

***MORE TO THIS CONFESSION:
RELATIONAL PRISON THEOLOGY***

Acknowledgments

Jesus the Liberator Seminary of Religious Justice is grateful for the many who have contributed to the life of the organization. We dedicate this book to those in prison and their family members.

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Introduction

by Chris Barbera

This book is an attempt to expand the concepts of Prison Theology by integrating concepts of Relational Theology. Relational Theology can be seen as an understanding that God is embraced by the dynamic between two or more; that is, between the supreme self within the self or between the self and other. Divine relationship is healthy – the absence of relationship is static or absent life and therefore a form of death.

“God and I are one.” John 10:30

Crying out in the Wilderness: The Word and Community

The words of captivity are scattered voices crying out as psalms; sometimes reserved, reflective or cryptic and at other times bold and possessed of subjective visions embracing pain and miracles. They are devotional and honest. They are deeply religious, a world outside of the pluralistic, secular and modern scientific, technological, consumer America. Words of captivity are expressed and related by the written word, there is no digital, instantaneous correspondence. A letter from an inmate often takes time to be received and time to digest their wisdom, pain and alienation.

The Biblical world view within captivity and the 21st century offers depth of feeling and contemplation not readily available within modern society. It is a mind out of time; prescient, intuitive and mythos-poetic. It inculcates a deep patience, humility, gratitude and desire (thirst for the word). These are aspects and virtues of a spiritual education that academics do not always consider.

They have the feel of a 21st century psalm. They are a longing for connection, for relationship and release from captivity.

They have the power of the prayers of Jesus in Gethsemane and the drama of the book of Job. Like the biblical psalms, their wisdom is emotional. They are also imbued with insights into scripture law and society.

Below are words or concepts from the archives of Jesus the Liberator Seminary of Religious Justice, from people in prison. For years, we established writing programs, book distributions and theology classes inside prison. These words are from those experiences and are a bridge to an unedited, uncensored world of inmate writing. They are the tip and sampling of what we have in our archives. They show that there are many ways to know. They reveal that devotion, subjective vision, emotional depth and longing are as insightful and powerful as professionally researched academic analysis. They are words of life. We believe that these words of life need to be heard. Survival requires community. We are the community that is preserving the words that would otherwise be lost.

“I am the companion of him who remembers Me.”

Prophet Muhammed

“I am the Law and the Prophets.”

Jesus

The law and the prophets; the law is the word and community. The prophets are the embodied consciousness speaking the word to resilient communities.

Written word
Spoken word
Embodied word;
Text
Word
Identity

The objective structural consciousness is formed outside of prison by having relationship with the living spirit of the “salt of the earth” oppressed. The community is the bridge between the inside and outside.

Survival demands community; our model is of early Christian communities established outside of prison united with base ecclesial (Prison) communities. Within the Prison Theology context, Jesus speaks to the “mainstream” society through the church/community but from the perspective of the poor and oppressed. In other words, Jesus was/is an oppressed peasant recovering divine connections for community inmates with pyramid texts. Outside, community activists are texting actions and meeting.

The link to the building up of an organization and a movement is the inmate becoming their own theologian and advocate – our part, our charisma is service.

To an Unknown God

Forming a divine relationship within prison, within captivity, is a powerful experience. There is inherent power in their absorption.

Our experience has shown us that inmates want their voices to be heard. They want people to know that they are thinking, feeling and spiritual beings. They want people to know of the conditions that exist in captivity. The silence and darkness of repression is often more painful than bars limiting physical wandering. The freedom of mind remains alive in the written and spoken word. Inmates long for freedom. We feel compelled to share these words of longing. They are a testament to human freedom. We take the responsibility to tap into the essence.

Wisdom is eternal and reoccurring. Wisdom recovered is a refreshing spirit. Ancient wisdom recovered, like the Dead Sea Scrolls, enhances the consciousness from which it is formed. And so, the consciousness of a community near an obscure dead salt lake in the desert gives depth and expansive breadth to Judeo-Christian consciousness.

In a similar vein, writings from our prison writing archive enhance our concept of Prison Theology. This theology is rooted and contextualized by the experience of captivity. People in captivity relating to the God of their life and vision, is relational. It is also relational to be connected to a life supporting spiritual community not in physical captivity.

Physical captivity requires a certain degree of disembodiment for the sake of emotional distance and survival. Disembodied bodies form abstract prayers outside of the somatic body forming mystical time and places distant. The preserving of mind/spirit distinct from body is supported by Neo-Platonic Christology and the consciousness only school of Berkeley, among others.

The whole body – the body in prison whole, can embrace the incarnated body Christ, the holy body in captivity. One can “escape” from prison reality in the abstractions of disembodied words & thought & prayers and embody “freedom;” that is, inner freedom. And so, Western abstract enlightenment has a place within Prison Theology.

Below are some of the words or concepts we hear...

“More to this confession”

“I was a lost soul”

“Full of drug addiction”

“Life sentence”

“Not a vicious man”

“Existential anxiety”

“I wanted out”

“Corrupt institution”

“Sold down the river”

“Inmate brother mistrust”

“Hide and take attitude”

“Self-destructive”

“Broken, broken more”

“The guards... left”

“House on fire”

Shadrach

Meshach

Abednego

“Resist the death of prison”

Jehovah-Jireh,

Jehovah-Rapha,

Jehovah-Nissi,

Jehovah-Rohi,

Jehovah-Shalom,

Jehovah-Tisdkenu,

Great God Jehovah

“Embrace eternal life now”

“Resist the death in prison”

“Liberation Theology”

“Public freedom”

“Critical awareness”

“Rebellious thought” (Camus)

“Memory of pain” (Malcolm X)

“Crime against criminals” (Dostoevsky)

“Bonhoeffer & new perspectives”

“Wounded Healer” (Nouwen)

“Yearning”

“Explosive anger”

“Attica & 3rd world poverty”

“Collective act”

“Dear Sirs...”

“Please accept my apologies...”

“This missive...”

“My signature, my testimony...”

And types of stories we heard and list below, to be elaborated upon
in future times such as...

“People died while I was in jail”

“The variegated, diverse and mundane in prison”

“Rebuking the Devil”

“Daily Greek and Hebrew study”

“The liminal space of prison”

“In the depths of the people”

“The bondage/wilderness of Moses”

“Life is resistance – resiliency of the oppressed”

Including notes from a trial...and notes from a journal...

“Is the protocol rational, visible, and moral?”

“If the facts align, morality is irrelevant”

“Morality is protection of assets and property”

“This trial is about property”

“Brutal wearing down on technicalities”

Temple of Knowing: Creating from a Cacophony of Visions

We are creating a template for voices of the “mystics and prophets and criminals.” We are creating an epistemology (theory of knowing) based on the fringe of society, those outside the law or those subjected to or under the law (which in the prison context is one and the same).

Hope within captivity does not diminish suffering; it notices and transforms “Job in Gethsemane.”

Inmates are like war veterans suffering traumatic stress. These veterans leave maximum-security prison facilities and enter the minimum-security free world. While they are within maximum security, prescient and broken and open to the depth of existence and human suffering, they have the ability to transform themselves and thereby the moral universe. Wisdom born out of suffering is transformative just as sad music touches the deepest joy. We on the outside have the opportunity to help bring this transformation to fruition.

Some people in prison I have related with described their time there as an in-between time, a waiting, akin to 40 years wandering in the desert – their time of exodus. An awakening can occur in the nuances of consciousness. These “liminal” spaces of people and culture and conditions on the fringe of society and consciousness can be fertile ground for “vanguards of consciousness.” The fringes of society (prisoners, mystics, shamans, artists, thinkers, advocates) have some experiential solidarity with each other and may experience “liminal space awakening” which is the seed of transformative depth consciousness and movement.

Pedagogy: Spiritual Autobiography

There are some who think that objective analysis and academic rigor is the basis of education. It is a part. God is more than an abstract other to be attained by apprehension of principles and theories. God is living within. We can know God within by subjective expression. Manifesting the freedom of individuated God consciousness is an act of witnessing and theology. Trusting poor people and people considered sinful and criminals is an act of Christian service.

We believe that the seed of knowledge (divinity) is within each person, so each person is a witness and each person can teach themselves. "Healer, heal Thyself." The person in prison attests to their divinity and becomes a witness to resilient spirituality within captivity, that is, prison theology. This requires a belief in the individual and an individualized, facilitated approach to education. It also requires a deep listening and attunement. It is sometimes requiring attentiveness to people even without full understanding.

We maintain a kind of Socratic Method of seeing ideas and answers within others and drawing them out in dialogue and relation. Memory and subjective vision are a core of a confession or autobiography. Words such as "hermetic, atomistic and autodidactic" apply. Because solitude is a condition of prison, we draw out the good essence of a bad situation.

Each autobiography is then supported and enhanced. Every person is accepted, and each autobiography is valid. This makes the approach relative and relational. Perhaps it makes it somewhat "postmodern" in that each point of reference is individual. This is our fundamentally democratic approach to education. The collecting of a multiplicity of voices makes it a democratic experience.

The ethics of a confession is that in articulation, one is bearing the weight of the past (a sin or crime) and bringing it out into a light which heals. In so doing, the dead survives the dead in their time. Positively told, by “taking the light from under the bushel” and showing the world, one brings a truth into existence.

Augustine’s *Confessions* influenced Christian autobiographical writing. In a similar vein, we encouraged a spiritual autobiography. This spiritual autobiography is informed by St. Anselm’s *Proslogion*, which expresses the thesis that “faith is seeking understanding.” In other words, experience prefigures and informs knowledge. Knowledge is putting words on the experience of resiliency and liberation from suffering. Solidarity with this is compassion.

So we have been shifting from a “traditional” prison ministry which focused upon emotional empathy and solidarity with suffering, the 1st noble truth of Buddha and teaching of Christ, into a prison theology – the apostle’s articulation of “what happened, who was that?”

Spiritual education involves compassion and solidarity by means of affirmation and deep listening. We have facilitated an individualized education with inmates and from that developed a blueprint for the synthesis of compassion and intellect and subjective experience with generalized, abstract notions. We have taken a feminist notion, “the personal is political” and created a way that the “personal is theological” to formulate Prison Theology.

Process Theology – God as event
Feminist Theology - the personal is theological
Therefore, make God happen in relation

The Performative act in speech and writing is a form of public expression of art and spirituality. When these are practiced or integrated with inmates, the fringes, then the whole is awakened. To do it with compassionate affirmation brings healing and dignity, which is a good place for vision and authentic being (spiritual education). The art of thought can be a sword that heals.

Spiritual Autobiography: 3 Examples

The three authors in this book are part of the outside community of Jesus the Liberator. Each has helped to build the institution and community. As part of the “cloud of witnesses” that creates a “life-line,” we asked each other to write a spiritual autobiography to exemplify a fundament of our approach to education and service.

Matthew

One of Matthew’s primary insights is that intentional relationships are expressions of relational theology. He sets his transcendent wisdom and respect of place within indigenous culture by evoking the Lakota Mitakuye Oyasin; an expression of I & being & life interconnected.

This inter-being connectedness is a foundational practice and wisdom within indigenous cultures. Within present day New York State, the Haudenosaunee evoke a prayer of thanksgiving for “all my relations.” This is in stark contrast to the modern world where humans are separate from nature in order to control it. This has led thinkers to speak about the “Anthropocene” – a time when humans apportion undue influence upon the world. Humans are alone on the earth. Prison is the most extreme example of this; humans separated and segregated away from the natural world, under the control of other humans abstracted from the world of nature, placed in an artificial world of steel and concrete.

This inter-being, relational way of life also stands in stark contrast to his upbringing within a white, middle class, American Protestant consumer society - which he rejects. His story of breaking from that, his downfall, enlightened awareness and subsequent searching for and participating in alternative systems is his spiritual autobiography.

In short, Matthew rejects death and embraces life. Like King David (and many prison inmates) he is faulted and falls. He claims that “it was a wild, beautiful and completely unsustainable ride.” But he maintains a faith and vision. He sees the limitations and injustice of white privilege. And he sees how his situation would have turned out much worse if he had black skin.

Matthew could have been a capitalist or a criminal. Instead, he became a spiritual revolutionary. He gives us a vision for a more relational, sustainable, just and nonviolent world. He is practicing nonviolent communication, meditation and perma-culture while (metaphorically and perhaps sometimes literally) dancing ecstatically to a Cosmic Christ (Matthew Fox’s concept) at a techno rave altar. He is a “Dharma Punx” (Noah Levine’s notion) challenging the power while advocating justice and a new kind of power and inter-being.

In our prison archives and within our previous publications, we have seen the resilient wisdom of survivors. Matthew survives. In so doing, he presents models for a world outside of prison which would reduce incarceration. These models (many of which are listed at the end of his article as resources) can also provide alternative ways to deal with “crime and punishment.” He shows that the peace and justice within is translatable to the outside world. And we are the ones to initiate that.

Gabrie'l

Gabrie'l was coming into consciousness and identity in one of the poorest neighborhoods when Hip-Hop music and culture collided with the crack cocaine epidemic. Her roots give her sensitivity and solidarity with people suffering from a matrix which perpetuates the prison-industrial complex: racism, poverty and its effects of abuse and drug addiction. A great number of prison inmates in upstate New York come from 5 of the poorest zip code areas in New York City. That she survived such an environment is noteworthy; survival is a form of resistance; resistance is a form of wisdom. This is one way I understand Rev. Dr. Katie Cannon's notion of the "everyday wisdom of black women."

At one point, she makes the assertion that if she or people from this environment were unaware or made to be unaware of the prison-industrial complex, then how much less aware are the white middle class, not to mention the aristocracy? To love the world is not to demonize ignorance, but to "let your light shine." This is a key to Relational/Prison Theology.

In addition to Gabriele'l's articulation of this "series of phenomena" which informed her moral character, she continued to grow and achieved great academic success.

Many theoretical structures put a language to our experience. Dr. James Cone puts a framework on the lived experience of poor black people and names it *Black Theology of Liberation*. Audre Lorde expands the narrow concept of Eros beyond the sexual to describe the intimate life force that binds and heals. And Carter Heyward speaks of the power of intimacy which is mutually redemptive. She calls the sacredness of this Relational Theology. Each of these 3 thinkers informs Gabriele'l's moral vision.

The above mentioned thinkers are harmonized with 3 people within Gabriel's life that shifted and expanded her consciousness. She integrated these people and thinkers into her moral empathy and the vision of a black feminist. Meeting each of these 3 is described as a bend. Keith was a mutually supportive and redemptive confidant. Having experienced this would make it easier for her to connect and receive the wisdom and mutual redemption of an inmate, Wally. Her third bend, Craig, was a social worker. Spiritual service is a form of Karma Yoga.

Working for the people, with knowledge born out of their experience and devoted to their wellbeing and spiritual growth is redemptive and relational. Gabriel is shining a light upon Prison Theology as Relational. The necessity of relating to that and connecting that to the spiritual renewal of both the individual and the world is a way to understand Relational Prison Theology. In the words of Carter Heyward, it is to see "God as a verb" – it is to be born again.

Chris

My spiritual autobiography expresses interrelatedness between my life and being and voice and the anonymous voices of the poor now exalted. It was my experience of the "Holy Sparks" of the mystic Rabbi Bal Shem Tov – Holy Sparks of relatedness and divine energy. This occurred not in an exalted, pure temple of healthy foods, devotions, scripture study and teachings from the guru, but amidst homeless squalor, sickness, bugs, deprivations and desperations, and overworked sex-workers with meth skin. The Holy Land of the Tenderloin district in San Francisco is where I found God.

In the ghetto, I was practicing Husserl's thesis, that transcendent subjectivity is inter-subjectivity. I was hearing and integrating everything I heard into a transcendent wisdom which began personal and became universal. I was simultaneously absorbing karma of others while "surrendering my will to the guru."

Phenomenology is a school of philosophy which can partly be characterized as a cluster of experiences. A “phenomenology of crisis” is a being on the edge, the margins of polite society, like the existential crisis of incarceration, which is a form of insight that can lead to a break thru of consciousness. In one of our former books, *Prison Theology*, Jelanti, who was in solitary confinement, wrote about psychosis and transcendental insight and enlightenment as seemingly seamlessly interchangeable. That he documented his insights during torment was an act of heroism. In a similar vein, I am documenting the resilient, transformative spirituality of the “salt of the earth.”

Reflecting upon this intense, salt of the earth moment, I learned that authentic spiritual human relationships inculcate and create a spiritual ontology. This eventually led towards a prison theology. I learned to distinguish impulse control from the yogic ideal of feeling the joys and sorrows of all; the emotional/physical somatic body from spiritual empathy. I learned that the depth of love was often so powerful that I turned away. I learned that spiritual love frees me of bondage to the power of emotions, though it is tied to a passion of energy with compels me forwards, with a fear that without it I am lost, like the feeling of romantic love.

I saw relational theology like jazz – in the moment – music grows out of response in kind to others: life (and therefore God) is improvised, relational.

I felt the anxiety of Job not cursing God in a desperate ghetto church praying.

I questioned grace and relationship and if I could ever go beyond relationship? The moment I did not want to leave my body was the moment of transcendence. Can the yogi transcend matter?

One day, I walked into the office of Jesus the Liberator, in a back room of Trinity church, in the small rust belt working class Great Lakes city of Buffalo. I meet Hugh Pratt who was the president of this nonprofit. We quickly became friends and I became part of this prisoner education program. I have written about this in previous books. For this present endeavor, I will relate my experiences with multiple people who formed the consciousness of Jesus the Liberator. The people, ideas, consciousness and initiatives that follow have been and will continue to be a cloud of witnesses.

The Cloud of Witnesses

Rev. Hugh Pratt was a southern white gentleman who grew up in Jim Crow South Carolina and attended a primarily black seminary school and worked with Ralph Abernathy, the right-hand man of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. One of his favorite theological books was *Moral Man and Immoral Society* by Reinhold Niebuhr. Hugh often spoke of the “moral imagination” and conceived of a seminary of and for poor people, which became Jesus the Liberator Seminary of Religious Justice.

Rev. Jimmy Rowe was a black man who loved the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He was the right-hand man of Hugh Pratt. Together they united black and white consciousness – the African American religious experience and German theology into “pedagogy of and for the oppressed.”

Rev. Anne Paris was the wife of Hugh Pratt and Dean of the organization. She was a creative writer. She went on to establish Paradise House, a half-way house for women coming out of prison. On that block, she also purchased homes to be rehabbed and used for some of the women to transition into apartments. Within Paradise House was a grassroots church called Harriet Tubman Church.

Rev. Dr. Dorothea Brooks was a professor, biblical scholar, feminist and teacher within the organization. She was strong willed and strong minded. She did biblical archaeology in Israel, had a clear sense of right and wrong and advocated for women.

Father Thomas Kreuder was a Vincentian priest and board member. He had worked for years in the realms of mental health and addiction, both institutionally and on the street level at Friends of the Night People. He also taught at Niagara University thereby fulfilling a charge of St. Vincent to “serve the poor and inform clergy to serve.”

Bernice Price was a board member. She was a Black Muslim woman from St. Thomas. She claimed that her advocacy for housing rights in New York City contributed to her time in prison. Her fierce love of poor people and intensity of prayer enlarged the spirit of our mission.

The House of Witness

Each of the 6 witnesses mentioned above ministered within Trinity Episcopal Church, our first House of Witness.

The Cloud of Experiences

Within our first house, our witnesses first formed the Certificate for Religious Justice Ministry. This course of study was taught by the above-mentioned witnesses along with others to poor people and people who did not have access to traditional higher education. I have written about this in previous books. This education morphed into a Theological Education for Prisoners Program.

One intention of this education system was to form a “para-clergy.” This clergy would be made up of people with life experience and refined with traditional higher education that would assist

and give meaning to institutional clergy and structures and houses of worship.

This Religious Justice Education and “para-clergy” would consist of “7 inner city/suburban churches” which would assist and form “circuit riders” within a “Black Chautauqua.”

The Cloud of Witnesses

Rev. Dr. Juan Carmona wrote his doctorate on Puerto Rican Liberation Theology. He was a chaplain at Groveland Correctional Facility. He helped us to establish an in-house theology course at that facility co-taught by him, facility inmates and members of our organization who would supply books, reading of papers and occasionally visited.

Ken Lashway was the first graduate from our Theological Education for Prisoners Program at Groveland Correctional Facility, which was taught in correspondence. That program was the seed for the in-house Theology Classes at Groveland. He assisted and co-taught with Rev. Dr. Juan Carmona. He had several degrees and wrote insightful papers on “Paul’s prison letters” and “Jesus and sex offenders,” which helped form our consciousness.

Maria Pratts was a Puerto Rican woman who worked with-out great acclaim to help the organization function smoothly. She was a worker bee and witness akin to biblical Martha.

Dr. Rosemary Radford Ruether was a professor who evaluated and graded some of our papers from prison. Her work within religion and sexism fit well with her support and uplift of women inmates at Fluvanna Correctional Facility in Virginia, which we had correspondence with. She would eventually connect us with a publisher.

Rev. Lynn Litchfield was a chaplain at Fluvanna Correctional Facility for women. She was a great support for her people and helped us in establishing a rich correspondence program with multiple women there, some of whom we eventually helped to get published.

Elizabeth Haysom was an inmate at Fluvanna Correctional Facility. Her papers helped to form our Prison Theology. Her belief in the freedom of the mind of the inmate despite physical bondage remains a powerful statement. Her paper, *Prison's Door to Freedom* would eventually be published in *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* under a category entitled Prison Theology.

The House of Witness

Each of the 6 witnesses above shone within UCC Epiphany Church, our second House of Witness.

The Cloud of Experiences

Within the second house, our witnesses formed what I called the “Path of the Tuscarora.” The Tuscarora are native people who came from what are now Virginia and the Carolinas to join the Haudenosaunee, the people of the longhouse, within present day New York State. The Fluvanna and Groveland models of prisoner education program, being in New York and Virginia, were formed of a male and female prison. One was an in-house theology course co-taught by inmates and the other was a writing correspondence program from which we published or helped publish 3 women inmates, which connected us to national universities and publishers.

In addition to the “Path of the Tuscarora,” Hugh Pratt published a book entitled *Social Ministry for Beginners*. This led and co-existed with our participation and creation of conferences, seminars and Annual Award graduation ceremonies.

The Cloud of Witnesses

Rev. Vivian Waltz was the president of the organization following Hugh Pratt. She was a New England feminist who helped articulate our new curriculum and the nonviolent power of Jesus. She went on to lead the Karen Klimczak Center. Karen was a Christian martyr who formed a halfway house for men now under the umbrella of Peace Prints Ministries.

Rev. Fred Jensen was the board chair. He was a Texas Christian who helped articulate our new curriculum and the revolutionary social impact of Jesus.

Rob Harris was a student of ours in prison who, when released, formed the Prison Youth Prevention Project, which worked to keep youth out of prison. Our relationship with him gave credence to our efforts and his determination inspired our work.

Karima Amin was a board member. Her community activism with black consciousness, storytelling and prisoner advocacy led to the formation of Prisoners Are People Too. Our relationship with her was mutually supportive and helped form cornerstones of consciousness in our respective efforts.

Ted Peters, of Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary and Graduate Theological Union, was the editor of *Dialog: A Journal of Theology*. He published Elizabeth and me in that journal under the category of *Prison Theology*. These 2 articles gave us some publicity and furthered our development of Prison Theology.

Allen Ryan was a board member and member of Westminster Presbyterian Church. He helped to give us a platform at that church which allowed us to bring a formerly incarcerated man into that wealthy parish and “move the heart of Lydia.” They subsequently supported him and us with resources.

The House of Witness

Each of the 6 witnesses above created consciousness while we were within Lafayette Presbyterian Church, our third House of Witness.

The Cloud of Experiences

Within the third house, our witnesses formed a focused curriculum which included aspects of objectivity (Human Spirituality, Old and New Testament and Liberation Theology) book-marked by subjective expressions and visions beginning with a Spiritual Autobiography leading to the articulation of their own Prison Theology.

A few years and many students into this curriculum produced our first codification of this consciousness entitled *Prison Theology*. Prison Theology became a new building block within the evolution of our educational mission.

The Cloud of Witnesses

Els Claessens was Doctoral student at the Catholic University of Leuven in Belgium. She wrote her thesis based on our work, thereby universalizing our vision with international recognition and commentary. Her paper was entitled *Prison Theology as Inspiration for Prison Pastoral*.

Nick Lindsey was a Doctoral student at the University of Buffalo. After interacting with us, he began a writing program at Wende Correctional Facility and documented that experience in our 2nd publication: *Dreamers, Romans and Prisons: Meditations on Crime, Illness, Healing and Liberation*. He affirmed our emphasis upon personal testimony, autobiography and writing as a means of education.

Kathleen Sambrotto was an artist and survivor of multiple crisis's whose perseverance, as well as her artwork, was documented and preserved in our publication. The intersection of art and spirituality as a cornerstone of education was affirmed in her work and presence.

Linda Abrams was a mental health counselor who traveled regularly to the Amazon to study shamanistic indigenous healing. Her vision and intellect helped us to see the interconnection between "crime, illness, healing and liberation," and the necessary distinctions between "healers of the south" and "jailers of the north."

Jelani Zulante was an inmate who contributed to our 2nd publication. His life and document are a testimony to the survival of the human spirit. The fine line between ecstatic spiritual vision and hallucination affirmed the importance of reaching the untapped potentiality of inmates. His "cells of thought" within solitary confinement is a root of potent theology.

Dean Faiello was an inmate who contributed to our 2nd publication. He clearly articulated "metanoia" (turning from sin) and showed techniques to get there while inside as well as the institutional challenges to rehabilitation. In so doing, he expressed the importance of study and devotion as a survival technique and a valid theological practice, thereby affirming and evolving our collective vision.

The House of Witness

Each of the 6 witnesses above created while housed in Ascension Episcopal Church, our fourth House of Witness.

The Cloud of Experiences

Within the fourth house, our witnesses formed a loose coalition of autonomous working parts all creating educational models within universities, prisons and health facilities. This led to our 2nd articulation of Prison Theology entitled *Dreamers, Romans and Prisons: Meditations on Crime, Illness, Healing and Liberation*. While engaged in this work, we also continued our prisoner education program in correspondence.

The Cloud of Witnesses

Rev. Judy Breny was a student of James Cone and Black Liberation Theology. She had a vision of the church as a bridge between rich and poor neighborhoods and invited us to use the space as an office and new home. Her sense of church and justice collaborated and supported our efforts.

Dr. James Martin was a board member and theistic humanist and literary philosophy who used the term “ego strength,” as necessary for the healing of an inmate. Consistent with this was his re-articulation of B.F. Skinner’s idea of “contingencies of support” to create a lifeline for the incarcerated.

Dr. Gabrie’l Atchison was a board member, consultant and black feminist from the south Bronx educated within elite east coast universities. She recognized Prison Theology as relational and conceived the integration as an evolution of our efforts. She also formed and began leading an archiving of years of our efforts into a data field, all of which is relational.

Matthew Holsinger was a board member and grassroots activist working to create intentional alternative community development. His breath of yoga and the intersection of spirituality

and justice furthered our vision of subjective voices coalescing and creating a template for objective truth and justice movements.

Rev. Jon Lavelle was the minister of our host church who filled in when Judy stepped down. His years of ecumenical and interfaith service in the Middle East gave him a unique voice and critique of the Christian Empire of America, which affirmed our libratory educational approach.

Rev. Dr. Douglas Gilbert was a Presbyterian minister and medical doctor who greatly influenced our thinking about the interrelation between body and mind and spirituality and addiction (Meister Eckhart and brain chemistry for example). When he passed on, he bequeathed his great theological library to us which over time (especially within this house) we have shared freely with hundreds of prison inmates.

The House of Witness

Each of the 6 witnesses above witnessed while within St. John's Grace Episcopal Church, our fifth House of Witness.

The Cloud of Experiences

Within the fifth house, our witnesses integrated into the life of the host church while maintaining correspondences with multitudes of inmates in various states. Our educational approach involved massive distribution of books and the freedom of inmates and allies inside to use them with little guidance or instruction. We matched the needs and requests of inmates with our available literature thereby allowing the freedom and power of inmates to use our resources and thereby guide us.

We began our 3rd publication; *More to This Confession: Relational Prison Theology*. This effort gave subtlety and depth to Prison Theology.

We also began to archive and create a data base of all our previous work including the hundreds of inmate correspondences and writings. This library would serve as an educational resource.

The Cloud of Witnesses is a system or method of subjective visions coalescing and condensing into a seed.

The Cloud of Witnesses manifests in one – one is dichotomized Judas/Christ – guru/disciple – transmission rather than tuition (intuition).

The warden is Cain which is the order of society.

The Cloud of Witnesses also includes homeless people on the streets, inmates in prison, other unnamed professors, ministers and activists involved with Jesus the Liberator and other historical/mythic saints and thinkers in and out of prison like;

Joseph the beautiful youth seeing visions in Pharaoh's prison, the temple grain elevator pyramid, eating the sacred cows of dreams,

And Daniel reading hieroglyphic cryptic messages in Babylonian captivity Mene Mene Tekel and Parsin fasting and praying in purple cloth toward Jerusalem amidst the Chaldean star gazers,

And Jeremiah's bread and ladder unto heaven from prison escaping Platonic caves of ideal images and bourgeoisie morality for the earthy word of God's direct insight,

And Jesus Christ incarcerated and executed by the state,

And Dietrich Bonhoeffer's resistance and Viktor Frankl's
logo-therapeutic choice within Nazi prisons,

And the sad, burning violins of romantic Leonard Cohen
singing of love, the transcendent power of joy in the face of death,
melodies evoking string concertos of Jewish inmates in concentra-
tion camps playing as comrades and sisters and brothers entered
the gas chambers,

And Dr. King's moral advocacy and formation from Bir-
mingham jail,

And Nelson Mandela's patient tribulation,

And Rev. Dr. Katie Cannon's "everyday wisdom of black
women,"

And Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and *My Mother's Gar-
den* as Ethiopian Africa beneath the systematic pyramids of Egypt
as Queen Sheba beneath Solomon's temple of multicolored system-
atic gold as Bob Marley beneath London's parallel's and parallaxes
of time and line and money flow empire,

And the daughters of Ethiopia and the daughters of Jerusa-
lem weeping like Rachel for her children incarcerated,

And Anthony and Mary of Egypt, Theophane the Recluse
and the desert fathers traveling like Bedouins across the desert
seeking solace in the burning heat of solitary cells, their eschatolog-
ical apocalyptic burning visions of chains of ignorance falling like
lizard scales and fish eggs,

And Paulo Freire's "critical transitive consciousness" and reading in "relation to the awakening of your consciousness" and John Dewey's inherent educational democracy, both of which are implicit in our approach to a belief and practice in universal egalitarian theological expression,

And Ramakrishna integrating devotion and intellect and Chaitanya universalizing spirituality for poor and rich alike,

And Vinoba Bhave, apostolic heir of Mahatma Gandhi's vision of satyagrahi (individual truth force) forever brahmin, his "purity" finding fruition, among other places, phenomenological spaces, in an English colonial prison teaching the Koran without malice and with sarvodaya, that is, welfare for all,

And Bo Lozoff *Doing Time* like all of us in and out of prison,

And Htein Lin, Burmese artist and freedom fighter, creating a "show of hands," an exhibit displaying 100 plaster replicas of the hands of political prisoners, suggesting that just as plaster fixes broken bones, so too do prisoners fix a broken society,

And New Orleans' St. Gaudet reforming prisons as French Jean Genet shuns reform and embraces criminality of the Bourgeoisie,

And Teresa of Avila embracing ecstasy & visions "I loved what I could love" at the foot of the cross ecce homo loving the man Christ who suffered for me, me alone, personal, relational theology,

And Medieval Ontology of transcendence de-territorializing bodies – words floating out from territory of capitalist repression – prison – words of resilience and ideals,

And yoga - nirvana of liberation from world - not yoga nirvana in samsara (world of suffering and phenomena),

And monad – Essentialism – Wittgenstein, atomistic, a-priori, unrelated reality more akin to inmate incarcerated incarnation than existential, relational outer communal world (ideas and people outside vs. self-contained),

However, Existentialism – existence precedes essence – subjectivity – adherence to no abstract absolutes so constant growth – Buddha – relationship to involvement – choices determine nature – process theology = action – Viktor Frankl – action and choices – (what if moral choice not offered?) (Poverty and prison) – not true only degree of moral choice – frees us from fatal sin, quietism (bourgeoisie philosophy),

And *Being and Nothingness* (Sartre) more so than *Being and Time* (Heidegger) - because Being is more implied and necessary than Becoming when life and death (nothingness) is at stake as in prison.

And how *Being and Time* explains how “Dasein,” (“being –in-the-world”) leads to history as the “spirit-in-time” formula. This creates an active, analytic of being so that we can apply this to “being-in-prison.” This formula extends to a phenomenology of prison, where “structures of experiences and consciousness” are made up of the crisis of punishment and suffering,

And ascetics of captivity and the Sufi path of the heart co-existing with Christian partisanship – with the poor and revolution – not Caesar – focused specialty – prison theology,

And aseity – of and from self – autodidact – self-taught - the fearless moral vision and conviction of subjective relational theology,

And Buddhist sociability – ambient music – democratic nonviolence – universal mind coexisting with Mikhail Bakhtin – fringe revolutionaries like Christian partisans – unlike Buddhist universal proletariat of Marx,

Mikhail Bakhtin & anxious energy of rebellious youth & disconnected society = revolutionary impulse,

Unlike inner most being – Samadhi is deep concentration, bliss, beyond phenomena, the “still small voice within”- the God within – reality is that,

Like being in the world and using Martin Buber’s *I and Thou* analytic as

I and it = prison

I and you = ordinary reality

(bourgeoisie empire sensibility and comfort)

I and thou = the word and community.

Epistemology (theory of knowing) = word, community.

The word is subjective vision integrated into loving supportive community (one based in service and sacrifice).

Base Ecclesial community

Early Christian community

Community of the word and consciousness

Ashram is a stage of life as well as a house of God (community).

As I became...

Alternative Systems

by Matthew Holsinger

“The focus of prison theology is the personal and individual relationship each prisoner can have with God.” - Elizabeth Haysom from “Prison’s Door to Freedom”

Introduction

This piece is meant to shed light on the possibilities beyond our current systems and paradigm; both those that are actively being developed and those contained as seeds within each one of us. It is primarily for those who are disillusioned with the current state of our world and have yet to be exposed to resonant alternatives. For years, I floundered in this in-between stage of knowing. I wanted nothing to do with the ways of mainstream society and yet I had no clue about or exposure to viable alternatives. So, I write these words that they might be a beacon that could inspire us all to imagine and co-create a more beautiful world for all our relations.

My insight into how a more beautiful world can be created is based on, and limited by, my perspective as a person who is of European-descent, able-bodied, gender normative (almost completely), heterosexual, middle-class, a citizen of the United States of America and male-bodied. These privileges that I was born into, along with the ways I have chosen to focus my time and energy, have provided me with incredible opportunities to explore many possibilities beyond the current status quo.

I feel a deep responsibility to share and give back of the experiences I have had because of the privileges I was born into. I cannot deny these privileges, but I can choose to transform how I make use of them. I choose to be uncomfortable in the awareness of my privilege and let that awareness lead to greater empathy. With this empathy, I understand that had my circumstances, skin color, nationality, etc. been different, I could be in prison right now.

So, in a way, I am these people in prison and they are me, the only difference is the circumstances I was born into. As Lilla Watson, an indigenous Murri artist, activist and academic (from so-called Australia) has so clearly said “If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.” So, I write this piece with the clear understanding that all our liberations are bound up together, and this is one of the many imperfect ways I continue this work.

Grounding/Framework

The purpose of Jesus the Liberator, as I understand it, is to support people in prison in the development of their relationship with God or Goddess, Creator, the universe, the divine mystery, source or whatever language they use and of their personal prison theology by providing resources, tools, encouragement and love. The approach is relational, so there is no one size fits all solution. We all have the same basic needs and desires, however, as we each have different personal, familial and cultural backgrounds, experiences and stories, those needs may be met in different ways. In order to understand what kind of support someone needs, we must enter into a loving and compassionate relationship with this person. I understand the divine love that flows through and between us to be the basis for relational theology - which proposes that God is not above and beyond us, but rather within and between us. That not just our existence, but also that of God is dependent on relationship.

I believe that the divine permeates everything; that to fully develop our connection to divinity we must look not only outside ourselves, but also within; and that humans are a crucial link in the relationship between the physical realm and that of spirit and the divine. This concept is found throughout the myths of many of the spiritual traditions around the world. The bible says we were creat-

ed in the image of God. In Hinduism, one expression is the Sanskrit word, greeting and farewell “namaste” whose spiritual significance is “The life force, the Divine, the self, the Lord in me is the same as in all others” or “the divine in me recognizes the divine in you.” In Buddhism, it is stated that all beings have the Buddha nature as their core essence. In the worldview of many indigenous traditions, interconnectedness of all life and the divine is foundational. The mythologist, author and storyteller, Michael Meade, who draws from stories from all over the world, speaks often of the concept of each soul’s genius and inner nobility.

How do we do the work of finding, developing and expressing our inner genius, nobility, light and divinity? Meade contends that struggle, turmoil, marginalization and challenges make for fertile ground in which to discover and embody this divinity within us. I have faced many difficult situations in my life, and I have also been blessed to be unconditionally loved by my family, which has allowed me to experience firsthand how the possibility for transformation expands exponentially when one is held and supported in this way. How can we build a justice system in which each person whose actions have harmed another is supported to undertake this transformative work? How can we transform not just those involved with harm and conflict, but also the underlying conditions and circumstances that contributed to and allowed the harm to happen to begin with? What would it look like if we built our society with the purpose of meeting the needs of all individuals and communities through relationships based in love?

I have been studying, researching, exploring and experimenting with what this might look like for the last few years. I have had the amazing opportunity (at least partially due to my privilege) to be able to visit communities, projects and people who are all working on what I call “Alternative Systems.” I define Alternative Systems as “strategies for meeting human needs outside of the mainstream or dominant systems, which focus on bringing harmony, vitality and love into our relationships with ourselves, each

other, all creation and the divine mystery.” I believe life is all about relationships, and the survival of our species and life as we know it on this planet depends on bringing health to “Mitakuye Oyasin” (all my relations) as the Lakota language succinctly expresses this worldview of interconnectedness.

That all life is interconnected is true on many levels. It can be understood on a physical level that any change in an ecosystem has an effect on the other elements in that system. This principle extends into other realms. Many of us, for instance, have experienced the shift in energy when someone experiencing strong emotions – whether it be anger, happiness, sadness, fear, excitement or another feeling – enters the room, the vibration of the entire room changes. This concept extends to the realms of soul and spirit as well.

The challenge of our time is to take this understanding of interconnection and apply it in the healing of our relationships in order for the needs of all members of all the kingdoms in our local and planetary communities to be met in health and harmony. To do this, we must first understand our needs as humans. I understand that we have five “bodies” that need attending to, or five aspects of our being which have needs: physical, sexual, emotional, spiritual and intellectual. These different bodies are also completely entangled, overlapping and connecting; what meets one need in a healthy and balanced way cannot help but contribute to fulfilling another. How can we learn to meet these human needs outside the dominant systems of control, violence, exploitation, oppression and extraction which degrade all elements in the system? One answer lies in relational theology: the transformational power of bringing Love into our connections to embody and express the divinity within each one of us. When we become aware of all our relationships and focus on applying love to them, I believe transformational Alternative Systems will emerge.

I believe that the collective embrace of these Alternative Systems can only transpire through the construction of a new story, a new myth of what it means to live on this planet. A story of oneness

and interconnection which has roots in many traditional indigenous cultures - a thread of which runs through many, if not all, spiritual traditions. While it has indigenous and spiritual roots, this is a universal perspective, and "new" stories and myths are needed that will be crafted specifically for our current times. The immense power of story, myth and narrative to shape our realities must not be underestimated. So, I will include some of my story of what I have found on my journey as an introduction to the alternative systems currently being developed.

My Story

I was born naturally and without much complication in 1984 in Hagerstown, a small city in western Maryland. My family was stable and loving. My Papa was a civil engineer; my Mama worked part-time as a nurse when she was not working full-time as a stay-at-home mom (the most important job in the world according to her). I am the youngest of three children with two older sisters. I grew up in "the country" in a house on a hill with about 30-40 other houses surrounded by farmland: fields of cows and corn and soy, orchards of plums and apples and peaches and more. The area lacked diversity culturally, racially, spiritually, politically, etc. My parents were devoted conservative Christians. They were frugal. They lived a relatively simple life focused on relationship and quality time rather than materialism and accumulation. I lived a privileged life sheltered from much of the ills and suffering of the world. TV was limited, movies were "wholesome" and music was almost completely Christian. I am very grateful for many of the things imparted to me by my parents and family.

My life is and has been one of great privilege; socially, economically, racially, sexually, regarding gender, ability and most any other area one could imagine. Even with all this privilege, and the experiences that went along with it, I felt dissatisfaction. Long before I understood the ways of the world, I felt in my soul that

my needs were being met at the expense of other people, cultures, animals, forests, ecosystems, etc. I never felt, experienced or understood the religion of my parents and my family. I was disgruntled and rebellious. I was also a bully. I made fun of other kids and used my stature in the world to bring others down.

When I started smoking weed at the age of 16 (not the first time; the first time was when I was 12 or 13 and was caught by my parents), everything changed. I had an epiphany, and the things that I knew in the depth of my being became much more apparent on a tangible level. Through these experiences I gained a whole new perspective about the world, our civilization and my place in it. I could not understand why there was so much suffering in the world or why the political, economic and “justice” systems seemed to contribute to that suffering rather than to mitigate it.

I realized my values did not align with those of the broader society (consumerism and accumulation) nor with those of my family (contemporary protestant Christianity). With this new perspective, I abandoned the expectations to get an education, get a good job, get a wife, have kids, buy a house and fill it with stuff: “the American dream.” I began to figure out how to live outside of the dominant culture.

I quickly realized that I could sell marijuana in order to smoke for free. I also found a counterculture in the jam band music scene that had spawned from the hippy movement in the 1960’s, and I started experimenting with any drugs I could get my hands on. This behavior caught up with me quickly. I was arrested for possession of marijuana after being pulled over while driving to a party near my high school. Because I have white skin, I was not seen as “criminal” and because I had a supportive family that would advocate for me. I did some community service and the crime was expunged from my record. Without these privileges this story would have been much different. My entire life would be radically different. It took me many years to come to this awareness.

Life continued much the same as before my arrest, and I prepared to go to the University of Maryland in the fall of 2002. I thought that the higher education system would offer me more answers and options than those which my homogenous, small-town, rural high school had. While there was more diversity and opportunities, my focus shifted immediately towards developing relationships that would enable me to continue partying, smoking, drinking and experimenting with psychedelic substances and other drugs.

After two years of an ever-intensifying relationship with drugs, music, festivals and partying, I had worn myself down. I had gotten so high and become so ungrounded that I had what I have come to call a “hallucinogen-fueled manic episode” that verged on schizophrenia. Part way through the fall semester of my junior year, after finally declaring my major as criminal justice, I dropped out of school.

I was ashamed, confused and devastated. I moved back to my parent’s house and was enveloped in their immense, unconditional support, but my world was shattered. I had failed in my pursuit of the only viable alternative to the status quo that was apparent to me. This way of life had led to more problems and imbalances than I could have imagined. I knew I could never go back to the wasteland of the dominant narrative and systems I had left behind; however, I could not see any other way forward. I fell into deep hopelessness, despair and depression. Winter was approaching quickly, and the days were getting shorter. I barely left the house and I slept the days away sinking deeper and deeper into my despair and sorrow with no light at the end of the tunnel.

It was then that I decided I would end my life. I started stockpiling the antidepressant drugs that were being administered to me. I researched how much I would need to take in order to kill myself. I scrounged together all the drugs and alcohol I could find in the house along with a vast quantity of antidepressant pills and ingested it all.

To my surprise I opened my eyes the following morning to my dad waking me up. I had survived. What was I going to do now?

After working to regain some stability and semblance of normalcy in my life, I quickly returned to the party scene and marijuana business with many of my old friends and habits. I held a job moving pianos while also selling weed. After a few years I yearned for something new and different. I moved to Colorado with some friends. Not long after I moved, my friend and I went to Florida for a music festival. I met an amazing woman there and we fell deeply in love. She lived in California, and we started communicating continuously and traveling back and forth from Colorado and California to see each other and go to parties and festivals. It was wild, beautiful and completely unsustainable. I had left my depression behind and was approaching heights I had never known before; it was wonderful and dangerous.

The troubles began showing themselves again at one particular festival in Colorado. We got some really amazing and beautiful LSD and got really high. I was on top of the world; we were having a blast, acting as fools, spending money, joking, making connections, dancing, being silly. It was terrific, and then I started making rash decisions. My girlfriend and I got “engaged” (with a blinky glow ring). My roommates could see I was losing my mind (again) and conflict ensued. I was determined to go to the next festival in Michigan and made many poor decisions in the execution of that desire. We had a wonderful time at the festival. While there I had the great idea to expand my business and start selling LSD in addition to Marijuana, and I bought a whole slew of it. It didn't take long for this foolishness to have consequences as we were pulled over in Nebraska on the drive home; the car was searched and everyone in the car was arrested for the hash, LSD and psilocybin (psychedelic mushrooms) they found. We were charged with three Class A felonies for possession with intent to distribute: each charge carrying a 1-20-year sentence.

I spent a week in jail until my parents, in their rock-steady loving support, secured and financed a lawyer to take my case and arrange for my bail to be paid. My dad then flew to Colorado to collect me as the mess I was and bring me back to Maryland. I went through a month-long inpatient rehab program in inner city Baltimore. This was no resort; I met people who were desperately addicted to crack, heroin and alcohol. Many of them came from historically oppressed and marginalized communities steeped in these problems. They did not have the safety net of a stable family to fall into. This experience vastly expanded my perspective, because I had never been so intimately exposed to people and communities so deeply affected by these problems. Yet I was still largely insulated and protected from the hopelessness of those I met there because of the resources, support and love I was held in.

I ended up moving to California during this legal process so that I could serve my probation (if that were the outcome) there and be with my girlfriend. In the end, my lawyer told me that the arresting officer wasn't cooperating with the prosecutor; I never had to go to court or return to Nebraska, and I pled to a misdemeanor charge of "intent to possess psilocybin." The punishment was a thousand dollar fine and a month probation. We all thought it was a miracle, which in one sense it was. It was certainly incomprehensible from my perspective at the time. It was not until later that I realized the role the privilege of white skin and financial resources played in this drama.

So, free from my legal troubles, I was again able to choose not to lean into the work that could have brought about a radical transformation. I took steps towards building my new life in California with support from my girlfriend and a friend who let us stay in his living room. I started working a straight job again and continued my party habits because that was the culture in which I continued to surround myself. It was not long before I picked up my old work in the marijuana trade.

This time, I had access to new sources for quality product at

low California prices as well as my connections on the east coast who would pay significantly higher prices leaving room for large profits. This is when I really started making money, and I was sucked back into the consumerist, materialist economy. The parties were more extravagant. The drugs flowed more freely (although I had finally learned that I could not abuse psychedelics like mushrooms and LSD without drastic consequences, so I stuck [mostly] to alcohol, MDMA, cocaine and ketamine). I took my friends and clients out to lavish dinners. I traveled extensively, flying all over the states and beyond. I bought anything I wanted or that caught my eye. I filled my life with stuff. Having a surplus of cash allowed me to pursue accumulating things in a way that had never even been attractive to me before. I had been pulled back into the consumerist culture that I wanted to leave behind, albeit through an alternative and illegal pathway.

While my life became more and more materialistic, I was also consuming more and more alcohol, drugs and food. I became a raging yet functional alcoholic. I drank at least five or six beers every day and would often mix in wine and/or liquor. I was surrounded by and contributing to creating a culture where abusing drugs was normal and habitual. Almost anytime I gathered with friends in a social setting, some kind of white powder was consumed.

Although I avoided a breakdown like I had experienced before, my life was becoming more and more out of balance. I was overweight. I was inactive. I ate unhealthily. I was addicted to porn which deeply affected my sexual life and health. I had no tools for processing and dealing with my emotions in a healthy way. I had no conscious, intentional spiritual practice or community. I almost never pursued learning or actively educating myself. My life was a complete mess, yet I was able to maintain and keep the train wreck moving due to my income.

Throughout this time, I had many more close calls with law enforcement than I can detail here. The final straw came when a

client of mine was traveling from the east coast to pick-up a large order from me. He was pulled over and had about \$300,000 cash confiscated from him. I thought to myself: I have done well in this work, and I do not want to lose everything I have worked for or my freedom. So, I decided to leave it all.

It had been 13 years since I realized that I did not want anything to do with mainstream society and what it was offering me; 13 years of escaping from that which I did not want. 13 years before I finally started the work of imagining, envisioning, finding, exploring, experimenting with, and building the life I wanted to live. I did not know what was next, and I had no idea how much my life would change.

Transition to Alternative Systems

Out of this unknowing, I began my exploration into the kinds of alternatives that have led to greater health and vitality in my life rather than more imbalance and harm. I am a student, connector and compiler of the many experiments that seek to develop a life in which we collectively commit to serving the needs of all rather than the greed of the systems which currently dominate the narrative. Only together can we weave these threads into the beautiful and diverse tapestry of the life of which we dream.

Something that is changing and evolving is never “done” or “complete.” Since everything is always, by nature, changing and transforming, this tapestry will never be complete. If we have basic trust in the flow and Love of the universe, we can let go of our compulsion to control, dominate, quantify and categorize in order to allow the beauty of what is emerging to shine through.

One of the first alternative systems to impact my life was an alternative to the dominant Christian narrative which is pervasive both in our broader culture and in my family. In the last six years, meditation, and a Buddhist meditation to develop concentration and wisdom, has been a beautiful alternative to the one-size-fits-all

approach that was handed down to me.

Vipassana can be translated as “insight” or “to see reality as it really is.” There are many Buddhist meditation practices and techniques that have been developed to lead to insight or vipassana. The technique that I first learned is simple, with awareness and equanimity as the cornerstones: one becomes aware of their breath and the sensations felt on their body and maintains the balance and harmony of their mind whether these sensations are pleasurable or painful, exhilarating or excruciating. The meditator lets go of attachments, craving and aversion to alleviate suffering. This practice has been a powerful tool to help me shed the conditioning of a culture which is out of touch with reality in order to respond from my center, my true-self and the divinity within me rather than unconsciously reacting to the circumstances, interactions and situations I encounter in my day to day life.

There are many resources for those in prison to develop meditation or other spiritual practices, although they are not always readily accessible. The North American Vipassana Prison Project and other groups teach meditation courses in prisons. *We're All Doing Time* by Bo Lozoff is a manual of Eastern spiritual practices and theory including, but not limited to, meditation, hatha yoga (physical exercises), breathing exercises, chakras, prayer, etc. This book is distributed freely to those in prison. The Prison Yoga Project distributes books for developing a yoga practice and goes into prisons to teach yoga asanas (exercises) and train those imprisoned to teach yoga as well. There are many other organizations that give books on spirituality to those in prison.

Many aspects of one's life in prison are regimented, structured and watched over; so while it may be helpful for some, imposing a rigid, dogmatic and hierarchical spirituality in prisons isn't always the best way to open up pathways for transformation. True recovery and rehabilitation have the chance to take root when different options and alternatives of spiritual practices are offered and people are held in unconditional love and support to find what

resonates and develop their own personal connection to the divine mystery in order to transform themselves from the inside out.

Community Accountability

As I have stated, at the core of my spirituality (and that of many traditions) is the idea of interconnectedness, of the bond of love between all. What would an alternative to our punitive justice system, based in these principles of love and interconnectedness look like? How can we bring alive the notion that to be whole all parts (both the one who was harmed and the one who did the harming) need healing?

The members of our beloved community stuck behind bars in the Prison Industrial Complex would certainly stand to benefit from an alternative to our current dehumanizing, degrading and humiliating prison system, an alternative based in love and focused on healing. Fortunately, there are many fine folks who have been developing alternative systems of justice such as community accountability, restorative justice and transformative justice.

I was exposed to these alternative justice practices during a trip I took in 2017 to visit different communities, projects and people working on alternative systems. Many of the communities I visited were studying and using a system of communication called Nonviolent Communication or NVC. NVC was developed in the West by psychologist Marshall Rosenberg starting in the 1960's when he found traditional therapies to be lacking. Rosenberg acknowledges that in his travels he found languages in different parts of the world which made it almost impossible to not speak "nonviolently." These languages and cultures are inherently more aligned with the principles of oneness and interconnection.

NVC is a way of observing objectively, speaking from the heart, owning our feelings, understanding our needs and making requests without coercion in order to make life more wonderful for all. It involves unlearning the cultural tendencies to blame oth-

ers and to deny us choice, while learning to empathize with both ourselves and others. The language itself is less important than the essence or way of being that is exemplified when one integrates this practice into their life.

The process itself involves four steps. The first is objectively observing and conveying what happened. Secondly, the feeling(s) and emotion(s) that arose during the incident are noted and expressed. Next, we search for the need that was met or unmet that is connected to those feelings. And finally, a request (not a demand) is made that would make life more wonderful with no attachment to whether the request is granted.

Community Accountability is the notion that a community can hold its members accountable to the norms and agreements of said community without outside enforcement by institutions such as police, courts and prisons. There are many different models of community accountability, and each community that I visited had a slightly different process for conflict resolution/transformation/engagement. Two models of community accountability are Restorative and Transformative Justice which have both influenced and inspired each other as they continue to develop.

Restorative Justice practices involve bringing together all stakeholders (those affected by a conflict or harm done) to determine how each person can find clarity, understanding, healing, resolution and restoration. Its focus is on restoring what has been broken due to a conflict or harm. It involves getting input from all parties about how to make amends, what restitution there needs to be and how to heal the people involved as well as the broader community.

Transformative Justice expands the scope of the healing that needs to happen. It focuses not just on the specific harm done, but also on the norms and cultural circumstances that created the conditions in which one was compelled to harm another to meet their needs. It honors the fact that we are products of our given circumstances and in order to transform ourselves we must also do

the work of transforming the community norms and culture and vice-versa. One way to make amends and/or restitution in a Transformative Justice process is to work towards creating norms and guidelines within the relationship, community and/or organization that would preemptively mitigate the likelihood of harm being done in the first place.

Imagine how prisons would be transformed if prisoners were fluent in these systems of communication and conflict engagement. How about if the guards, administrators and the entire staff were trained in these practices? Imagine a world where our entire society is engaged in transformative and restorative ways of being together in harmony and in conflict.

I have experienced firsthand the power of these practices both within myself and in conflict with my community. When I take responsibility for my actions while also acknowledging the broader cultural context and influence, I am empowered. I know what I need to change within myself, and I can also see more clearly the shifts needed to create conditions in which it is easier to live in harmony together. I feel a deep responsibility to do my part to ensure that these tools can be accessible and widely shared both inside and outside of prisons. These powerful practices of transformation help those engaged with them become more deeply connected with themselves, see more clearly the perspectives of others around them and contribute to the health and vitality of the entire community.

Intentional Communities

Intentional Community is another alternative that has deeply impacted my life. Intentional communities are places where people live together for a specific purpose and/or to embody shared values and principles. This intention could be as simple as saving money or as broad as changing the world. Communities have different purposes such as raising their children outside the influ-

ence of the dominant system, developing off-grid systems, working on social justice issues, doing inner emotional and spiritual work, creating meaningful dialogue across traditional lines of division or any combination of these and many others.

In my experience, many intentional communities have formed in order to further develop other alternative systems. These systems include integral nonviolence, permaculture, regenerative agriculture, ecoculture, traditional crafts, sharing, unschooling, artisanship, passive solar (and all kinds of alternative) energy systems, radical honesty/fierce vulnerability, healing, self-sufficiency, simplicity, natural building, gift economy, primitive skills, return economy and many, many more.

Each community has its own specific skills, experience, focus and personality. There is often a clear awareness that, in order to better meet their own needs, they must also consider the needs of all others with whom they share their place: animals, plants, fungi, minerals and all elements present. So, these communities seek to bring the community into healthier and more vital relationships.

Many of these communities exist in isolated, rural areas so there is little public exposure. I do not know how or exactly when I came to know about Intentional Communities; I was seeking out alternatives, and the privileges I was born into allowed me more freedom and time to explore and less stress and trauma. Even given all that, it took a long time for me to discover these communities. It seems like it is a privilege to even know that they exist, let alone have the time and means to visit and explore the alternative experiments happening in these places. The capital needed to access land and start an intentional community and the vast disparity of wealth between people of European descent and those who are melanin-blessed (aka people of color, aka people of the global majority [POGM]) in the United States of America due to a legacy (that continues today) of racism, genocide, land-theft and slavery make it so that this opportunity is primarily available to white folks with privilege.

There are some notable exceptions that I have come across which are worth highlighting. While not explicitly called an Intentional community “Soul Fire Farm is a BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and People of Color) centered community farm committed to ending racism and injustice in the food system.” They honor their ancestors and their current and ancestral connection to the land. They invite diverse communities to share skills and train the next generation of activist farmers, strengthening movements for self-determination, food-sovereignty, justice and collective liberation. They are also helping to create pathways for reparations.

WILDSEED Community Farm & Healing Village is “an emerging Black and Brown-led, feminine-centered, queer-loving, earth-based intentional community, organic farm, healing sanctuary, and political and creative home forming on 181 acres in Millerton, NY, 2 hours north of NYC.” The land that WILDSEED stewards is amidst and surrounded by mountains, wetlands, a river and forests. They are committed to creating and maintaining a safe space for BIPOC, LGBTQ folks, people affected by the criminal (in) justice system and others on the frontlines of ecological disruption. I’m sure there are other examples of communities created by people who have overcome the systemic racist oppression of this country to manifest their visions and build a more beautiful world, and there is much more work to be done to create systems that would create equitable possibilities and pathways for people of all backgrounds.

Over the last few years, I have been leaning deeper and deeper into life in community, sharing, justice, spirituality and alternative systems. I have yet to live in an Intentional Community, and I am excited to dive more deeply into community life and these alternative ways of being in the world. My partner and I are currently preparing to embark on a journey to explore possibilities for finding or building an Intentional Community that shares our values and vision. Part of that vision is creating pathways for exposure and accessibility to these communities and alternative systems

for people who may never even know they exist, let alone have the means to explore them. So often I find myself wanting to “be there already,” to transform things quickly and immediately, and I need to remind myself that it takes time to build the foundation of relationship, intimacy and trust needed for deeper, lasting transformation to take place.

Conclusion

Prisons are, in a way, a very different kind of intentional community. Those inside have no choice in being there, and the intent and purpose of prisons is punishment. What if the intention of our justice system was healing? To allow people to develop their skills and give them the experience that would help them contribute to a more beautiful way of being and interacting with the world? What if all the resources that currently end up in the hands of profiteering corporations who benefit from the current prison industrial complex were put towards giving those in need of healing the support, resources and opportunities to develop systems that would allow human life to flourish in harmony with the other elements of our ecosystems?

Because our current prison system disproportionately affects the people of the global majority (POGM), I imagine this kind of shift being a step towards a return economy in which financial resources are returned and redirected towards healing, as reparations, in a humble attempt to return what has been stolen from the native inhabitants of this land, the people who were kidnapped from Africa and enslaved here and the descendants of both of these groups of people. The dismantling of the racist and white supremacist systems that have dominated our world for hundreds of years can only transpire through meaningful relationship that can inform this work of reparations. The process of doing this work across historic lines of division, whether racial or political or otherwise, would, in and of itself be an incredible pathway for healing for all

those involved. When we remember that we are all connected, then it only makes sense to work towards the health and vitality of all the individuals and groups in our communities.

When we shift the focus of ourselves, our communities, our states, our religions, our spiritualities, our societies, our economies, our nations, our work, our play, our civilization, our worlds and our planet towards the embodiment of the interconnection of all our relations, all the people, all the species and all the elements that make up the web of life and death, we open to the Alternative Systems that create possibilities of collective liberation, healing and peace. Let us begin and continue this work together.

Resources and Notes

- The opening quote from Elizabeth Haysom was taken from an article entitled *Prison's Door to Freedom* published in *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* volume 46: Issue 2, pages 131-138. In that same volume, pages 128-130, Chris Barbera's article *Toward a Christian Prison Theology* appeared. Many papers like this exist in our archives but these two articles were the first externally published beginnings of our concept of Prison Theology.
- (Gandhian) Integral Nonviolence is a practice of extracting oneself from all the inherently violent systems of our world; doing inner work to eliminate the violence within and develop strength, discernment and perseverance; outer work to create systems for meeting our needs outside the dominant system and all the violence, exploitation, oppression and extraction that comes with it; and nonviolent resistance and activism to stop injustices to those who are oppressed, recognizing that until all are free, none are free.
- *The Gandhian Iceberg: A Nonviolence Manifesto for the Age of the Great Turning* by Chris Moore-Backman, online at <https://gandhianiceberg.com/buy-the-book/> or request a free or reduced-rate copy (gift economy style) by sending an email to

gandhianiceberg@gmail.com or write Be the Change Project, Attn:
The Gandhian Iceberg, 2055 McCloud Avenue, Reno, NV 89512

Ecological Care

- Permaculture is a design system based on principles learned from observing nature that draws from the wisdom of cultures, systems and peoples who understood life's natural principles and worked with the other elements in an ecosystem to support diversity, create vitality and live in harmony and abundance.
- *Permaculture in Prison* by Nicole Vosper (blogpost)
<http://www.emptycagesdesign.org/permaculture-in-prison/>
nicole@emptycagesdesign.org
- *One Straw Revolution* by Massanobu Fukuoka (book)
- *Gaia's Garden* by Toby Hemenway (book)
- Regenerative Agriculture is a set of systems for producing food that focuses on restoring the health of the water and land, increasing biodiversity and the vitality of all elements in the entire ecosystem.
- "Ecoculture is a new relationship with nature in which natural ecosystems are managed 'to enhance their production of useful products.'" <https://wildfoodgirl.com/2017/samuel-thayers-new-book-incredible-wild-edibles/>
- Unschooling is a system of education in which the student's interests and curiosities guide the course of study trusting that the necessary knowledge will be gained organically with the support of parents, mentors and community members.
- Simplicity is a practice of voluntary renunciation found in almost all spiritual traditions and practiced by both lay and monastic folks.
- *Waking Up to the Dark* by Clark Strand (book)
- *The Unsettlers: In Search of the Good Life in Today's America* by Mark Sundeen (book)
- Natural Building involves using materials readily available on the land to create structures and shelters instead of relying on

industrially produced materials which require huge energy expenditures and toxic substances.

Gift Economy/Reparations

- Gift Economy is an alternative economic model that trusts the emergence of life and emulates nature in that energy flows freely without an intermediary means of exchange.
- *Sacred Economics* by Charles Eisenstein (book)
- *The Moneyless Man* by Mark Boyle (book)
- *The Gift* by Lewis Hyde (book)
- *The Man Who Quit Money* by Mark Sundeen (book)
- Return Economy/Reparations involves the return of financial resources and land in an (woefully imperfect) attempt to repair harms; most notably in the U.S. the genocide and theft of land of the native inhabitants by European settlers and the U.S. government; and the kidnapping and enslavement of Africans for work on plantations.
- *The Case for Reparations* by Ta-Nehisi Coates (articles) <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/06/the-case-for-reparations/361631>

Intentional Community

- Soul Fire Farm (farm/community) 1972 NY HWY 2, Petersburg, NY 12138 518.880.9372 love@soulfirefarm.org <http://www.soulfirefarm.org>
- Foundation for Intentional Community, 1 Dancing Rabbit Ln. Box 23, Rutledge, MO 63563-9757, USA 800.462.8240, support@ic.org
Facebook.com/FoundationForIntentionalCommunity
Twitter.com/icDotOrg
<https://www.ic.org>
- Living Energy Farm (community focused on off-grid systems and regenerative agriculture) 1022 Bibb Store Road, Louisa, VA 23093 540.205.9815 livingenergyfarm@gmail.com

<https://livingenergyfarm.org>

- Anahata Education Center (community focused on emotional and spiritual inner and interpersonal work) 144 Anahata Circle Drive NE, Floyd, VA 24091 540.745.5811 anahata.edu@gmail.com <https://anahataeducationcenter.com>
- The Possibilities Alliance (community/experiment) 85 Edgecomb Rd., Belfast, ME 04915 - 207.338.5719

Spirituality

- Prison Yoga Project P.O. Box 415 Bolinas, CA 94924 <https://prisonyoga.org> (Yoga training + Yoga: A Path for Healing and Recover)
- Buddhist Association of the United States 2020 Route 301, Carmel, NY 10512 845.225.1819 (Buddhist Book Distribution)
- *We're All Doing Time* by Bo Lozoff, freely distributed by: The Human Kindness Foundation, P.O. Box 61619, Durham, NC 27715 USA 919.383.5160 humankindness@humankindness.org <https://www.humankindness.org>
- North American Vipassana Prison Project <https://na.prison.dhamma.org>, info@prison.dhamma.org

Nonviolent Communication

- Nonviolent Communication by Marshall Rosenberg Community Accountability/Restorative Justice/Transformative Justice.
- Centre for Justice & Reconciliation P.O. Box 17434 Washington, DC 20041 USA 703.481.0000 <https://www.restorativejustice.org>
- Restorative Justice Initiative P.O. Box 50174, Brooklyn, NY 11205-9996 <https://restorativejustice.nyc>

Other Resources

- Prison Activist Resource Center P.O. Box 70447 Oakland, CA 94612 510.893.4648 <https://prisonactivist.org>
- Critical Resistance 1904 Franklin Street, Suite 504, Oakland, CA 94612 510.444.0484 <http://criticalresistance.org>
- *The Revolution Starts at Home* (book)

Contact the author: Matthew Holsinger 14312 Barkdoll Rd. Hagerstown, MD 21742 240.389.0710 mattcoyote1042@gmail.com

Sojourner

by Gabrie'l J. Atchison

God Talking

Delores Williams defines theology as 'God-talk.' How do we talk about God? How do we experience God? And, how can we form an authentic and lasting relationship with a loving God? Based on Williams' definition of theology, then, a theologian is someone who engages in the creative work of 'God-talk.' As a theologian, I work to answer these questions for myself and, in collaboration with others, I apply theory to the ongoing struggle for peace and justice in society. When I am teaching or writing, I am often pulled to consider the harder questions in theoretical rather than practical (or even personal) ways. Here, I would like to rise to the challenge of considering my own spiritual journey without relying on the theories of other theologians or religious scripture. During my writing process, I realized that my path to a relationship with God was indeed through my connections with other people – a sentiment that resonates with the term, relational theology. Before providing my testimony, however, I wanted to define briefly, relational theology, prison theology and to show how the work of Jesus the Liberator Seminary builds a bridge between theory and activism.

Prison Theology is a dynamic process evolving from conversations – real and inspired – between inmates, activists, scholars and theologians. In *A Black Theology of Liberation* (1970), James Cone explains that all theology is contextual. Cone defines a Black Liberation Theology which comes out of the lived experience of African American people coping with ever evolving forms of racism from slavery into the modern day. Similar to Black Theology and other Liberation Theologies, Prison Theology was born in part out of the lived experience of people who are incarcerated. Different

from “prison ministry,” Prison Theology is a philosophy which can be used to support the work of those who care for the incarcerated.

Prison Theology,

- challenges a society addicted to violence and focused on crime and punishment
- disrupts a system which is designed to separate, dehumanize and break people
- personalizes connections with incarcerated persons
- And, places the lived experiences of incarcerated persons at the center of analysis.

In Relational Theology, the connection between God and humanity is considered reciprocal. Theologians suggest that through the formation of a relationship with God, we inevitably come to understand that our well-being and who we are as creative beings matter to God. Each of us, regardless of status in life or mistakes we have made, matters dearly to God. Therefore, the relational nature of Prison Theology becomes apparent in the methodology of Jesus the Liberator Seminary.

First, Prison Theology provides a foundation or a path for incarcerated people to connect with the Christian faith and to form a relationship with the God of their understanding. Through individualized connections in the form of correspondence, members of Jesus the Liberator Seminary used deep listening skills and non-judgmental acceptance to honor each person’s story. Facilitating a connection between people within and without of prisons, provides a lifeline for people who may not have many connections on the outside. Second, the curriculum offered by the Seminary provided opportunities for participants to explore their own “Spiritual Autobiographies” and encouraged them to study the historical and biblical figures who were incarcerated like Dr. Martin Luther King, Mahatma Gandhi, Daniel and Jeremiah, as sources of inspiration and inquiry. The “conversations” which emerged through these

interactions were then explored further in two books published by the organization. In this way, ideas and inspiration were spread through in-person and more distant connections.

Finally, the Seminary has created a pathway for many activists – some of whom were formerly incarcerated – to design and live out a transformative vision. People have been inspired to use their talents to do all they can in the service of social justice. For twenty-five years, through this organization, a small group of dedicated volunteers have served over 600 low-income students and incarcerated persons. Largely through correspondence, the organization reached people living in institutions in thirty-five states. Our publications and other books have been put into the hands of people in prison and have generated and inspired individual and group study and other connections the impact of which we may never know. We will have, in the summer of 2020, an archive chronicling the history of the organization and a dataset of the raw materials (letters, spiritual autobiographies and scholarly papers) of participants throughout the years. We are hoping that scholars, activists and clergy will visit us and draw greater understanding of Prison Theology. We hope they will become inspired to start projects of their own.

I find it worth noting that America currently incarcerates over 2.2 million of its own people. And, our country which has less than 5% of the world's overall population holds 25% of the world's prison population. The statistics are staggering, and incarceration is also very expensive – more expensive in many cases than prevention strategies would be. However, the numbers point out that our society values isolation, punishment and control more than restoration, rehabilitation and healing. Mass incarceration has its origins in the unwillingness of a slaveholding class to let go of people they once held as property, and has swallowed up generations of African Americans disproportionately; however, it is now a system that warehouses the poor, the young, the addicted and mentally ill of

all races. Prison becomes our answer to all the social problems we choose not to address.

A “Relational/Prison Theology” makes sense in a society where so many people are incarcerated and so many more are on parole or in other ways impacted by the criminal justice system. Further, it is worth mentioning that one role of the church should be to enter these spaces – not allowing the walls of the prison to serve as a barrier to our evangelism. Relational/Prison Theology works primarily to facilitate the spiritual liberation of incarcerated people. However, by reaching clergy and others who are called to serve God’s people, Prison Theology can help us change our consciousness and strengthen us in our roles as allies and advocates. Through these connections, we may be able to build a stronger Christian Church.

In conclusion, a Relational/Prison Theology recognizes prison walls as a liminal space. Our purpose is to make those walls permeable so that love can pass through; it disrupts the system and the undoing of God, by infusing love (over and above control) into the prison industrial complex; and, it replaces systems of domination with a system of justice that is restorative to individuals, to communities and to society.

Spiritual Autobiography

“I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. Like the bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus sideshows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves or figments of their imagination, indeed, everything and anything except me.” - Ralph Ellison, Invisible Man

“(T)here was no one to welcome me to the land of freedom. I was a stranger in a strange land; and my home, after all, was down in

Maryland, because my father, my mother, my brothers, and sisters, and friends were there. But I was free, and they should be free.”
Harriet Tubman to Sarah Bradford in Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman, 1868

Introduction

Jesus the Liberator Seminary asked each program participant to write a “Spiritual Autobiography” as a way to articulate her connection with the God of her understanding. My spiritual autobiography describes my connection to a loving, relational God. My goal here is to present my story as a path with three bends. Each bend ... each point in the story represents a snapshot of my evolution.

I want to start my story with a brief discussion of my social location. I am an African American woman who was born in one of the poorest zip codes in the United States, 10451 – the South Bronx, New York. I was born in the time of “Black is Beautiful,” “the Bronx is burning,” returning Vietnam vets, and a surprise visit from President Carter to bring awareness to the issue of urban blight. I came of age during the birth of hip-hop and the devastation of crack cocaine. Being female made me invisible in some ways and very vulnerable in other ways. A nonprofit organization with a goal of racial integration set my family on a trajectory of educational achievement as a way out. I credit my mother for raising my sisters and me to understand one principle “there but for the grace of God go I.” I have never once believed that I was somehow better than the circumstances from which I came. In fact, being rooted in struggle and in faith made me stronger than my cohorts who grew up in privilege.

After I achieved the goals of higher education, I realized that the world did not have a place for someone like me – a 28-year-old, working-class, black woman with a Ph.D. As such, I have spent many decades carving out spaces for myself and lend-

ing my talents to creative projects. As a student, I studied African American literature, history and culture, as well as Gender Studies, and I would later become an adjunct professor of Sociology. On the last leg of my educational journey, I returned to school to study religion at Yale Divinity School. Over the last twenty years, I have lived in Newark, Philadelphia, Dorchester and the greater DC area – and I learned that poor, black communities are all just like my own, with people struggling and coping in similar ways.

My life has given me a unique perspective on the suffering of poor people and the many forms of expression that suffering can take. I was recently reminded that compassion means to “suffer with” and conspire means to “breathe with.” My experiences with others have shaped me into a person who is interested in alleviating the suffering of others – suffering with them in solidarity and breathing with them in protest. *Can I hold the pain of others? Can I look at that pain without turning away?*

Three Bends in the Road

Keith

Many people who do not live in New York City believe that the inhabitants feel overwhelmed by or lost in the sheer volume of people. However, for the residents, the city feels like it is divided into neighborhoods based on geography and then again into communities based on connections like living in the same apartment complex, attending the same church or school, or extended family or one’s parents’ friendships. During the 1970’s and 1980’s my neighborhood was predominately black and Puerto Rican. A few older Jewish and Italian people remained after “white flight.” Mrs. Epstein was an elderly, retired ballerina who taught all the neighbor kids ballet from a folding chair. Life was fast-paced, busy, loud and raw.

Keith was around my age but had older brothers who were friends with my older sister. The younger ones of us would follow around and try to emulate the older kids. We would travel in large packs on public buses to the Grand Concourse to see a movie and go to White Castle afterwards. Or, we would go to the bowling alley to play video games and drink Cherry Coke fountain sodas. Keith did not go to my school, but he was in the neighborhood and he slowly became the thorn in my side. He teased me mercilessly. Keith and his brothers all had red hair – which was a rare thing for black people. Compared to his older brothers who were tall and attractive, he was short, freckled and always unkempt. He was a nuisance, interrupting girls' street games and just being around.

As we got older, things changed between Keith and me. Keith noticed the changes in my body because of puberty before they became of real concern to me. He shocked me, when he spontaneously kissed me, causing me to spill my lemonade Kool-Aid all over the kitchen floor. As preteens and as teens we would become intimate both physically and emotionally. After the sixth grade, I also started to attend a private school where people of color represented an extreme minority. The daily trip took me over an hour each way, and the time separated from my community expanded my worldview significantly. Around the same time, my parents' strained relationship finally broke and my father left the family. With my life in transition, the time I spent with Keith represented a lot more than it once did; he helped me feel grounded and connected.

I would often seek out Keith and spend time with him in his apartment. His life seemed very different from my own. He seemed to have no adult supervision. His home was always chaotic, lots of adults and unsupervised little kids, drugs, alcohol, porn on the television, people in fights and yelling at each other. He lived in a large apartment complex with a courtyard in the middle. One day we were sitting outside together and he pointed to an upstairs apartment. In the apartment, he said, there was a thirteen-year-old

girl, and men from the neighborhood were going a few at a time to “pull a train” on her (gang-rape). The violence of the situation was not lost even through the matter-of-fact way he delivered the statement, and I felt helpless, maybe he did too. We just sat there silently for a time.

Violence in the form of food deserts, mass incarceration, broken streets, implicit bias in health care and on and on, breeds the violence which is part of life for poor people in inner-city America. Police brutality, gang violence as well as family violence and sexual assault are accompanied by self-inflicted violence in the form of alcoholism and substance abuse. Victims are not met with care and compassion; instead, their behavior is criminalized or pathologized. Segregation is also a form of violence. The poor are left behind in neighborhoods where the city is most likely to dump toxins and process garbage. EMS, police and fire departments are slow to respond. Living in urban poverty can feel like being detached and abandoned in a wasteland. The moment at Keith’s complex haunted me. The sexual assault of girls and other horrors seem like dreadful side effects of a world where poverty and despair leave children to fend for themselves.

Keith worked on cars, and I loved that his hands and nails were always dirty. It seemed radical to me at the time. In a time before cell phones, I could always find him. If he were not in his apartment, he would be some place close working on someone’s car. Neither of us could drive, so we would just spend hours sitting in other peoples’ cars talking and listening to music. We never officially dated, but at some point, I decided it would be okay to depend on him. I think it was at the end of the ninth grade, I decided to ask Keith to pick me up from a friend’s party in one of the posh neighborhoods on the east side of Manhattan. I walked out to the street, totally expecting to be disappointed and there he was with some helium balloons he had stolen to give to me as a gift (I guess in lieu of flowers). At that point, I realized that I really did love him.

I relied on visits with Keith less and less as school and my new life started to become my whole life. Once I moved on to college, we lost touch. Keith represented many ‘firsts’ for me, but he is a significant part of my story as a deep experience of mutual love.

Wally

In 1994, I was in my first year of graduate school. I volunteered to teach literacy as part of a community outreach program in Philadelphia called the Pan-African Studies Community Education Program (PASCEP). That year, the PASCEP program took a group of us to Graterford, a men’s State Prison outside Philadelphia to celebrate Kwanzaa with a group of inmates.

I like to describe my South Bronx community as “prison-adjacent.” In the 1970’s, we experienced crime associated with drugs and alcohol. No one would describe my neighborhood as “safe,” but crime seemed like a random occurrence, a difficult fact of life. There was a significant shift in all our lives once crack cocaine made its way into the inner city. Violent crime increased, gang membership provided a form of protection as well as a source of income for some, and police brutality, harassment and surveillance were the city’s response. Being female to a certain extent provided some cover from law enforcement. However, the way that the prison system swallowed up so much of the population could not be ignored. I knew of the sky blue city buses that took loads of men “upstate” and the buses that took many of my friends to see loved ones who were “locked up;” however, I did not have any first-hand experience until Graterford.

The staff at the prison made sure that their disdain for our presence was not lost on us. After many levels of screening, we finally made it to the cafeteria. We set up to welcome the men. I am not sure what it was about Wally that made him stand out, but I remember feeling like, “hey, I know you!” – when our eyes met. Later, we would revisit that moment and laugh about it. Wally and I talk-

ed for a while, and then it was time to go. I do not remember how, but I left there with information about how to stay in touch with him. As we made our way out of the prison, a few women complained, because the guards had stolen their leftovers ... and the bowls. We were encouraged to let it go and leave. Leaving someone you care about behind prison walls is quite an intense feeling.

Segregation is a wall which limits the mobility of poor inner-city residents and is held in place by the police. These walls breed apathy and shield the rest of the country from having to watch poor people suffer. And, as long as we can blame the poor for their own predicament, the less we have to feel bad about our own privilege. Prison then, becomes a final dumping ground for poor people who most likely have already suffered greatly throughout their lives. Prison walls protect us from having to care for poor people at all, once they are inside. As “adjacent” as my neighborhood was to prison, it would still have been possible for me to live my whole life without having any concern for the people living inside of prisons. How much harder must it be for middle class, white Americans to consider the lives of incarcerated people?

When I lived in Massachusetts, I volunteered with an organization called Aid to Incarcerated Mothers (AIM). We helped to load a van with children and babies going to visit their mothers in prison, five hours away. Someone told me that prisons with women are often farther away from the cities where most of the women reside than are men’s prisons – which is tragic. We only entertained the children and helped workers before the trip. I cannot imagine what the task of separating children from their mothers at the end of visiting hours must have been like. While I lived in Philadelphia, I also visited Muncy, a women’s state prison in Pennsylvania. My sister and I organized a small group to facilitate a couple of workshops on women’s history and women’s empowerment. During one of our gatherings, I was floored when one of the women in the class said that she was sixteen and doing a life sentence. Muncy would be her life. She would grow old and die in that prison. Being able

to leave, knowing I could not bring that girl out with me, broke my spirit for a time.

Most of my experiences understanding the needs of people in prison came from being in a relationship with Wally. I read his long letters and tried to meet his enthusiasm and volume with my own letters, as I balanced school and work. I knew how important our lifeline was to him. I learned how to send money and items, and also about how predatory the phone company could be and how just getting to talk to someone you love could possibly drain your entire income. Wally's family told me about a van that brought families from Philadelphia to the prison. Each of us paid \$30, I believe, for the round trip. The van driver would say a prayer for God to bless the "internal and external working parts" of the van. I always repeat these words to myself when I am nervous about an airplane, train or bus trip. We would listen to Philadelphia's old school radio station and sing or chat with each other on the way up and sit quietly with our thoughts on the way home.

Poverty is often a greater predictor of engagement with the prison industrial complex than crime itself; and yet, this is not because poor people are more deviant or violent than are other people. We live in a society that punishes poor people just for being poor. Justice is doled out in ways that are grotesquely uneven. Not only are not people with racial and class privilege held responsible for their actions, but courts often apologize to them for the disruption to their lives. In sharp contrast, poor people are held to a higher level of responsibility for their behaviors, bear the brunt of responsibility for things done to them by those in power and in many cases end up in prison for no reason whatsoever. There are no "youthful transgressions" for poor children of color. Negative behaviors in school that used to end in suspension have now become a "school to prison pipeline." Injustice is not a "victimless crime." Accountability rolls downhill. As those at the top sidestep responsibility, people at the bottom suffer disproportionately. What keeps me up at night is the idea that in our effort to incarcerate

over 2 million Americans, that we have locked away an engineer, scientist, musician, artist or writer that would have potentially taken our society to the next level. Why are we so sure that only the privileged and those who have the most are the only people who are worthy of freedom and life?

Visiting a loved one in prison was hard. It was hard waiting. It was hard waiting for his number to be called; and it was hard seeing Wally being treated like a number. It was impossible leaving him there. In time, I cracked under the strain of being his connection to the outside world and the promise of a life we would build together when he got out. I tell my 22-year-old self that I did the best I could, but I am not really sure. When I ended things, I believe that Wally understood why. I think of Wally and his children often. Prison has a devastating impact on the individual inside and creates so much damage to families living through the experience with them.

Craig

By 2009, I had spent over a decade using my art and activism in resistance of violence against women and girls. I volunteered with rape crisis hotlines, domestic violence organizations and had written articles for women's publications. I was embedded in an insulated, queer/feminist/womyn-only existence – which I loved. As part of my journey, I was hired to do a focus group with women of color who had experienced domestic violence. I held two groups, one at an HIV/AIDS prevention organization in Boston and the other at the Women's Building in San Francisco. At the Boston gathering, I spent the majority of my budget providing food from the best soul food restaurant in Roxbury. The women were so pleased by the meal that they allowed me into their intimate stories and we had a very productive discussion.

During one of the focus groups in Boston, a woman described an attack where her husband beat her in the head with a

hammer. Her lack of affect as she told us this was startling. And, for some reason, this story planted a seed inside me. Whenever you talk to groups about domestic violence, people ask “Why did the woman stay?” After hearing this woman’s story, I began to ask, “Why did that man beat someone he claimed to love with a hammer?” Was it possible to turn the lens around and wonder what set of circumstances lead to violent behavior in men? Other “women’s issues” I would explore like the spread of HIV/AIDS and teen pregnancy also focused on women and girls, asking them to change their behavior. Women and girls were being asked to adapt to, avoid or escape men, and men were not being examined or held responsible for their actions – nor was anyone asking men to change.

Out of this attempt to examine “women’s issues” differently, came an exploration of my own father’s behavior. What had happened to my father that caused him to be abusive towards his own wife and children? I had to speculate because secrecy is a big part of the culture of my family. That said, I had two pieces of information. I knew that my father was physically abused by my grandfather and that in the 1940’s or 1950’s, he was sent to a Catholic boarding school in South Carolina. His school made the news for being the first of its kind to allow black children. Because in this kind of environment a child predator would have unfettered access to victims, it does not seem farfetched to believe that my father experienced sexual abuse in that institution. To our best understanding of this issue, child abuse advocates believe that one in six boys are sexually abused. If abuse happened to my father, he would have had no language for what happened and absolutely no support for his pain. His abuse may have led to a number of struggles throughout his life. My father had a lot of bluster, but if I think about his behavior objectively, he definitely had an eating disorder, struggles with addiction and violent behavior – all these things make sense in the context of him as a survivor.

My father died in 2010. And, I will never know whether I am right or wrong. However, considering these questions opened

up a path of healing and forgiveness for me. Most importantly, I began to feel that it was more important to consider perpetrators as complicated people who harm others because of their own pain, rather than as monsters we need to discard. Each of us should be held accountable when we harm others, but there is also room for grace, compassion and even forgiveness (in time) for even the worst of us. Collectively, we need to understand more about the stories of perpetrators so we can have more informed prevention strategies.

In my quest to know more about black men and child sexual abuse, I read everything I could find about male survivors of which there was very little. There were even fewer resources about men of color. As background, I had to gather information from the handful of memoirs written by men of color survivors. I also interviewed a few men and wrote a book about what I discovered. Through this process, I began to believe that underlying many of our so called “women’s issues” were several men/boy issues that we as a society had failed to address.

I met Craig through my outreach efforts looking for male survivors who would share their stories with me.

Craig is a social worker, and as it turned out, his office is at the corner of 161st street and Morris Avenue. In 2010, I would soon head to divinity school in New Haven, and during the interim I moved back home to the South Bronx. For as long as I remember, the corner where Craig worked was that corner where people would line up on the street, early in the morning to get help from various social service agencies – the “welfare line.” Craig works in an office on the side of the building that had been turned into a Wellness Center to help people struggling with addiction. I interviewed Craig in his office.

In one of my classes in divinity school, we learned about a Korean concept called “han.” Han is your state of being when you are suffering. We watched a short video about a destitute family breaking rocks for a few pennies a day to make a living. The mother

needed to work from early in the day until late in the night, and eventually had to pull her son out of school to help out. There was an image of a little boy, in a crouched position, breaking rocks in the hot sun beside his mother. Han provided the language for this young boy's suffering, day in and day out with little to no hope for a change.

People in the South Bronx fall into two categories. There are the people who rush in a daily parade to the corner of 161st Street and Morris Avenue from six to eight am to catch buses or to walk the quarter mile to the subway station. There are crowds of people moving fast, going to jobs and heading to school. New Yorkers are rushed and impatient. This frenetic way of being can be shock to the system for people like me who move out of the fast-paced environment and try to return from time to time. People in the other category are those who do not work or cannot work for whatever reason. Most rely on some form of assistance – the care of family or friends or aid from the government. Their lives are organized around waiting – waiting in lines for social services, waiting in line for food or for medical care. They can face daily indignities and a lack of respect for their persons and for their time. Some people are crushed by the weight of a life where you have to choose between being ignored and being viewed in the harsh light of negative judgment. Han for me describes the spirit that exists when this despair is combined with alcoholism, drug addiction or undiagnosed mental illness. Craig is one of the lovely souls working to heal men who are broken.

Craig told me his story of abuse at the hands of an older family member. Then he told me about his promiscuity which may have been in part his way of working through the pain. He said, over time, his different girlfriends had upwards of twenty abortions between them. I am firmly pro-choice, but in that moment, I mourned for the destruction of lives – those who are here and those who had the potential to be here. Craig told me that he sees a number of male clients who have disclosed incidents of childhood

sexual abuse. The abuse, or rather the unresolved issues caused by the abuse, was often a factor leading to substance abuse.

During that interview, I could feel Craig's pain, and also the pain of the men who came to see him for help. The pain felt bigger than the room could contain. I wrote my book with the caveat that there would be so much more to explore about the topic. In the past decade, there has been a greater cultural understanding of the sexual abuse of boys. Survivors of clergy abuse have led the charge and raised awareness about this issue. Rape crisis centers train their volunteers and workers to provide support for men who were abused as children. Through my exploration of black male survivors and my connection to Craig, I learned the value of releasing judgment in the work of healing individuals and communities.

Each snapshot in my story represents an important trajectory in the development of my consciousness around human suffering. Poverty and racism can create impossible circumstances for people, especially children – and the circumstances breed violence – self-inflicted, state-sanctioned, abusive and deadly.

Who I am in Relation to God

My understanding of God has evolved through my understanding of (or rather my acceptance of) my role in the world – my purpose.

Each of us has a role. I believe that my role is to listen – lovingly, intentionally, compassionately, and without judgment. Other people will fight for larger, structural changes to prisons, advocate for prisoners and work on changing policies and laws. And, others will work to change the hearts and minds of those who oppress or abuse others.

I listen. Sometimes it is my official role – like when I worked on a rape crisis hotline or served as the receptionist at an agency serving homeless men. I have interviewed survivors of

domestic violence and sexual abuse. I have prayed with people. However, mostly I am a stranger waiting for a bus, someone in line at the store, or a passenger in a cab. Once, the guy who came to deliver my pizza stopped to tell me his story. I am not sure what it is about me that puts people at ease. But I am happy about it, and I take my role seriously. I listen. It is what I can do. It is how I do God's work.

In many ways, my work with Jesus the Liberator Seminary represents the culmination of my years of listening to others. Mass incarceration touches so many lives of the people I have known and intersects seamlessly with the social issues I care the most about. The idea of being part of this “inside/outside” partnership appealed to me instantly.

Because I have engaged in loving communion with a diverse cross section of humanity, I have come to believe what the Bible says in 1 John 4:8 that “whoever does not know love does not know God, because God is love.” **God is love.** *But what is love?* Love is the energy found in the connection between people. Forgiveness, compassion, empathy, care and social justice activism all emanate from that energy. Violence, abuse, separation and apathy can cut off that energy. The ability of prison to create walls between us and to strip away a person's humanity makes prison a “hot spot” for the undoing of God – as well as the perfect space to roll up one's sleeves and get to the business of doing God's work.

I also believe that God is deeply impacted by human suffering. We are all called by God to use our gifts and talents to alleviate the suffering of others – especially the most vulnerable. Collectively, our purpose is two-fold; we are called to “break the yoke” of all forms of oppression and we are called to encourage those who are causing the suffering of others to repent, which means “to turn” from their ways. As individuals, we have a life-long journey of forming a loving, authentic relationship with God. The love we share and the energy we generate through connections with other people is how we love God.

Notes:

These are two great sexual abuse resources for men – www.lin6.org and www.rainn.org.

On forgiveness - Forgiving someone who abused you is your own choice. If you choose to forgive your perpetrator, do it at your own pace and do not let others make you feel bad if you can't get there right away. Forgiveness does not condone behavior, nor does it mean that your pain isn't real. The only reason to forgive someone is for your own peace of mind – not for the sake of the perpetrator.

Further Reading List:

Baker-Fletcher, Karen (2006) *Dancing with God: The Trinity from a Womanist Perspective*.

Cone, James (1970) *A Black Theology of Liberation*.

Gutierrez, Gustavo (1971) *A Theology of Liberation*.

Heyward, Carter (1982) *The Redemption of God: A Theology of Mutual Relation*.

Oord, Thomas (2005) *Relational Holiness: Responding to the Call of Love*.

Orpheus Bones

by Chris Barbera

Is it blasphemous to say that the lives of my people hold precedence to Jesus? Who is Yeshua bar Joseph? My teacher held my soul in ransom. For times, time and half a time I walked the streets with him. Various accoutrements dangled from his dreadlocks, soft as lamb's wool – the Lamb of God: keys, bones and golden rings. Not the gold of the marketplace; his black skin brighter than the sun, his soul warmer and more encompassing, his presence fiercer than fear.

“What do you fear?”

“The other side.”

“You don't fear the other side; you fear that you can't take others with you.”

On the other side of prison is the life I fear, the life I love; the fear/love wall of separation consciousness. Which side was I on when I attained epiphany, Orpheus half-life, glance back, under/over world return again? Can I go home again? Is home any place? A holy land?

My teacher was a fighter (love within). My fighting was a teacher. I was from a family of fighters. I wanted to be a lover, the serenity of a yogi. My teacher, in Bob Marley's spirit, “was fighting for survival.” My teacher and I had a relationship. “A teacher is only as wise as the student” he would say. I did not receive instruction and training so much as I absorbed the transmission of soul, from one to another. The black soul life from time immemorial, brief departures in the pyramids and cities, washed over my white soul. What would remain of who I was and who would I become?

Metempsychosis (the passing of soul at death to another) - but could be transmission during life – death of old consciousness

into new – prison into relationship – bondage into liberation – I was Orpheus half streamed life of the dead - Saul evoking Samuel to divine instruction - Salem witches speaking underwater - Ulysses hearing voices from the wine dark sea, sirens and Hades. I was in theological relationship with the transmission of soul from death, that is, prison.

The last time I saw my teacher, this poor black homeless man in this rich coastal city named after St. Francis lover of the poor, he was standing in a soup kitchen line, outside Glide Memorial Church, on Easter Sunday. He was a king among the poor, smelling of urine and alcohol, not the pure unstained resurrected body but the Magdalene proletariat laity. I stood in radiant soulful awe, my heart aflame like the burning flame of Christ. He gave me the hieroglyphic keys and spoke agape Greek, an echo from a Neo-Platonic cave. “What do you love?”

The Delta of the Ganges
The Delta of the Nile
Even too the Euphrates

Winter nebula
Astronomical data
Theta Beta
Alpha Omega

And now turn your gaze to the Mississippi, the Amazon
and what lies in between

Betelgeuse
Bellatrix
Imhotep

Many tribes
Many visions of the infinite
And ladders unto heaven
Many stars, constellations, lights beyond our world, colors

Social organization
Construction
Foundation of the homes, temples, cornerstones
Written documentation to ensure equality, remembrance
Plentiful supplies of grain
Mathematical points of the stars
Positioning in the body
Equivalency of the connections
Unity of physics
Deep blue ocean currents
Phases of the lunar cycle
Light of the sun
Shells bones
Implements to build

What cometh Thoth of the head bride of
Wisdom
Bridge of the worlds
Waters of
Creation I
Uncreated I
Am is I
Is the door of the
Seers of the unity of all souls

To create and rise as the star in the Eastern Heavens,
Come now to recount our ways,
The ways of knowing and revolutions,

The transcriptions of the ancient texts (ancient ones),
Not to create out of all things nothing,
Nothing to rise, to create –
Cometh you here to this place and time –
Seeing receiving all who come –
Speaketh –

So saith raise

Words

Bones, my teacher, ate this scroll by the sea. As we sat on the beach looking out into the great ocean, he taught me of the natural welfare system. “The deep-sea crab, water killers, cleaners of the ocean and the bird eating eyes of the dead are the natural welfare system.” He spoke as he ate the crab he stole from the market. “You cannot steal food” he would say.

Penetrate the love and the first star
at night
I wish
I wish
a love
a fish
and all the creatures of the sea
and me

And the words of Bones – “All things am I”
From the ancient scriptures,
Putting his black face on the words – the origin
Aboriginal

Being –
What was could be seeing
Sensing
Intuiting
One continent, the flood

The ethics of hunger

Theology, the study of God, shifts between apprehending ultimate reality and being in relationship with that reality. That reality is within me. I am. I am in relation with others and the other. I am in relation with myself. “Thou art that.” I and thou or nothing at all. Or everything. I searched for the lost melodic chord of knowing. I touched ultimate being and it almost destroyed me. I walked barefoot in the city streets without a lantern. I had only faith in knowing. How I survived is a wonder. Or perhaps not.

The recapitulation of a transforming experience – putting words upon moments of time – mining the data of words from that transformative moment – the process of God moment – is a way of doing theology. It is a subjective vision – the “personal is theological.”

Theology is an experience. It is relative and can at moments be absolute. Or the absolute manifests in the relative. My relation to the absolute or relative, the transcendent and immanent, is an expression of theology, of knowing, of a way.

Theology is relative to my experience and knowing but taps into and expresses dimensions and aspects of the absolute. The subjective vision is in relation with the blossoming flower of ultimate existence. Or so it seems to me.

I was on the precipice of salvation, the door to the kingdom. My teacher and I in relationship bounded by intentional inquiry into mystery, salvation, insight and love; the old sage's notebooks in spoken word and deed of essence in this existence; I a devotee and necessary vortex of unearthly realms. Or so it seemed to me.

Walking the streets of the city, voices emerge and infringe my conscience... "You need codeine, cocaine, crack, bills, pills?"

"No nothing."

"You want a date?"

The bus door opens lights on dark street sitting contemplating death in the city. Will I attain immortality? Beneath the bridge wrapped in old carpet praying to an unknown god.

Knowing all

I will be ok

I say

I awake on the street face down a man offering compassion seasons in the sun dying living existential fear of unfulfilled life my master, my teacher unknown, now I am my own savior.

The tenderloin area of San Francisco was poor, the fringe of the palatial rich funhouse that was most of the rest of the city. The infringed, fringes enclosing, the energy condensing – enclosed in a messenger – "That woman, voodoo, yeah! Ha ha ha..." Shake shake he turns eyes up, in... "Yeah" said the Green Man outside the bank. Incense in the dreadlock hair, frankincense and myrrh, another man speaks – "I ate at Frank's, bagels... teach your children... did you love that woman?" "It was temporal" I say. "Everything is temporal... What of this moment, what brought us here?" "Cause and effect" I say. "It's all accounted – not all time is a cycle, a thin line beyond and outside." "When is the time?" Yankee asking me responds. "It is now, there is no other." A black man and a white bride prostitute are walking "you fuck a virgin and you're stuck

with her, whore of Babylon.” Sex worker says, “think fast but gave him time to think.” The eastern star dog Cerberus, an Old Russian man, milk dog cow of old Roman twins, the pure dope, the higher high.

The city streets mixed voices of mine and thine, a steady stream of word energy feeling, vibrancies and rhythms and frequencies. We heard celestial callings and called out God and shat in the streets with needles in the arm. It was all life, all God and many gods to be in relationship with - relational theology within this prison cell world. Many world inmates went into prison cell America. America found her body commodities from the ghettos. America found his bodies. America, like Roman Cupid, is a patriarch. America is no lover. America lusts for money. Prison labor creates wealth. Bodies of the poor fill the streets. Empty the streets and fill the factory prisons. America is a good businessman.

And I remember the times I would release from the world of suffering and service and escape into bookstores and one bookstore in particular that had multitudinous translations of ancient texts and wisdom tracts including the Vedas, Mahabharata, Bhagavatam and other deep esoteric texts taking my mind into the eye of a pyramid passing thru El Condor Pass and enhancing intensity and the existential crisis of the spiritual import of the streets.

Gloria humble asks for nothing but speaks to me gently and with wisdom “Plato was a proletariat, Aristotle an aristocrat.” “Plato was Eastern, and Aristotle was Western” she continued. She would go on to tell me of her guru and relational theology, how everything was interconnected but that wisdom and ignorance were separated and that not all possessed the tools, inclination or gift to attain divinity. “The earth is a sad plain” she would say.

Voices fill the air and fill the conscious individuated mind and who is to say which is which.

“The first time I smoked crack...visions of fire and funerals and depths of darkness in the wet streets time out of mind...”

“One love,” I say. “It’s always been there” my teacher responds. I feel it intensely amidst poverty prison addiction. I am in relation with that. “Thou art that.” Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Hail Mary full of Grace.

One eyed Mary full of grace in a tent on the street offers readings of stars and cards for kindness, attention and money. Blood stained feet and nicotine stained lips, sweetly foul smelling like fancy rotted cheese, “no soul” she said when I praised her. “King Midas turned everything he touched into gold, so he could not touch his wife. Do you want this wand to undo the spell?”

In America, the streets are lined with gold. The ghetto streets are filled with St. Lawrence’s vision of the poor as riches of the temple. People are gold, gold within. A relational theology is that gold. That gold was unearthed beneath the filth of the capitalist empire.

“Who’s the keeper of the keys” my teacher asks as we sit in the south east corner of the city park, I terrified of the awful knowledge that will open up epiphanies and leave behind the bliss of ignorance, leave me like a live wire no longer able to sink into comfort, commodity anesthesia...”that’s right...many keys...only one opens it...”

I waited in time suspended for the answer. I had taken the “red pill” and put on the devil’s “red shoes” before I knew what was implied, expected, who I had become, who I had/was about to lose.

A fire engine screeches in the distant memory imminent streets passing by. My heart was palpating, so I knew I was alive – I feel therefore I am – I am and I was. In moments suspended awaiting transition, fear of the unknown must be overcome. Instinct refined led me to this point where reasoned intellect held dim power over the heart or the force which swelled the heart and entire being with life and meaning. Life and meaning overflowing in abundance are terrorizing for the innocent and traumatized. “That which is within you must be shared or it will destroy you” claimed Jesus. Within me was the wisdom and terror of existence, the wisdom and terror, life and death of this being who possessed my soul in order to retrieve what had been lost in America, forced me to retrieve what I was unable to recognize but somehow knew was existent, retrieve from the depths of the pit of hell 3 days in, the base of the pyramid enclosed entombed un-enlivened, retrieve myself. The greatest teacher can only give what the student already has.

“Like the Buddha said, vent don’t pent” gnarly Mike on the fisherman’s pier advised me in other times unattached to mute terror and the reality of the veils of the heavens splitting.

“I won’t tell you the 7th seal.” Dogs howl, a blues band plays, apocalypse is the devil’s time. Crack angels walk the earth barefoot, no orange saris. Celestial musicians dropping the poly-rhythm of hip-hop, concrete jungles enclose us, pleading for Zion. “The Eastern star, the Western mystery,” my teacher concludes his sutra sermon.

“Maybe I’m the chosen one, maybe I’m not.” Children walk by. “Those are the chosen ones.”

Voices and experiences of angels in the ghetto transformed my being and gave me a new frame of reference, a new ground of being. With a genuine passion and zeal, I wanted to feed and speak

and learn from every poor person. My mother had told me not to talk to strangers, to only trust “our family.” But now my family was enlarging. I felt a joy in giving. In deep gratitude I saw the love and humility of Jesus. Everything I read from the world’s Holy Scriptures was being lived out in the ghettos and reservations and among the poor of the world. I was of this world. Step by step, in learning and tribulation, I entered deeper into the suffering of our world. I did not want to give charity; I did not want to write about it, I did not want to be political. I only wanted to suffer more unto the suffering. The stars began to open up for me, the heavens and oceans. I left my apartment, I lived in the streets. I ate with the people. I suffered with the people. I became among the poor in spirit.

There was still the question of arrogance. I saw my humility as a form of arrogance. I had a need to say to others - “Look, I’ve found God, blessed among the poor! Look, come and see!” This was a kind of zealous idolatry. This was also a response to those who sat in churches and made great and glorious pronouncements about justice, those who were indifferent to suffering and those who openly scorned me. This pain I felt and the pain of the suffering I felt. I had no solid reference for love. No framework and background. I sank deeper into misery.

In my brokenness I was split between two worlds. When people laughed, I could not feel their joy. Their joy seemed temporary and unreal. There was no tragedy; there was no salt to dry the tears. Yet the salt my mother gave me had no joy and had no deep bitter remorse. It was the salt of abstraction, separation. The poor were not abstracted, they were very real, centered, yet they were poor and suffering.

I was beginning to lose my selfish attachment.

Fear possesses. Fear of loss causes a tighter grip, grip for fear of death. Death becomes fear. Fear is covered by ignorance. Ignorance is death. The crusades are ignorance. Men are ignorant of women. Ignorance is fear is death.

Suffering is redeemed by the word of God. The word of God was taught at church. Church was full of dour faced people and empty ritual. There was no inner light or joy in the word. My mother had no joy. Words like “love” from church and family had no meaning. Love meant to do as you are told. “If you love me” you will do as I tell you. “If you love me” you will give your faith to the church. My soul was taken away by my mother and by the church.

The priests and pharisees and gurus and lamas and lawyers and educated people know words. They are more honored than the poor. They maintain the wheel of this world but within them is no joy. In the samsara world of the ghetto, there was suffering and joy.

I remember the nights in the ghetto, the prostitutes and policemen. How the police would use the women for their pleasure and release them back into the night to be used and how they would arrest them the next night. I spoke with the prostitutes. I had been told that they loved sex, that all they wanted was money. When I spoke more, they were people, women. They were women who worked for sex - sex workers. I looked at them with compassion. Everyone thought I was a whoremonger. I only wanted to do unto others as others would do unto me. I gave compassion. Often, the men I gave compassion to would use me, steal from me - the women too. Why would someone use me when I was helping? My family used me too. Everyone seemed to use one another. I was beginning to understand selfishness. Here too I saw great acts of selflessness by the poor. All my teachers were poor. Bones are of one color. Black people taught me compassion. From this I learned

true love, selfless love.

My theological context was deeply of and by the people. The love that is born out of long-suffering people surrounded by incredible wealth and privilege deeply informed my vision. My ground of being, my ontological vision, was rooted in the resiliency, humility and long-suffering love of poor people. Liberation from suffering in oppression became my pedagogy, my theology.

Time passed and I reentered polite society...

From the coastal city notebook

And now the edge of self-actualization,
after the dream of movements of reality,
after the evolved state of awakening into nothing of soul,
beyond even the thought of the first word spoken beyond
even intonated in the inkling thought of consciousness
no – now – yes.

We realize existence and God's age beginning again,
was given,
the thought,
the chance to realize the hidden destiny.

(I think they are going to cast me out)
Why?
I live, I love, I am outside, I never accepted
what was laid out, reasonable.

And now
to retrieve memory,
looking behind to save,
I moved without a border of sleep,
without rationalization,
blood to the brain - brain in the mind –
mind in movement, movement
as one sense in time,
all is now is,
time,
movement in love towards
the eternal return of love.

I remember moving in dream sleep movement of life when
water sprang and blessings were a fact of existence,
no distinctions and pleasures ascended –
the streets, life of God's people,
people of God, son of Jah,
daughter of Eastern ways, and wisdoms,
the writings of a remnant to
understand only
to pass down.

Let us begin to think of life this way,
awake I believe.
Were we here, there?
What is now
or
what is?
What is not now,
all is real,
so let us begin.

Walking sleep beneath the open eyes
see –
the quarter turning and aspects of time,
seeing and feeling,
hearing the words and
the days – in one.

Inside, outside, day, night streets above the city,
leave the keys and identity and walk the roads,
watch,
learn from those who came before,
interplanetary vision -
the past is the earth.

What knowledge have you left to attain when
within the deepest recesses it is recovered,
all you have ever known, all that which is,
and which was, is was knowing continuously.

Encoded two stars
of dark and light.

I witness the sun turn a quarter from noon day
as if a blinking of the eye or breath of sleep.

A day is.

A triangular setting encoded vibration,
keep the love in flowing,
as language words in knowing,
within and outside, the stars, the voices of the past,
our contemporaries.

Merry Christmas, Happy New Year –
remember those...that day?

Hotel delivery, base of the triangle,
cleaning out the system, sleep in garbage, beneath electric

walking streets – everyone is of spirit, share words,
connections, cab rides to heaven, every seat full,
truckloads of boxers with mammal fur inside,
leather out to withhold the rain.

We will always be with you; we will always be up here.

A place in the universe ((pop))

I did not even think of the sacrifice of life,
the movements of flesh and foods.

I thought only of duty, justice, and love,
and the leaving of the material sphere.

(You are not here).

Walking streets – birth of soul child – sleep in alley – awake –
walk with family – in bar – take out clear glass of water –
far down line of family (shades of color) – old woman sitting,
man beside her, stirring fire, against wall, everyone was from
outer space, “what’s he saying?” Regions ascended while
standing – we walked – no money given – do favors before
you expect one – we are all good here – we left the planet,
mind, this planet is detention,
“you have some more time down here,”
phone calls to upper ups who left, walking, connections –
God’s in all colors, one chain, love, force of gravity in the air,
a magnet connects heart to heart.

Sleep beneath the thruway,
tapped in release guilt, the mind traps a body from reality,
a pure core, deep within, a seed of love within
the human faculty. Yellow, green and red.

Though we live here, we lack.

Walking streets – St. Anthony, Christmas – candy, crystal,
metal, silver, rainwaters multicolored.

Wanted to fly yet you had to prove that death could
not contain you and that you could walk and plant roots
before you could...Plant the seeds while you walk the earth.
Shed the skin and enter the kingdom
before the skin has withered.

Walking upon the fields of heaven
 where
languages speak as one breath and thought is united
in aspect of living –
we walk
we talk
we connect and see beyond the

night of –
 sleeping in building, upstairs hallway,
 leave, walk streets,
hills – everyone getting ready to go –

society, the organization of the ethos,
the organization of words, peoples all, we walk,
we sit on corners and we sing the blues.

Taking my licks – St. Anthony on street, mamma
in the boarding room. Perhaps there has been a necessary
abstraction in my life, bones walking ground yet roots
temporary of this place.

The years passed, you saw the future retreat behind you,
walking thru time a line, “It will be here...as always.”

Around the streets,
my being sowing,
the rain watering,
everyone uniting.

The rain, the food, the sun, black roots of shoes, one brown.
A woman gives cloth, walk streets greeting people,
reaching out the spirit, over the hill.

What is the voice that challenges and questions sight and
hearing, the voice that tries to condemn something
which exists? As if existence were a curse, a judgment
of wrong, a conscience out of tune for being aware.

Was I sleeping in the tent in the alley to sweat away
the star sun; day night (sky)?

Awake in the house of my god
 arise
Now set out to discover who...

Emerged out of cavern, exercise on trees,
thoughts of universe, walk as my forebears walked.

I cut the throat, I cut the
I –
Save the world.

The bus, the rain, streets, beneath the thruway,
electric. River, ring – awaiting,
 to end?

Midnight...give me body.
There is a connection beyond the words,
swirling the chaos, stirring the pot,
bitches brew, out of sight space.

On the edges of the atmosphere looking in.

I am emanating colors, I keep my hands outside,
so that everyone can see them,
soul brother number 1, a boxer in a bus.

We transcended and I was shown thru
the orders of humanity and
the ages of the people.

Deeper recessed love deeper recessed knowing.
One love all colors merged in the rain,
and the joy of all people,
black roots and shoes.

I wanted nothing short of direct communion with the
infinite, and the movement
without flesh and communication without words.
To fly and not walk
to enter dimensions beyond time and...

people – the ages

the black roots of Africa and
the Asian mainland – disciplined

America – the temples

brown toned

3 creations:

Lion of Judah,

Serpent Dragon of the Sea,

Oblivion/Nirvana.

Years later, after the metempsychosis of my guru/student experience, the transmission of the soul of my teacher and the soul of the ghetto into my soul, long after I entered into Kenosis, that is, the giving up of the divine attributes to become human, I was a bodhisattva by circumstance. I gave up the glory of heaven in order to live on earth and to attain a relative level of sanity and stability within the relative contemplation of the polite, petit bourgeoisie society. This was a necessary process, like Paul coming down from the 7th heaven in order to meet the Ethiopian. I had met the Ethiopian and was now coming down to meet Paul. I was Onesimus being sent by Paul from the prison cell of ghetto America to the prison cell of capitalistic, materialistic America.

Each I contain within them many stories of many people and many experiences. Which of these are criminalized when one is incarcerated?

Which spiritual attributes are tapped into when we listen? Are we hearing ourselves, another person, that which exists in between or something or someone else?

When we listen and feel and thoughts are born and relations are born, who is being educated?

When we encourage and support and enhance the articulation of a vision, are we building another or ourselves? Is the building of self and other a relationship with God, ourselves or others?

What is the juxtaposition of freedom and punishment within ourselves and within others and within society?

What is our relationship with the world and the world outside our imaginings?

In our evolution, our coming into consciousness and conscientiousness, are we intimately linked to a relationship with ourselves, with others, with that which exists in between, with God or with nothing?

Who is the one to initiate a spiritual relationship?

Are emotions, thoughts and the host of human experiences relational? Are relations spiritual?

Blessed be the love that we create.

Blessed be the love that we receive.

Blessed be the vision born of love.

Blessed be the action born of love.

Blessed be...

