the story forcing the individuals in attendance to listen and take a specific point of view.

My resources for dealing with the politics of community and relationships, and even elections come from remembering and identifying both the strength and the determination that have come from people in my daily world. It is the constant reiteration of faith and determination and vision that keeps me alive.

The Bible stories and parables that I have known and read as a child, the prayers of the people on Sunday morning and the telling and retelling of the stories of strength remind me that we have a part in a drama that requires our attention and intention. In this year of political changes, I remember the little girl, who was just like me in Little Rock Arkansas, thirty-nine years ago, and the final stanza of a poem by Mari Evans:

I am a black woman...beyond all definition still / defying place and time and circumstance / assailed impervious indestructible / Look on me and be renewed. #

Veda Wright

I have found that a daily commitment to personal/spiritual growth is essential for sustaining myself in social/political change work. Over the years, I have seen how I and other people I know who sincerely want to effect change have become at times discouraged, burned out, and/or exhausted from it. Once I began doing "social change" work for myself, I noticed qualitative changes in my own life. It became clearer to me that while I was focussing my time, attention or resources on external causes and relationships, I didn't value myself enough to do the same for me. It has become even clearer to me that I must "be the change I wish to see in the world" (paraphrase of Gandhi). By committing to my own personal growth and development on a daily basis, I am able to be more effective when I do *choose* to direct my energy towards particular goals or relationships. I know that who/what I am internally affects every situation and relationship in which I am involved. When I am right with me it shows in what's going on around me.

The two things that are part of my daily practice that have been most helpful to me are meditation and breathwork. The meditation helps me to experience inner peace and centeredness, which I have found are necessary for making choices that benefit me as well as others. It also helps me to value and appreciate me independent of what I have or do or what other people think or feel about me. The breathwork has helped me to clear out emotional baggage from recent times back through my childhood. Physically, it has allowed me to release a lot of toxins from my body. Mentally, I am much clearer. And it has helped me to increase my abilities to live my belief that spirituality is who you are and what you do every moment of every day.

I try different practices and techniques as they come up in order to have a wide range of choices to assist me in my personal growth, but these two are my consistent daily "staples." #

for the spirits of miscarried lives (a prayer for the healing of AIDS)

© renita l. martin, 1996

In 1963, four Black girls, Addie Mae Collins, Denise McNair, Carole Robertson, and Cynthia Wesley, were murdered in the bombing of Birmingham's Sixteenth Street Baptist Church.

miscarriage: 2: spontaneous expulsion of a human fetus before it is viable.... Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, Tenth Edition

**where are the keys to
the kingdom?*

the kingdom
being
your life
being

*oh standing at
the door and i
wanna come in*

i'm tired of
calling you up
in services
holding you up
like that precious
ember that was/
that/patent leather
shoe that/ was all that
little girl's mamma/
had left/
in Birmingham
one day after Sunday
school.

they say you
won't wear this shoe
again, say this time
it ain't the shoe that's
melted. it's you.
and i can't take
this again
can't take
this

again can't do
another
miscarried life

folks sang that
Sunday in Birmingham
for that shoe levitating
like the fiery chords of
***some glad morning
when this life is over
i'll fly away*

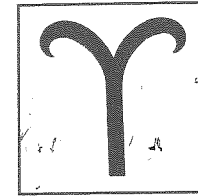
and it must be something
to bust out with a
song anywhere you
be
to sing a love song
with smoke in
your soul to
let a blues song
hold you when
you holding the shoe
'cause
you got
the
salve
to rub
on the
burns but ain't
got the foot

will one of y'all sing me
a balm, sing me a sanctified
healing prayer
sing these bodies a mantra
sing up a
foot in this here shoe
i'm holding. sing up
the keys to the kingdom,
Lawd, i'm standing at the
door and i wanna come in.

* Gospel song by Rev. William Herbert Brewster
** "I'll Fly Away", hymn by Albert E. Brumley

Elemental Summer School

by WTC Staff



RENAE SCOTT

This summer has been a summer of wonderful lessons and teachings. It's been a summer of intense work and new learning about play and the playful spirit. Much of my learning this summer has been about duality and seeing things from more than one perspective.

The summer started out for me in the Black River/Treasure Beach area of Jamaica. This spot offered me a relaxing and peaceful place to write, reflect and just be away from the hustle bustle of day-to-day living. I slept and — my next favorite activity — read till my heart and soul were satisfied.

I also learned new lessons about transition and change. My work this summer with youth has been where the issue of transition and change stood out. The transition/change lesson is teaching me about flexibility and how I, myself, learn and change. I've been working with Greater Boston Regional Youth Council (Regional).

Regional works with youth ages 15 to 21, addressing issues of race, class and gender. The youth present skits and other presentations that they design to the community. Some of the lessons I learned from the young people this summer came from being an adult in a youth-led organization. I had to pay attention to power dynamics and internalized ageism. The experience taught me about flexibility, asking questions, listening, and letting go of a lot of stereotypes of young people. I have been challenged to do things simply, make and keep it real, and to maintain a sense of humor.

I've had the opportunity to see young people struggle with and grasp some of the complexities of race, class, and gender. They asked tough questions, challenged some of my assumptions and

presented viable alternatives. I've seen young people with hope for the future, compassion, leadership, and commitment to their communities. Thank you Regional for reminding me about hope and play.

My daughter graduated from college and is living back at home. Having my daughter back home after four years is teaching me about changing roles, letting go, and examining my own expectations and fears. We are in a state of transition, living as mother and adult daughter. (This process might become a *Brown Paper* or I may discuss it in more detail later. Any readers with thoughts and comments should send them in to me).

The last two summers, I've spent a weekend or 2 to 3 days in a healing community, a program for families infected or affected with HIV or AIDS. This healing community taught me about living life fully, and about embracing and holding those near and dear, and holding and embracing those infected with and affected by HIV and AIDS.

In the teaching about living, the children take the lead. They live in the moment and in the present and are so unafraid of asking for what they need and want. I'm reminded of the devastation the AIDS virus is causing in the African American community and families. What I've taken in is how the disease is forcing the community to deal with family and our concepts of family. The disease is pushing us to be family again, to love again and to embrace and hold each other. To the families of the healing community: peace and love! Continue to hold each other. You are in my thoughts and prayers.

Having some time to reflect on these work experiences, I've come to the conclusion that the teachings are many and that they are ongoing. A quick summary of my summer lessons:

- moving beyond duality - looking at the many sides to any given situation. For

any situation there is more than just one way or one answer (or two!).

- flexibility - being open to more than one way, or my way. Try things on a little differently. As my colleagues at Visions say, "Try on something. Try something on." Look at it from another angle and leave room for new possibilities. I think this goes hand in hand with duality.

- value of friendship and family - I've been reminded to tell and show the people in my life that I love them.

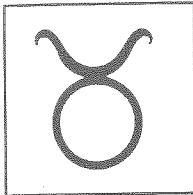
- transition - I had the opportunity to see many young people this summer, some going off to college, some returning to high school, some working for the first time. What I learned is that we have few structures and rituals that mark our many transitions.

- letting go and releasing - for me as a woman it means moving from goddess to queen. Learning to let go of attachment to things and people who I cannot fix or save is a daily process. I am practicing letting go and releasing issues and problems and opening up to the possibility of change and new ways.

Being a fire sign, I'm often described as being an intense person. I'm just beginning to appreciate my intensity. I've been thinking about my fire sign self as it relates to me and my process of change and growth. My first image was the fire walker, the people who walk on hot coals, because of their faith and mind/body control. The doing of something that looks like it cannot be done. I see the fire walkers as risk takers and people of deep faith.

I think another image that symbolizes me is the moth attracted constantly to the flame: I know if I get too close it can consume and destroy. I think my being a fire sign is about living life to the limit, still being attracted to the flame.





DONNA BIVENS

In *Walking in the Sacred Manner: Healers, Dreamers and Pipe Carriers — Medicine Women of*

the Plains Indians, I read about an Oglala Lakota woman's dream about the integrity of humanity. She saw spheres for different Peoples. In her dream, the Red man's contribution to the wholeness of humanity was spiritual insight. The Black man's was the expression of emotion expressed physically in things like music and dance. The White man's was in bringing things into physical reality through technology. The Yellow man's was mental powers like meditation and acupuncture.

To be honest, at first I felt resentful. I realized I was insulted because of the way the body is vilified in Western culture: to say that you are body and emotion as opposed to mind or spirit seemed to say that you are less. Not just the West but other spiritual traditions appear to treat the body as something that ties up rather than facilitates the liberation of the spirit. How low this put the African people of her dream in value, I thought. But on reflection, it was clear that she was not limiting any People to a particular sphere but calling for balance of the whole. I took the dream to be an expression of what must be claimed to have any spiritual wholeness on this planet. Clearly, healing our relationship to our body is crucial to the healing of spirit. That does not mean the perfect body but the loved and cherished body whatever its condition.

Exploring my initial irritation, I saw yet another place where I got lost in other peoples' stereotypes and limitations instead of claiming and embracing what I love about myself as a woman of African descent. When I was younger, anything heady was definitely secondary because I was what we used to call "a dancing fool." At the time dance was sexual energy release. And if I partied or went to hear jazz too often it was in an intoxicated mood, if not state!

Dancing and the partying that went

with it were not done with an air of sacredness or any connection to God or spirit. I didn't know — was not intentional about and conscious of — what I was doing. And so I had as big a mind-body-spirit split as the most heady intellectual then too — only in reverse.

This for me is a huge spiritual issue. I have seen and heard other Black women write and speak about this so I know it is bigger than me and my experience. When Black people do not hold our own and each other's bodies sacred in the heart of our spiritual lives, we suffer and have a hard time coming to the fullness of our power. I don't know how other Peoples have experienced this but I believe it to be a huge truth in the shared historical and cultural reality of African peoples. The more conscious we are of our process in this regard, the more awake to it, the more spectacular is our growth and our access to our spiritual, intellectual, emotional and collective power.

A workshop experience at my church last summer on relationships led me to begin to see dance and my body as the sacred part of my own spiritual life that they are. In the study, my image of myself was being shattered as I came to deeper understandings of what it means to love. To love here meant to embrace the other for who they are and not for what you like about them, wish they were or wish you were. As I understood more, I got clear that much of who I had thought I was or wasn't (and others were or weren't!) is simply who I have become out of projections and resistances. It was liberating but wrenching work and I grew distressed and tearful in the safety my church family provided.

At one session, I asked our minister and teacher about my distraught state. Her answer was that when you do a lot of spiritual and emotional work you also need to do body work. Since the body is matter, it is slower to change. Thus, we need systems that help move energy in the body to speed the integration of spiritual learning and ease the pain of rapid recovery.

One of the men in the group affirmed that. He said he had recently gone through deep spiritual growth and had found someone to help him to

rebalance physically. He said when you lighten your spirit but do not attend the body, it is like running 220 volts through a system that is set up for 120 volts. You burn out or explode.

Eagerly, I went to a healer he recommended. When this man would touch certain spots in my back I would feel emotions — mostly fear and anger — floating out of my body like ghosts. It was like meditation in that I could see pure emotion unattached to any story or incident or current reality. It was just old stuff stored in my body that I no longer had any use of. My body though, as matter, was glad to hold onto it if my spirit did not demand its release. It was like the clutter in my closets that had piled up because I didn't have the consciousness and make the time to sort and distribute it — much of it straight to the garbage can.

Another major revelation about body and spirit from the relationship work, which drew on the writing of Harville Hendrix, had to do with finding out what qualities in yourself you were projecting onto a partner instead of developing in yourself. The challenge was to think of shared characteristics of the people you had had serious relationships with and reflect on how they related to your self. I found that I had often been attracted to athletes who tended to fanaticism about the well being of their bodies. Yet I saw myself as "unathletic" and low energy. I tried on the idea that this was something about myself I had learned to devalue but secretly loved in me. Instead of claiming it in myself, had I projected my desire for myself onto significant others?

To test it out, I finally heard and grabbed at my sister's longstanding invitation to go with her to African dance class. I went and it was like I found a missing part of myself. I immediately fell deeply in love with that lost part of me. I found this lover — dance — as a sacred part of myself and it transcended romance. It was love. I was dance as any lover is her beloved when she loves from spirit and not from ego needs.

For me, connecting with the healing power of the drum and dance was a

(continued on page 8)

WTC FALL CALENDAR OF EVENTS

Dictionary of Feminist Theologies

BOOK SIGNING

Come get your collection of feminist theologians' signatures in your own copy of this amazing and radical redefining of theological terminology. Letty Russell, an editor, will be on hand to sign, as will numerous definers such as Angela Bauer, Elizabeth Bettenhausen, Donna Bivens, Francine Cardman, Joanna Dewey, Joan Martin, Nancy Richardson and others. Buy your book at the event as a way of benefitting WTC.

4:00 to 6:00, Friday, October 4, 1996

Rockefeller Hall, Harvard Divinity School

This event co-sponsored by the Office of Ministerial Studies, Harvard Divinity School and the Boston Theological Institute.

A WEEK WITHOUT VIOLENCE

The WTC is endorsing this Boston YWCA campaign, part of a national YWCA effort. For more details about events for the week, contact the Boston YWCA at 617-351-7600.

A Day of Remembrance	Sunday, Oct. 6
Protecting Our Children	Monday, Oct. 7
Making Our Schools Safer	Tuesday, Oct. 8
Confronting Violence Against Women	Wednesday, Oct. 9
Facing Violence Among Men	Thursday, Oct. 10
Eliminating Race & Hate Crime	Friday, Oct. 11
Replacing Violence with Sports, Recreation and Fun	Saturday, Oct. 12

June Jordan

POETRY WORKSHOP AND READING

for Action at 617-495-8604.

Agassiz Theatre, Radcliffe College, October 16, 1996

Wanting to Be Indian

WORKSHOP

When does spiritual searching turn into cultural theft? We will explore the problem of cultural appropriation of Native American religions by feminist or new age spiritualities.

7:00 to 9:00 pm, Thursday, October 17 - 140 Clarendon Street, Room 501. Led by Myke Johnson with RESPECT* members. \$15 [\$0 to \$5 - low income**]. Pre-registration required.

*** For notes on accessibility, childcare, etc. see notes. This event co-sponsored by RESPECT. NO PERFUMES PLEASE.

Making a Way Out of No Way

RETREAT

October 20, 1996. Blairhaven Conference Center, Duxbury, MA. \$85 - \$100 (includes room and food) (\$75 to \$90, if you register before October 14).

Cultural Appropriation "102"

WORKSHOP

10:00 to 4:30, Saturday, December 7, 1996 - 140 Clarendon Street, Room 501. Led by Myke Johnson with RESPECT* members. \$45 [\$0 to \$20 - low income**] - bring a bag lunch; beverages provided. Pre-registration required. NO PERFUMES PLEASE.

*** For notes on accessibility, childcare, etc. see notes. This event co-sponsored by RESPECT.

In the Spirit

REFLECTION & RENEWAL

Part of the Loves Herself. Regardless. program, this is a gathering for African American women to be held on the last non-holiday Wednesday of each month. 7:00 to 9:00 pm, September 25, October 30, November 20, December 18 140 Clarendon Street, Room 501. Call for schedule. Donation requested

CLASS ACTS

A workshop for upper-middle and upper class women who are interested in addressing underlying questions of values and meaning in society as they are raised by class advantage. Program begins October 19. For full details, call WTC.

* Responsible Ethics for Spirituality — Project to End Cultural Theft
** On public assistance, disabled, elder, unemployed, student, minimum wage worker.

*** The building has a wheelchair accessible entrance on Stuart St. There are accessible bathrooms on the second floor. All floors are accessible by elevator. ASL interpretation by request two weeks in advance. Child care available by request two weeks in advance.

REGISTRATION FORM ON PAGE 11.

spiritual transformation. Since then I have read a tiny bit about the drum and dance as healing in African tradition. I know I have just had a slurp of an iceberg in terms of my knowledge of this vast tradition but it is enough to let me feel I had found a huge part of myself. It has given me another piece of the puzzle for putting my spiritual self back together as a woman of African descent.

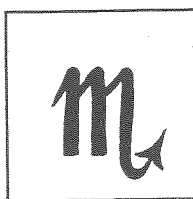
Since last summer I have danced my 43 year old body a lot! It is very different from exercising for me because it so grounds me in the People I came from. I am not just remembering and reclaiming myself. I am remembering all that we have been and all that held us before the nightmare crossing to this place. And in ways I could not have imagined, I am being healed.

This summer, Meck and I went to an anti-racist trainer/educator gathering on the land of the Mandan, Hidatsa and Arikara. As I watched their powerful dance and identified it with my newfound love, I realized dance is also healing my relationship to this earth. My restless soul spreads between two struggling continents. One I have lived for myself and know well — all the propaganda about it aside. Travelling over it in North Dakota, I had the sensation of being a little speck traveling in the palm of God's hand. I felt a new and growing peace with this land that promises to let me transcend the murderous myth that allows her desecration and the genocide of her People.

The other — Africa — I only imagine and feel in my soul. I must transcend nightmare images the media feeds us about her. They mirror those I know to be lies and distortions about her children here. Dance as spiritual practice is helping me to remember, to know the truth of African power and beauty in my body.

As I have learned so from women's liberation struggles, body is earth and earth, body. I see so much of the current political environment as the result of this fear of the body and particularly the hatred of African bodies that are not of service to the dominating society. When African people claim our bodies and the many fruits of our labor and creation for

ourselves and each other, we claim our spirits. We insist that the earth's people are not whole without us and our love for ourselves and each other.



MECK GROOT:

I've been thinking a lot about water this summer. In June, my partner Laura Ruth and I took a

vacation in the Netherlands to visit friends and family. It's hard to be in the Netherlands and not think about water. Much of the country lies below sea level. If it weren't for the elaborate dike, canal and water pumping systems, the country would be flooded. Windmills are constant visual reminders of the Dutch technology that keeps the country "dry".

My father's brother and his family live along a canal. The waterlevel in the canal is higher than the ground floor of their house, which stands dryly facing a dike. My mother's brothers and a bunch of my cousins and their families live facing an even larger dike which keeps the IJsselmeer from washing them all away. Before huge land reclamation projects were undertaken a couple of decades ago, men like my grandfathers and uncles would take a flatbottomed row boat to a network of very small islands outside of the village. Here, the farmers grew potatoes, cabbage, onions, tulips, lilies, etc. The only way to get to these fields was by boat. Even the horses that were used to cultivate the soil had to be ferried. When the crops were harvested, farmers would load up their boats and take the harvest to the auction. One of my uncles took us to the site of an old vegetable auction that is now a museum. The entire building stands over water. Hundreds of boats used to line up inside and outside the building and produce would be auctioned off, boatload by boatload, to merchants bidding in bleachers above the water.

After visiting my parents' families, Laura Ruth and I took a friend's car and took a tour of the country. Leaving North

Holland, the province my family comes from, we headed east for Friesland, a neighboring province. To get to Friesland, you have to cross the Afsluitdijk, a 20 mile dam that stands between the North Sea on one side and the IJsselmeer on the other. The IJsselmeer used to be the South Sea until the Dutch built the Afsluitdijk and pumped the salt water from the South Sea into the North Sea. Rivers then filled the void with fresh water creating the IJsselmeer.

In Friesland, we went searching for *terpen*, elevations in land built up by my ancestors hundreds and hundreds of years ago in order to have some high place to run to in the event of flooding. Most of the *terpen* now have churches on them, so they are easy to spot. But even without the churches they would be easy to see since the land there is platter flat and any elevation is noticeable. Driving through the countryside, I understood better why so many Dutch immigrants settled in places like Iowa and Southern Ontario, where no land rises up to block your view of the earth and sky.

Heading south, we eventually ended up travelling along the Rhijn valley. We took back roads as often as we could. At one point we were driving along the top of a dike that runs along the flood plain of the Rhijn. The road veered down off the dike. Suddenly, it ended at the river. Not quite knowing what to do next, we sat a bit. Looking around, we noticed a line of cars across the river, all in the same predicament. It was then we noticed cars getting off a small ferry on the other side. Wow! By this time, others had joined us on our side of the river. Two Dutch quarters and a half hour later, we were on the other side of the Rhijn.

Ferries, locks, dams, bridges, *terpen*, windmills. There is no end to the technology used by the Dutch to "take care" of the abundance of water in the Netherlands. There is a saying that God created the world, but the Dutch created Holland. This saying always reminds me of the Greek concept of *hubris*, human pride that is scornful of the divine. *Hubris* is pride in human action and basically thumbs its nose at the gods. The *hubris* of my people is based on a

theology of a transcendent God — a God who is not part of this earth — a God who "put us in charge of the world," a God whom we have created in our own image, a God whom we call omnipotent but whom we as a people really believe is impotent without us. It is not that I am completely against adapting the environment. I just don't have much trust that my people know any longer how to do that in a way that doesn't lead to or come out of *hubris*.

I have been thinking a lot more about water and *hubris* since Donna and I took a trip to North Dakota to attend a conference for anti-racism educators and organizers. The site of the conference was New Town, a small town on the northern edge of the Fort Berthold Indian Reservation. New Town gets its name

from the fact that it is a very new town. In the early 1950's the US government built the Garrison Dam across the Missouri River. Whole towns and villages for miles and miles along the Missouri now lie under Lake Sakakawea which was created to generate hydro electricity. The Three Affiliated Tribes — the Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara — used to live off the Missouri flood plain. They grew corn, and beans, and squash, and many other foods. They gathered berries and herbs that grew wild. They had learned over generations how to preserve food so it could take them through the winters. Until the 1950's, they were largely self-sufficient. Now all the arable land on the reservation is under water.

The supreme arrogance of people who think it's okay to flood someone

else's land "for the [read our] greater good" is another form of *hubris*, but it seems to take it one step further. It seems to be saying not only does God need help but there is no difference between us and God. We are God and we can control everything and everyone.

After I told someone in Boston about Lake Sakakawea, she told me that there are also towns at the bottom of the Quabbin Reservoir, the water that quenches the thirsts of the residents of Boston. Now every time I turn on the tap I think about *hubris*.

According to the Greeks, *hubris* "ultimately causes the transgressor's doom." There's something to think about.

Notes from Our Readers

We've been getting a lot of response from readers of the newsletter lately. We thought you might be interested in what's being written. Whatever the response, we'd love to keep hearing from you. It's very affirming to know that all these words really land somewhere.

I just love your newsletter. I have especially been enjoying the interview with staff about provocative questions. Thanks for keeping me/us connected in this way.

Anne Slepian, Arlington, MA

The latest newsletter — particularly "The Role of Spirit in the Work of Love" — is extraordinarily engaging. Thank you for these personal insights and reflections — and for all the rest of your hard work on behalf of a healthier human community.

Joan Bates Forsberg, Claremont, CA

The last two newsletters have been so meaningful to me, especially Meck, Renae and Donna's reflections. I sense a *Brown Paper*, or bigger, collection evolving. Thank you, WTC, for being here.

Jane Strete, Cambridge, MA

Have just read your articles on spirituality in the latest issue of the WTC newsletter and I am excited to learn of your experiences. I have always felt WTC has had a courageous program. Now that you are incorporating this awareness of the spirit you must feel as though you are on an exciting path.

Elvira Charles, Washington Depot, CT

Blessings from Nassau to you. Thank you for the newsletter which is a gift. It came to me today like a critical message from the underground. A message I feel comes from the spirit. When I read this newsletter, chills passed through me and tears came up into my eyes. "...we must go slowly...there is not much time..." This sentence, these words, spoke directly to my spirit, to my soul — and I knew what it was saying. I felt it, knew it, with my body before my head even registered what it meant.

Here in Nassau, in groups that I'm part of, in projects I've tried to start myself, there has been so much frustration, urgency, needs for change, needs to create action for change and to create goals based on these needs: like what you have described — we, here, have also been searching, moving fast, and in the thick of it all, I have found myself more lost than ever, more despondant, joyless, and feeling that nothing we or I are/am doing is doing any "good". "...We must go slowly...there is not much time..." yes. Thank you for reaching out to remind us, to encourage, to affirm, to rally spirit together....I am grateful for your continuing presence at WTC. I support and honour your perseverance. I am passing the word on. I send Blessings. I send money for the work. I send belief in the work. And prayers for ears to hear with.

Helen Klonaris, Nassau, Bahamas

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We must go slowly--there is not much time.

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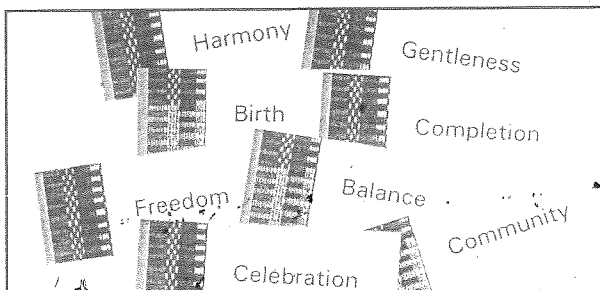
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