

***The Perks of Being  
Terminal***



# ***The Perks of Being Terminal***

AND OTHER  
REFLECTIONS

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Dedicated to Comrade and Frenemy Covid-19  
so generous in its teachings.  
May we be equal to them.





# PART 1

## The Perks of Being Terminal

and other reflections

*So aren't we all*

*TERMINAL*

# *Introduction*

So a new world is born and our grandchildren love and serve it.  
Serve her, for we are her children and she, our mother  
This life is a sacrament of all directions  
I am a hermit in the mountains where my mother played as a child,  
where the whole Ortiz/Hill clan  
and I played as children.  
I am a hermit because I have to learn to die for real.  
Terminal hermit with an incurable neuromuscular disease.  
Am a hermit living a short walk from where my mother  
and I buried my little brother, Paul, and  
another short walk to where a deer hunter found his skeleton after  
our four years of searching.  
Am a hermit.  
Here, now, I fold myself into the forest.  
The hermit, I think, is self-divided.  
On the one hand a proud veteran of the Nazi youth trying to whip me  
into shape... and a real buffoon.  
Who you foolin’?  
A very militant angel and a clown.  
I’m toxic with being drunk with what a smartass I can be.  
But can’t out-smartass you, Mr. Hermit. But very grateful for your  
wisdom of restraint when contemplating murdering  
“me, myself and I”---  
the "Three Stooges."  
But occasionally look in the mirror, bro, and be real with who you see.  
The alter ego has arrived unexpectedly. That is his way.  
“And besides,” says the Hermit, “you are too much in love with your  
cleverness and it’s seriously screwing with you. Quit it.”

## Hermit's Self-Advice

So you wanna be a hermit, do-yah?

Court Lady Solitude Slow Easy Patient She likes it that way

Crossing two-leggeds on the path?

Yeah yeah, slow easy patient.

Unless get spooked

then hit the gas

Four-leggeds? Bear, Squirrel, Coyote, Mountain Lion?

Invite for tea

Party hearty

Three years?

Alone?

Long time

Leave "me" behind

Slowly step out of time or you'll go nutso

And, for GOD SAKE, no holiness

If you meet the Buddha, Meher Baba or any raggedy holyman  
on the road

Hell, Billy Graham

If they pass you on the road, kill the bastards

Be still and know God is God

Surrender ALL of it

The Nameless One is unnamable

Present Moment, just now

Surrender all of it

Slowly utterly

Wrote this list of perks when I was in Mexico a coupla years ago

These perks have carried into the forest.

It was in La Paz, Baja California that I first faced being terminal.

My Multiple Sclerosis diagnosis

had clearly advanced.

After the first ten years of relapsing-remitting MS, I realized that  
I was not "remitting"

anymore. It has been three years since my last relapse and I have

recovered  
nothing since.  
My walking is gippy and cognitively I am a bit screwy and  
sometimes slur my speech.  
Was facing being terminal,  
Had to be real about dying.  
For me, that meant deep solitude, and this is the list that guides me.

### The Original Perks of Being Terminal

-  
Uncommon patience with people's flaws and imperfections.  
With own flaws and imperfections.  
Not in the least distracted by any kind of self-improvement project.  
To renounce perfectibility.  
Accept the kindness of strangers.  
The self, with its limited dimensions, is itself sacred and borders  
on the Infinite.  
Choose battles well.  
Forget fighting with self or lost and angry others.  
Savor day to day life – it is the domain of the Nameless.  
Present moment – only present moment—no-thing to be distracted.  
Illuminate and release self-amplifying habits  
Continue the silent, perpetual breaking of the heart.  
Be kind and humble.  
Release all whom the heart breaks for.  
No urgency for anything at all. The virtues of spiritually and  
physically moving real slow -- or not moving at all.  
These perks I live *for* as a hermit  
and to which live *into* these years alone.

### Confluence of Rivers

My will, God's will, Self-same water  
Not will snuffed out by God's fire, but willfulness released to  
Divine will.  
Coherently the same

The same incoherence

Intent -- Tender

Tender outgoing presence

No violence or aggression of any kind.

## *On Being a Hermit*

When I turned forty, I spent four months in complete solitude on the Big Sur coast in California. As wrote then, “forever within the music of river and ocean.” Now in the high desert pines of New Mexico, I wrote a couple of poems about slowly entering three years alone.

Set Sail Alone  
Solitude un-encrusted with time  
shattered mirrors  
each unbloodied shard  
Reflecting no other  
Know self *as* other  
Now fifty-seven  
Saturn returns with scythe  
nothing to harvest,  
nobody home  
absent one so uninterested  
Birth, death, crumbling self

We entertain ourselves thus  
Freedom, Incarceration  
Dust in the wind  
Illness, Healing  
Echo of an echo of story told *too* many times  
Fragrance, Breeze  
disease vector *is* self

*no self*

*no disease*

Bless Transience  
Bless the transient truth of all things  
That moment  
bless it  
twenty-five years married,  
thought 'til death we part  
What COULD be more transient THAN  
being *in love* ecstatically

*In love*

That season of having a reliable able set of legs  
Bless too that long passage when predictably continent  
Fool thought diapers for babies  
May he rest in peace  
Bless, when thought live to ripe old age  
Homage you fool  
Homage!  
Fool, though he may be  
Fool that I am,  
I also hope, where no hope is found  
Tend the fire for warmth, light, inspiration  
Invite you who suffer cold night  
I have a story.

Currently, that story is inscribed in this book --  
and sharing it has to be PERK NUMERO UNO.

Haven't a clue who I will be when I walk out of solitude  
years from now.  
Not a clue.  
Will I be alive? This "terminal" business is for real and though I  
frolic occasionally over its zany humor.  
It is dead serious  
Am a hermit because of being terminal.  
Want to meet the spirit of death face to face.  
In the years of being initiated into becoming a tribal  
medicine man (a nganga)  
by the Shona and Ndebele Zulu of Zimbabwe, if there are any  
teachings at all  
that have become a part of me, they are:  
God is the healer, the activity of healing.  
Not people.  
To make peace is to heal and to heal is to make peace.  
*First*, make peace with your disease, it is your path to the  
village of the ancestors.  
Don't for a moment imagine you know what healing is.  
Sometimes a sacred illness is healed in this life,  
sometimes through the ending of it  
It's not yours to choose.  
I am God's arms  
I am God's legs  
You are not the author of the story you are living and  
that is blessed.  
That is blessed.  
Animals are sacred kin. Those who endanger them are evil.  
Gratitude is the spiritual practice of elders.  
One of the big perks of being terminal is to celebrate what you  
have given.  
I do preen in pride (you could call it callow white male boast),  
that when your average white guy, forty-something was  
literally



*cashing in* (money-wise) on his numinous white male-ness,  
was cultivating a farm  
in Zimbabwe, so a clan of tribal friends and family could survive  
drought and famine, likely caused by  
climate change.

With that, I can die peacefully.

With having a daughter and grandson and two adult  
granddaughters

With that, I can die peacefully.

Refining practices of meditation, prayer, and compassion  
to the measure that God intends  
before departing.

With that, I can pass quietly.

Mr. Hermit arrives:

Mr. Hermit - The only thing worse than boasting is preaching!  
Cut it the fuck out.

Me - Don't you mean "f out?"

Mr. Hermit - Fuck off!

I will enter silence for real when Mr. Potty Mouth Hermit  
shuts the fuck up.

He barges in.

Mr. Hermit - How about you conjuring up a hermit -  
me truly - alter-ego,  
to convince you that you've  
arrived. Looks pretty sleazy to me.

Me - You know sleaze when you see it, O Thou King of Sleaze.

Mr. Hermit - The one and only.

Me - And yes f--you very much. This "one and only" BS is what I  
mean by identity by fiat.

Mr. Hermit - This insisting on the last word is how you do fiat.  
Don't say touché, or you'll die quickly and miserably.

Mr. Hermit SS (short and snoopy) - The truth (or lack thereof)  
of your precious poems is irrelevant. In my humble opinion, the

declarative voice immediately falsifies. It is the voice of an egotist and a cowboy.

The long and short saga of being a terminal hermit is forever in this timeless moment. This timeless moment is the only place healing can happen. It is the heart of God. It is the only place where you can be born, live, and die.

In ancient Egypt, it would be said that you die *into* the judgment hall of Ma'at where your soul is weighed against the feather of truth.

Dare I, for a moment speak the truth of myself. My life?

Dare I not?

If not now, when?

Mr. Hermit insists on being heard again:

Me - OK, blab away.

Mr. Hermit - That conversation we had before the Three Stooges

so rudely interrupted us.

Me - You, Mr. Hermit F-word pushing friggin' lonely-ass bastard.

What conversation?

Hermit - No good for a wannabe hermit to have a mind like a sieve.

You brought up e.e.cummings the Buddha of the lower case.

You waxed *cummingsesque*

You italicize lower cases;

and sprinkle them to the wind.

Me - And your comment?

Mr. Hermit - Brilliant, moron. Freakin' brilliant.

What do you have against the dead e.e?

The moment you pick up your *itsy bitsy* if you pull a Sachmo and trumpet --

IT'S A WONDERFUL WORLD and ain't I the center of it.

-- Gotcha. Should I suggest a Valium?

Mr. Hermiting polite.

You think you were a terrorist once?  
You freakin' with e.e.'s grave again,  
and you're dead meat.  
I settle into solitude and will emerge when I'm sixty.  
This is an order of solitude, which I have never known.  
Used to call Multiple Sclerosis, the Guest.  
Some Guest, my mother would say, seeing its rudeness.  
The kid that I was would make this a romantic tryst, the  
consummation of the most mysterious intimacy.  
Wrote erotic poems to the bride,  
that she choose me as husband.  
Reflect when was in a bookstore in Boulder, Colorado.  
Upscale café bookstore.  
With the first cup, mass peristalsis.  
Shit my pants.  
The Guest was messing with me again.  
The twisted humor of it.  
Staggered to the bathroom fragrantly,  
to wash out my pants and briefs.  
The morning of my fifty-sixth  
A friend in Santa Fe called my cell phone  
in the middle of my cleanup  
to wish me happy birthday.  
All in all, not a romantic tryst.  
Being trained in two African traditions as a medicine man,  
I learned that accommodating the spirit that  
afflicts is the way of healing.  
That's why I called the spirit of MS, The Guest.  
Exactly the opposite of Western allopathic medicine where the  
"war metaphor" predominates.  
Attacking an inflammatory process with powerful  
pharmaceuticals (as was I) is insane.  
A terminal hermit with an advanced "incurable"  
neuromuscular disease?

The Guest was always feminine - and a skilled instructor  
in the inner feminine.

Now he has become my bro/roomie and for three years  
he will deepen my solitude.

Night will soon fall.

Mi choza de soledad, my hut of solitude, will soon be  
wrapped in darkness.

Blessed without electricity or running water. Looking up  
at the mountains of

my childhood and my mother's childhood and her wild brood.

A hermit lives by the rhythms of sunrise and sunset  
and the waxing and waning of the moon.

#### Hermits Heartbreak

Suggesting 'overcoming' offends love gods

Orpheus overcoming losing Eurydice?

Eros overcoming the loss of Psyche?

Sometimes heartbreak is merely perpetual

May the man, that I was, rest in peace

Was a good go of it this second marriage

Second divorce

Heroic, since failure was always inevitable

Perpetuity of heartbreak

In Chinese, Kwan Yin's name means "she who hears cries"

No refuge from the wail of all living beings

Planet dries up.

Her multiple arms and endless kind gestures

"like changing the position of a pillow when asleep"

She takes my body for the fullness of the moon

Well prepared

Me - Goodnight, Mr. Hermit.

Thank you for your humble opinions.

I'll be indebted forever.

Mr. Hermit - Fuck your fucking f words. "Forever," my ass.

Well, fuck you very much, you masochistic punk. Woooooo. WAY TOO polite. You accused me of stamping your identity by FIAT.

Well, you're MR. FIAT, jerk off.

Enlightenment by fiat? Some kind of gonzo sudden enlightenment?

Way boring.

Cultivate a little suffering, it'll do ya good.

Me - I receive your wisdom and kindness

Mr. Hermit - Ain't kind at all.

Wise? You make me want to vomit. Leave the wisdom to the wise guys that pack a piece.

You expect applause for opening your eyes and getting enlightened?

You think you are the new kid on the block?

Applause will only make you stupid - or are you just too stupid to get it?

## *On Refusing to be a Terrorist*

"Some kind of honorary thug."

An alternative name for this chapter could be The Saintly Terrorist, Noble Terrorist, and me, the Punk.

The saintly terrorist was Sri Aurobindo who was arrested and imprisoned by the British colonial government in India, for "being" a terrorist. One could more accurately say an anti-colonial militant.

Aurobindo originally felt abandoned by God but ultimately thanked the British for the prison where he met God without distraction.

In prison, he wrote of Integral Yoga, which braided three kinds of Yoga: - Karma Yoga: Yoga of work - Bhakti Yoga: Devotion and surrender.

And Jnana Yoga: the Yoga of realizations or union with God.

Aurobindo in prison, in 1902, wrote:

“An entire self consecration, complete equality, an unsparing effacement on the ego, a surrender of all being and nature to Divine Will, a self-giving true, total and without reserve.”

The noble terrorist, who, I think had his soul remade by almost thirty years in prison, was Nelson Mandela.

Mandela was turned toward the terrorist gesture by the apartheid Sharpsville massacre which killed sixty-nine people. Mandela was head of the African National Congress military wing, Spear of the Nation. They were known to bomb civilian targets, for example, a train station in Johannesburg.

No accounts of Mandela mourning who he killed.

Mandela was definitely the pragmatist and shrugged away those who would compare him to Gandhi.

“For us, nonviolence was tactical and necessary. For Gandhi, it was a spiritual way of life.”

Whatever was the transformation Mandela went through in prison, his presence, his capacity to strike genuine friendship with his white jailers was right, mythical, and among other things, made him the founding father of post-apartheid South Africa.

And me, the Punk?

As punk, I was the ultimate wannabe, the palest possible member of the B\*\*. Was convinced that the company of thugs would make a bruthuh of me, and turn me from a punk wannabe into a man.

The B\*\* killed.

We especially liked to kill policemen.  
Being a Buddhist hermit who is terminal, ponders  
much about that karma.  
Never did kill anybody, but prepared to do so.  
For years mimicked  
aiming the gun (my finger) and pulling the trigger.  
This was a moment by moment spiritual practice  
that was quite interrupted  
by being the father of a newborn girl.  
The willingness to kill disintegrated slowly,  
Disintegrated *me* slowly, over a half a dozen years.  
Been asking myself, what was the moment sold soul to the  
devil as a terrorist?  
Remember it well.  
E. was a light-skinned brotuh at the California Men's Colony.  
Would smuggle him drugs. Marijuana and psychedelics  
hidden in my socks in little balloon containers.  
Tex Watson, of Manson family fame, got Jesus behind bars.  
As Tex evangelized to guests and fellow  
inmates in the lounge, he was the perfect cover for the  
smuggling thing.  
I'd crack open the New Testament  
and mumble from the gospels as E. swallowed a dozen  
balloons with his coffee.  
Lastly, an ex-lax to go.  
Before parting with E. he said, "Come back soon, bro. The drugs  
are nice but we're meant for bigger things. Next month we  
gotta talk about step one; killing a few cops with me when get  
out in coupla years.  
Then there's Africa and fighting apartheid.  
Did I mention I was a punk wannabe who was  
imagining masculinity would be conferred by being  
taken into the inner scene of the B\*\*? This conversation let me  
know my next meeting would involve the devil and whether



I would be willing to sell my soul.

Was willing.

Cheap.

When my comrades made terrorism sexy,  
readily sold my soul to the devil.

Was with E. a month later, sans drugs. Just drank a dozen cups  
of coffee between us and we got down.

Here comes the devil.

E. mussed up my hair and said, "Where you come by you  
nappy hair? Yo mama doing it with a brothuh  
behind the tool shed?" Never been the object of a  
"Yo Mama" joke before.

As silly as it was, felt accepted as some kind of honorary thug.

This is the first stage. I get out in two years. We meet.

"You call the cops and be the hopeless white man being  
attacked by negroes.

Ham it up. Include

you think your sorry ass life is threatened. They eat that shit up.

Give them an

address and they will be

there in three minutes. Figure that between us we can kill  
maybe half a dozen.

Are you willing?" said the devil.

"I'd be honored," trying to imitate some kind of adult.

Folks in the B\*\* won't trust you until they see your  
willingness to be killed and to kill.

You have to step forth.

The booby prize involved picking up the gun to fight in  
Rhodesia against apartheid. E. told me that a  
dozen of us would meet a wealthy Italian woman on  
her private island.

The PLO would come for weapons training, thus preparing  
us for Africa.

Being a terrorist was suddenly getting sexy.

Came to see the Italian woman seduction as the wet dream of a comrade brothuh that just had been incarcerated too long, but I connected with it.

This, again, how cheaply sold soul.

Of course never came anywhere near to this Italian woman's digs, never fondled her or her money, but could see that I was a comrade and a brothuh' (in spite of being melanin deficient.) The seduction of the Italian fantasy was real, oddly became evidence that was stepping out of young punkdom.

But Africa itself was seductive.

Mr. Hermit, of course, has much to say about this.

Mr. Hermit - Regarding that terrorist gig. It wasn't just selling the soul to the devil thing. Such is common.

But, where the hell did you learn to kiss the devil's ass?

Tell me that

Were you really, so stupid and arrogant, that you thought selling your soul was a small matter? That you were just a horny kid?

You think I give a damn?

Me - And who are you?

Mr. Hermit, of course.

Years before I fell into my acceptance of many fellow aspiring young terrorists, was deeply politically involved in matters of apartheid in Rhodesia and South Africa and the war against Portuguese colonialism in Mozambique.

Like many budding young terrorists,

Che Guevara was a patron saint.

Through Che could be willing to kill or receive the bullet that takes me.

In my religious devotion to Che, to kill or be killed on behalf of the poor was an ecstatic way to go.

Feels amazing and somehow inevitable that it would be post-apartheid southern Africa that would

initiate and train me as a tribal peacemaker among those who had drawn blood.

Last night remembered another talk with E.

“You know, we in the B\*\* can't trust you cause you're honky bait: so convinced of your innocence that you volunteer to be the bitch of some black dudes you barely know.”

“I sure wouldn't trust you with a gun.”

Hermit guy again.

Mr. Hermit -- Good karma, bad karma, this ain't no checkerboard.

That you were a kid trying to convince yourself to kill doesn't declare any kind of innocence.

You let others kill on your behalf, you swore that no blood would stain your high reputation of yourself. You may have been a young punk, totally true, but you were in fact in deep doo-doo bargains with the devil about what kind of adult you would be.

Don't deny the reality of choice. And intent too.

This is the karma that made you the monk that you are, and if you don't get real with this terrorist thing then your rendezvous with Annette Funicello and Richard Pryor and the other MS shindiggers will never happen.

Had your black proxies kill for you?

After all that is what makes a terrorist group.

CUT THE INNOCENCE, white boy

Me - You again, Mr. Hermit?

Mr. Hermit - The one and only Mr. Hermit, there is no other. Everything depends on your willingness to hear the truth.

In fact, Mr. H kept me up last night.

Rain saturates mud outside the door and the drought passes.  
Mr. Hermit asked - What do you mean by the grace of  
endarkenment?

Darkening, the inevitable grace of the waning of the moon.  
It now has now, at its core, trying to be real about training  
to be a terrorist

And the Buddhist practice of the development of a heart of l  
oving-kindness: lojong.

Which involves reflecting on 59 "slogans" to pare  
away our ordinary  
unconscious

One of the critical *dichos* to reflect on --

"Drive all blames into one," which is to say egoistic  
self-clinging.

When you are terminal you must look deep into what this  
life has been.

Observe so-called good karma  
and so-called bad karma.

## *On Becoming a Peacemaker*

Vietnam

"Damn, you had PTSD even without seeing combat!"

Lance Dickson told me.

Lance was one of a dozen American veterans of the Vietnam war that Dr. Ed Tick had invited to travel to Southeast Asia with him for "peacemaking and reconciliation" with the Vietnamese people.

I was, at first, kinda sheepish.

"I was a veteran of the anti-war movement."

But the PTSD was very real. Must have been

11-years-old when

I asked my mom "Will I have to fight in war?"

"Probably," she said.

Mom was born in 1929 so was offering her domestic support of the GOOD war against Hitler's Fascism and Hirohito.

Certainly felt good and righteous about it.

But Vietnam?

So prepared in terror for years.

My recurring nightmare throughout my adolescence:

In a cold sweat, awake from a firefight

Gun in hand.

It was a matter of killing and/or being killed.

"That's the way it is," said Lance.

Because of my MS gimp, in Vietnam, I was often asked,

"Wounded by the Viet Cong?" One young

Vietnamese man and his Vietnamese American

fiancé asked about my wound.

"Oh no, I was in the anti-war movement."

"Were you the only one?"

The majority of Vietnamese were born after the war.

Smiled to myself, thinking of shaking my solitary fist at

Richard Nixon.

"No, there were many of us."

But felt very alone. I was aware that in Vietnam

(and subsequent conflicts)

that lived in a country but could

never understand because of it's love of war.

At 16, I was an illegal alien in Saskatoon,

Saskatchewan since it was

so obvious to me that the recurring nightmare of

"my firefight" was just around the bend.

"You were of the "ROTC" clan, were you

(Run Off To Canada)?" asked Lance.

Getting ready to be "draftably" eighteen,

was homeless for three years.

I'd gather with other homeless folks for the hope of day labor.

One time, comrade Jimmy arrived ecstatic

Knew Jimmy to be a member of the VVAW --

the Vietnam Veterans Against the War.

"Cambodia has been liberated!" Jimmy announced

We homeless joined him in delight.

It would be a few years before anybody could understand what "liberation" meant for Cambodia.

Traveling in Vietnam with American veterans was a revelation. I had long said I'd never been at home in the US until we grieved the genocide we visited on South East Asia.

I came to see that veterans grieved deeply -- that in fact we required that of them, and it drove many of them nuts.

When did I commit to peacemaking?

I trespassed under the cover of night onto the White Sands Missile Range, to bury a figurine of Kwan Yin, the Buddhist emblem of limitless compassion, at Ground Zero, Trinity Site.

This is where the US tested the first atom bomb shortly before leveling Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Before dawn, I burnt a handful of papers - - each representing the renunciation of "enemy making."

It was evident that this "American disease" was intimately my own as well.

The harsh reflections were between my training as a terrorist and my initiation as a peacemaker in post-apartheid Zimbabwe.

It was very direct, my change from aspiring to be a terrorist to training in the way of peacemaking.

Once approached Mandaza Kademwa, the tribal medicine man that initiated and trained me as a peacemaker.

"Was I accepted by your people 'cause almost fought in your war of independence?"

"How much you forget, brother. Firstly NOT "MY" PEOPLE "The Shona and the Zulu are our people."

The derangement of American culture is a matter of the confusion of pronouns,

"I" is fundamental.

The deep shift to tribal Africa is that "we" is the essential way of seeing.

"How much you forget, Michael."

"Your spirits are peacemakers. You were accepted because they saw you cry. They had never seen a white man weep."

Where did it begin giving myself over to peacemaking?

Could start anywhere, really, but think starting with that lovely morning in 1988 when was bombed by the American Air Force, right after doing my rite of renouncing enemy-making.

I will tell that portion, from a poem written the same evening.

Near Trinity Site the day after the June Moon went full

When a swallow flies toward the face of a cliff, its wings cut the air with an effortless violence.

And so it was.

When the jets flew over, the stunning grace as they curved against the embankment of the Sierra

Obscura, shuddering along the spine of the yucca.

And beneath the roar, I also shuddered with the dull gray beetles that cluster

on the scat of coyotes.

When the bombs began dropping I thought, this cannot be

I thought El Salvador and not long ago a small hamlet in

Vietnam, the fire, the wailing of mothers over dead children

There was no place to hide

I became a dusty fetus curled up amongst cacti with only a small prayer in a small voice.

"Please, if I die now, regard the life of my daughter with kindness, and tend to her heart."

When the bombing paused I stood up and walked hurriedly

north, my back to where the mushroom

cloud first lifted poison to the sky.

The largest tiger swallowtail I had ever seen,



alighted on the rugged blue flower of a thistle.

My God, this life!

And then the bombs began dropping again and an antelope looked up from its grazing and held my gaze for a long moment then ran off to where the earth still smoked.

What must it think?

In 1945, two herds of antelope scattered to those mountains when the first nuclear bomb was tested here.

Later that day, J. Robert Oppenheimer, a man not unfamiliar with kindness found a turtle turned on its back near Ground Zero.

He set the turtle back on its feet.

Three weeks later, the Bomb the Japanese would call Original Child leveled Hiroshima, and then, Nagasaki.

In the world to frighten a butterfly will never mean very much.

To bake the underside of a slow reptile or to shatter the minds of a herd of beasts, to burn to the ground a whole city of children, has become the ordinary labor of ordinary men

Have mercy on us.

Trying to make Peace with the Hermit

Mr. Hermit SS: (short and snooty) Peace? Trying?

Me - Attempting

SS - You who kiss ass WE see right through you.

Me - We?

SS - All of us

Me - What? All? - You dumbfucks who never got it that Hitler offed himself?

SS - Cut it out. Just leave Dolfie alone.

He was a misunderstood kid.

Me - OK Mr. SS. I'll back off. What do you have to say?

SS - (and chorus) Our asses are blistered with hickeys. You only

kiss the asses of those you want  
something from.

And this F word - Trying to pass as the junior high cool kid,  
or what?

As I said, trying to make peace with Mr. Hermit. This morning, I  
awoke to lojong practice of refining loving kindness.

Fifty-nine 'slogans' to reflect on.

The *dicho* this morning, "Don't speak of injured limbs.

Don't talk about faults."

The Buddhist teacher, Chogyam Trungpa's, commentary.

"Because of your arrogance and your  
aggression, you prefer to talk about other people's defects  
as a way of building yourself up."

And the Zen priest, Norman Fischer, elaborates, "And just as  
we don't criticize someone for having an  
injury like that, although we recognize it as an injury, and  
note the limitations that come from it, we  
aren't critical of the person with an inner injury that is the  
ultimate cause of the person's poor  
conduct."

And so it is, Mr. SS and homies.

Me - By way of peacemaking, Mr. Hermit, I've exhibited great  
egotism in calling you an egotist.

Mr. Hermit - No shit, Sherlock.

Me - No shit. And calling you arrogant and aggressive when  
I'm being arrogant and aggressive.

Shall we make peace?

Mr. Hermit - If you don't make me gag on your politeness.

You're the boss.

MOH has been horrific in his aggression and arrogance.

## *On Loving a Woman with Alzheimer's*

Well, what the hell – WHY NOT start with a love poem for  
this missive is a love story, isn't it?

My baby is now in prison – so LOVE POEMS are essential.

Anne receives

'Twas the youngest of Lassies

Cleverly disguised

with eloquent wrinkles and radiant white hair

Forever held in the kind hands of GOD

Miguel offers what he learned as a hermit

Fistfuls of nothing

Fistful of prayers

Anne receives as hungry child

For it is Christmas ...

Now BY WAY of love and prison.

Have loved a lot of folks behind bars -- usually

African-American men.

This time, a Scottish-American babe.

How did fall for a woman eighty-five  
 (twenty-five years my senior)?  
 Now crazy as the proverbial loon.  
 If you can figure it out, drop me a line.  
 I've realized that I've become a connoisseur of dementia.

TO WIT:

Anne delighted me, wondering if my father would  
 approve of us as we tooled around in his caddy.  
 Irrelevant that my DAD died forty years ago and  
 drove a dinky, used Toyota.  
 As we bopped around the San Francisco Bay in his  
 caddy, my father smiled upon us.  
 Then there was Anne resurrecting the inner anarchist in me.  
 Memory room with the television perpetually on and a  
 fellow selling a nifty hose, obviously a  
 Televangelist.

Anne was agitated

I'M A PRESBYTERIAN!

I'M A PRESBYTERIAN!

I'M A PRESBYTERIAN! Anne shouted.

"Listen, girl, we need only to walk away from the tube"  
 ANOTHER BLOW AGAINST THE CAPITALIST  
 CONSPIRACY.

Wasn't big on the delusion that the Japanese were  
 about to bomb Oakland.

"Honey - WW2 ended a long time ago.

"I KNOW," she looked at me witheringly – me, the  
 youngish whippersnapper. Was born in 1957, Anne  
 in '32 after all.

She assured me, by referring to another AD  
 (Alzheimer Dementia) inmate who KNEW the JAPS  
 were flying over.

Haunted by before prison days, when was lost in  
 turning up the heat on the romance thing – before

even the act of will of giving into the falling in  
'love THANG', GOT Anne was a retired "home economics  
professor." Was taken by a weird-ass nostalgia for when  
was the pubescent proto-feminist of the  
masculine persuasion. Was sure the girls would secretly  
lust for me if I took Home Ec.

AHHH, the wonderful delusions of a young boy.

But that I'd fall for an actual schoolmarm?!?!

Who would've thunk it?

It took imagination and fervent reminders that

"love is all there is"

So... prison.

'Twas July 4<sup>th</sup>, 2016, when actually huddled up with the

Bill of Rights – particularly the First Amendment.

Was reminded of a conversation with my disability

lawyer in New Mexico.

"Even the DONALD has yet to abolish freedom of  
peaceable assembly"

It's altogether an ordinary prison—the guards are oblivious  
and cheerful that, with the mindless DO

GOODNESS, that they do not even note that they've erased  
the humanity of the inmates and are

greatly irritated. I might bring up the first amendment or basic  
civil rights.

BUT the inmates know – and will often speak among  
themselves that they have been left by so-called  
adult children as inconvenient.

HOW WE DARE DISPOSE OF OUR ELDERS!

Anne was the primary caretaker of her husband with  
AD for the last ten years of his life.

Her background was beyond extensive but not a guard  
asked her point of view.

IRRELEVANT!

When was first called to the office, laughed bitterly with Anne

“Courtyards seems to be a hybrid between a junior high school and a minimum-security prison”

Conversation with office workers.

“Gotta offer you two choices.

Firstly --You know I’m terminal with progressive

Multiple Sclerosis

and my girlfriend is decompensating with

Alzheimer’s. Dare I do civil disobedience?

Was a long time ago told Anne, “Fraid I can't be your knight in shining armor.”

Again to those who win the office.

Choice One: Civil Disobedience

Two: Lawyering up.

Have NOTHING to lose.

You have me arrested for breaking bread with mi novia

(my girlfriend),

will go quietly to jail

And return to break bread with Anne.

ETC...

YOU know, have to raise a fuss with the media.

Which do you prefer?”

Maybe it was the Christmas time that reminded me, was once a passionate Christian. I remembered two

Christian teachings to navigate the place his girlfriend was incarcerated.

“I was in prison and you visited me. Whatever you have done to the least of these my brethren, you

have done so unto me,” said Jesus.

“We are called to care for Christ in all His disturbing disguises,” said Mother Teresa.

So this is written on behalf of my girlfriend but also her jailers.

Not with ANY answers but with essential questions.

Do people with Alzheimer’s have civil rights?

(I write this with sorrow as Anne is forgetting my face

and my name.)

What do civil rights mean for “freedom of peaceable assembly” of the First Amendment of the Constitution.

Do you see seniors as Unpeople or just people with AD? (Alzheimer’s Dementia) ?

Are you of that strange tribe that sees aging is something that happens to other people.

Finally, Aldous Huxley beckons “The world is made up of organized lovelessness”

And so it is.

As an RN for 25 years, know what it is to be well paid as a jailer.

When was unceremoniously (physically threatened as a trespasser) KICKED OUT of Courtyards and then unable to visit the love of my life.

“You’re selling pot!” I was told.

My MD prescribed cannabis for multiple sclerosis with some success and was relieved was a legal fellow

– the people of California voting altogether sanely

Showed the manager my “card.”

“Not covered by federal law.”

Confess, was astonished that the Marijuana Tax Act of 1937, that vulgar piece of racist tripe, would be invoked.

But, HEY, prison is prison, and when haven’t wardens written their own laws?

Was honored to counsel another inmate who had ripped off his girlfriend to buy pot.

BUT SELL WEED?

Could see that this hybrid JHS/Prison was rife with rumors and don’t regret leaving it behind.

But seriously jones for my woman.

An unspoken question lingered:

Have you EVER been in love?

Hopelessly?

Postscript

Anne is now dead.

The last two months of her life she couldn't recognize me.



## *Another Thread in the Ragged Weave*

Every time I try to imagine the life of William Halbert, my mind runs mad with accusation and lament, then goes numb and silent. So I try again.

William Halbert, blue eyes, stout, fought in the Virginia Militia in the Waff Independence.1<sup>st</sup> Regiment, LightDragoons. For his service, Thomas Jefferson gave him 486 acres on Russell Creek in South Carolina.

He was a pious man, no doubt about it, and very much a man of means. A Couple of weeks after Abraham Lincoln's birth, March 5, 1809, "Knowing it's appointed for all men to die" he commended his soul to Almighty God, his body to the earth and "the world plantation whereon now I live, also my household full estate it has pleased God to blessed me with," he disposed to his beloved wife Elizabeth Hill Halbert, his children and grandchildren.

To Elizabeth "two hundred acres of land, including the plantation whereon now I live, I household furniture with all my stock of old ne-

groes and other stock of all kinds during her natural life of widowhood.”

Some of the negroes had names.

With his coming of age, son Joel got Sal and Mose. Enos got Reda. James got young negro Peter and others I gave or put in his possession.” Daughters Martha, Mary, and Lucinda got a couple of nameless negroes each with horses, saddles, and furniture.

God had apparently blessed William Halbert with quite a lot of Negroes to be bred alongside other stock for three generations until Emancipation. Wealth, one hopes, generates wealth.

Let's flash forward a few generations. Best I can tell, my grandfather, Herbert Hill.

He was the great great, great, great grandson of Halbert's brother-in-law, the Reverend William Hill, also pious and having a plantation of its own, but Herbert was born to the zinc and copper mines of Magdalena, New Mexico, fathered my dad, Milford Lee Hill, and his little brother Tommy with my Scottish-American Granma, Lorena.

Lorena got wild and desperate with the Depression. Herbert was in and out of jail and prison, forging checks and such. The ultimate absentee Father.

Lorena told her kids that their dad was shot escaping from prison.

“Your children will never be accepted by either side of the family.” wrote Lorena to dad when he introduced Adelina -- my Mexican-American mom.

In fact, the six of us were easily accepted by my Latino kin.

Ordinary American Mongrels, or “coyotes” as we were called in New Mexico. White kids, who are nonetheless Mexicans who are obviously white.

Lorena got Jesus and multiply remarried

Lastly to Mr. Tidwell. Tidwell nursed her as Alzheimer's ate away at her brain. Rumor has it

(unsubstantiated)

That Tidwell was in the KKK.

Quite substantiated, he was a stone-cold racist.

Family. Familia.

A month before dad died of alcoholism, his final exchange with his mom was, "You have never understood me."

And indeed how could she.

He declared himself Alamogordo's first Buddhist at fourteen, was a self-taught intellectual, agreed to raise his children as Catholic. Was rather more compelled by Lao Tzu than Billy Graham. Praise be to his drunken Buddhist soul, he broke ranks and paid the price. Paying the price he left a spiritual legacy to his children more generous than that left for him.

To trace, the little bit, of the procession of the ancestors in my body. Have known my father's bitter despair, the raw truths he could never shake. How much we want our ancestors to be noble and to ennoble us with their greatness or failing that be decently anonymous rising in time and disappearing wave after wave. But the point is that each of us is an ancestor to the unborn, each a thread in the ragged weave.

And Herbert's vagrant, furtive mind, I knew the years I was homeless. Mercifully in jail only twice -- a lousy thief, a bad boy.

And William Halbert... I know him more intimately than I'll easily admit. My spiritual life these last thirty years has meant nothing at all if not the melting of interlarded layers of arrogance and rectitude and greed sanctified by Divine Right and the impulse to keep all of them under control -- my own demons or whoever else might disturb my complacency. We all recognize William Halbert, don't we? He's so damn loud on the daily news.

The amalgam of rectitude and arrogance with a dash of boar and shame and a shovelful of megalomania, let's call it the Halbert Effect. White male supremacy runs amok.

Apartheid in Rhodesia or slavery and Jim Crow in the US.

No need to name names.

We rely on the received clichés. Thanks for the worldly estate that it has pleased God to bless us with.

Half a billion people all over this world live on less than two dollars a day.

The plantation has become global.

We all know what (don't we?)

What will we leave those who survive us?

And their children?

Grandchildren?

By way of Postscript to this letter.

As write this 12,000 Somalis are being relocated in America, 120 to Edisto Island, where Halbert had a plantation.

Edisto was one of the Bantu beachheads in the United States the Gullah (from Angola) people keeping faith with the Ways of the Motherland these centuries to a measure exceedingly rare in North America

And the Somalis? Well, they are "heathens" from the south of that benighted country, bought and sold as slaves by the Muslim north. Dirt poor. Without English. Having never seen a refrigerator or an indoor bathroom. Unable to drive.

But, praise God, no longer slaves.

## *Love Song to Gaia*

“No creature ever falls short of its own completion.  
Wherever it stands it never fails to cover the ground.”  
— Dogen Zenji

I woke up early this morning and walked to the nearby creek.  
Down a dirt road and through a strand of  
willows, a small brown spider, spunky, hairy,  
landed on the tawny hair of my left arm. "Good morning,  
Grandmother," I smiled and tried to wend my way through the  
thick willows without disturbing her. I  
thought, momentarily, of the Hopi stories about Spider-Woman,  
who'd nest behind the ears of the  
young men so they don't lose the thread of the old wisdom as  
they venture far from what they know.  
And damned if the spider didn't climb right up my arm over my  
shoulder to the hollow behind my ear.  
It began sprinkling shortly after I laid a few wildflowers on a  
stone in the creek, and then the rain ran  
wild. Took shelter under this small cement bridge, dry and

ecstatic in the sound of thunder. My body,  
more naked than the day I was born, wants only to  
sing and dance for the spirits, for this morning I  
emerge into the light of day after seven long years in  
that underworld that lies beneath the Afro-European village.  
Yes, I know few are aware that such a village exists,  
slavery and colonialism having driven all of us a little mad.  
And because Christianity in Europe and then Africa has declared  
this place of initiation the domain of devils and demons,  
few remember the Greek Hades, the Celtic Land of Faerie,  
the Bantu, mpemba, kalunga, kumfi da for what it is,  
and fewer yet go willingly to sit in the circle of the ancestors. I  
want to sing out a few crazy ideas for I am a man of strange  
tastes and find ideas to be actually beautiful,  
sometimes stunning like fireflies lighting a dark path, flashing,  
disappearing, and flashing again. Ideas  
melt quickly from concept to story, from story to music.  
I want to leave the reader with a little music, a little utterly  
unreasonable hope.

Buddy Bolden was mad. Everybody knew it. A barber in  
Slaughter, Louisiana, fond of the bottle and  
fast women, Cornetist extraordinaire, he and his band brought  
jazz to the world in the 1890s. Not a  
single wax disc of his music survives, and in 1907 he  
snapped altogether and spent the last twenty-four years of his  
life in East Louisiana State Hospital.

While Bolden was playing Funky Butt Blues in dives  
around New Orleans, Poincare was having troubles of his  
own on the other  
side of the ocean in France.

Poincare, the grandfather of Chaos theory, was a mathematician  
working hard on equations that  
Would explain the strange behavior of Heavenly Bodies.  
Much to his distress, Poincare discovered that planets do not

orbit within the elegant ellipses that  
classical math had claimed.

Darkness is in fact frightening. It can swallow us up and for all  
our ambition to conquer the natural  
world, nobody will ever own the forest at night. As I write this,  
I hear a stirring in the nearby bushes—a  
possum, I figure. It's been seventy million years since night  
lemurs (our last nocturnal ancestor)  
crawled through the forests of Madagascar.

Now?

Nighthawk, lion, and possum.

*The circle of darkness and light.*

*The sun that sets in the world of the living  
simultaneously rises in the world of the dead.*

*The ancestors begin awakening  
when living things begin to cast their  
long shadows in the evening, and it is  
said that midnight is noon in the village of the spirits.*

*Ngoma ceremonies*

*happen at night because out of the dark the spirits  
come to possess their children,  
to dance with them, to convey their wisdom.*

Sanctuary. Am I afraid?

Yes.

And yet the mystery of the lion moving through the forest at  
night supersedes fear. As my oldest of friends, Jay Salter,  
who lives in lion country on the north coast of California  
likes to tell me, one learns the meaning of humility when  
one realizes that one's not at the top of the food chain.  
Mandaza Kandemwa and I stepped in the edge between  
worlds very early on in our friendship. He was

initiating me into the ngoma of the water spirits, and as it turned out, I was initiating him though it was fully a week before I knew it. He asked me to work on some things that were troubling him; so not a small part of my first initiation was deeply involved in serving his spirits. A few days into this, the following dream still perplexes and astonishes me. In retrospect, I realize that this dream was the moment we stepped into the mystery of sacred twinship. In my dream, Mandaza was telling me a dream. As he told me his dream, I entered into it with him as I sometimes do when 'work with people. It is a profound thing to accompany a dreamer in his dream. Interpretation. Where does the dream lead? That is the question.

As Mandaza told his dream, I followed him in it, past mud houses at the edge of a village. He was carrying a gun, and it was clear that together we were entering the bush to hunt. I told him to close his eyes, to let the forest be dark. He did so without hesitation and continued walking firmly as if he could see in the dark. It was me who felt uncertain. How was I to proceed with working on his dream? And yet Mandaza walked forward with confidence as I have often seen him, confidence undiminished by the lack of sight. I relaxed and followed him, trusting him. It was an honor to teach him this non-Bantu way of working with dreams, which he swiftly became skilled in even in this first lesson. Even before I woke up from this dream within a dream, there was no way to define who was leading whom. Ngangas pay close attention to their dreams because often there are messages that indicate what ritual work to do with someone you're healing or initiating. That afternoon I worked with the dream Mandaza told me in my dream, which is to say we entered again the circumstance of the dream. I followed Mandaza up a dirt road. "My feet have eyes," he said, and "Oh, I know this well. I have been here before in my dreams. I know a sacred place near here. Follow me." I had him close his eyes as we



left the village behind, and as in his dream/my dream, he walked with great solidity and presence. It was hard to keep up with him. We came to a river, and he said, "We must wash off the scent of the village, or we will frighten the animals." We prayed in the water, and before we moved on, he laid his gun down. "I won't be needing this," he said. By this point, we were quite out of time. We hunkered in the bushes along a game trail, for how long I cannot say—minutes, an hour, a day, a year. Mandaza had gone completely silent, and then I heard him snoring thinly. When I returned to the house of the spirits an hour later, he was still deeply asleep. When he woke up, he looked for me, happy as a clam. "Everything turned into water," he tells me, "a whole world of blue water, but I didn't meet any animals except only fish." Strange to go to sleep under a bridge but stranger still to wake up under it at 4:00 A.M. Before I lit the kerosene lamp, I could well have been encamped along an underground stream.

#### An odd dream

I hear African drumming, not "dream drumming" but as if it were actually coming from the meadow downriver. I recognize the beat from the ngoma of the water spirits and people singing to Maria in the Ndebele language. The drumming makes me restless so it's hard to sleep. I am unaware that I'm in fact asleep. Then I see a simple image: a wooden bowl with the Hebrew name of God in it inscribed on a piece of paper. As I wipe the sleep from my eyes, I recall that I have this bowl with me, a gift from my friend Susan Shumba and her husband, Ezekiel. I also remember that "shumba" is Shona for lion.

#### Borders, boundaries and edges.

The boundaries between human and animal, Europe and Africa, night and day, dream and waking, sound and silence and always the edge of the river; the otherness of other people, other cultures, other species-various ways of knowing.

#### And the radical otherness of oneself.

Let's be honest. Who really ever recognized his or her face in the mirror? And failing that, who remembers that face that one bore before birth?

We live in a dreadful time.

The earth is being destroyed, nothing less; and we are all playing a role in destroying it. Those cultures that are on most intimate terms with this planet are being decimated. Traditional ways of knowing are being unraveled by those of us who live in the overdeveloped world, among them the medicine ways of the Shona and Ndebele people who have made me into a healer of sorts. Under this cold bridge at 4:00 A.M., I am willing to do damn near anything to call forth those who might accompany Mandaza and me in this vital work of protecting, celebrating, and encouraging otherness wherever it is threatened. I will plead, harangue, talk tenderly or with fury, with humor or with grief, politely or impolitely because everything is at stake.

Everything.

In my first book, *Dreaming the End of the World*, I became aware that apocalyptic dreams could be divided into two categories that were best understood as two legitimate ways of understanding the present moment in history.

In some dreams the end of the world was near, and the dreamer would often act like a crafty animal that would do whatever might be necessary to prevent this.

In other dreams, the apocalypse had already happened.

The bomb had dropped, the flood had come, the meteor had ravaged the earth.

These dreams are entirely different. In the ruins, compassion is born, and the dreamer is involved intending to the wounded, building community, making new meanings in the ashes of a destroyed world.

My political and spiritual praxis recognizes both these realities as simultaneously true:

The world must be saved; the world is already destroyed.

In either case, one's own soul is at stake if one refuses to act-tenderly, reflectively, skillfully, receptively-on behalf of the world. Let me offer one final metaphor for the edge between worlds. Something to ponder for those of us who live in the belly of God. This is a gift from Henri Poincare', several generations removed. Poincare is sometimes

called the grandfather of Chaos Theory, but his mathematical lineage also spawned Complexity, the

study of how systems—natural systems and cultures, for example—spontaneously organize themselves, find shape. The Afro-European world that Mandaza and I practice as *ngangas* within is such a complex system, emerging quite on its own by way of initiation, dialogue and generosity. "Complex systems," writes M. Mitchell Waldrop, "have somehow acquired the ability to bring order and chaos into a special kind of balance. This balance point often called the edge of chaos, is where the components of a system never quite lock into place and yet never quite dissolve into turbulence either. The edge of chaos is where life has enough stability to sustain itself and enough creativity to deserve the name of life... The edge of chaos is the constantly shifting battle zone between stagnation and anarchy, the one place where a complex system can be spontaneous, adaptive, and alive." For us non-mathematicians it might be easiest to imagine order as ice, molecules frozen into unchanging relation to each other, and chaos as the roiling turbulence of boiling water. The edge of chaos is the fractal zone between: no simple boundary but in every respect a lively, interactive world like the edge between two ecosystems or between day and night. Mathematically speaking, there is a very good reason why this edge has the same structure as landscape boundaries: the edge between order and chaos is where life is. The biosphere itself lives on the edge, being unable to tolerate either too much order or too much randomness. It is here that otherness proliferates; it is here, planet earth, that otherness comes into relationship with otherness. This is true of all living beings, of cultures, of the strange configurations of the soul and, as far as I'm concerned, the spirit worlds that make use of Mandaza and me as *ngangas*. All beings yearn for the edge for it is where we meet each other and where we feel most alive. Furthermore, each being that we meet invites us to the edge simply because of the fact of their otherness. Invites us to the long migration, to the edge of chaos that will without question take centuries to complete from this impoverished place of greed and hunger. The journey is arduous and necessary, but the point will come

when even the metaphor of "journey" is shed. For the edge of chaos is exactly where one is at this very moment, was never elsewhere, and only awaits the opening of the eyes. The sun is rising. It is time to scribble the name of God on a piece of paper and put it in this wooden bowl to place in the river and say thank you.

Thank you.

# **PART TWO**

Essays on Healing

## *Da Mojo, A User's Guide*

Da mojo first bit me on the ass for real in the mid-nineties. It was a few years before I was initiated as a medicine man among the Shona and Ndebele Zulu in Zimbabwe.

(“Mojo is an Ebonic form of the Bantu word kimoyo, meaning ‘[language] of the Spirit.’ writes Malaika Mutere. Among Western Bantu, mojo was nkisi, a medicine bundle, a gathering of ancestor spirits that had incarnated in this herb or that stone. Here I gather a few stories and ethical reflections that are the mojo that took me into the African world.)

### Introduction to Mojo

The 1990s were a season of radical transition between epistemologies: “ways of knowing.” To wit – I was finishing up a deep psychoanalysis with Dr. John Seeley, on the couch, paring away layer after layer of childhood trauma to my infancy in intensive care, to birth trauma and enwombment to ... the unnameable.

Those who know what it is to submit to this modern rite of passage know what epistemological breakdown is about. The healing process involves recognizing the unconscious as a “real place” and that unconscious traumas shape and inform one's day to day life.

One remembers the story beneath the story of who you think you are.

My analysis was classical – my “mother” was the sacred keeper of the threshold – which is to say I had to pass by mom as the wicked witch of the west as I proceeded to the deeper traumas of life and death struggle.

Getting born, getting a staph infection in my navel, treated with sulfa drugs that I proved to be deathly allergic, receiving the last rites of the Catholic Church so I wouldn’t spend eternity in limbo.

Thoroughly rescued it was apparently mine to spend a brief space in the hell called earth that “I might learn to bear the beams of love,” as William Blake wrote.

But enough of the backstory.

Now da mojo.

At that time I was living in Santa Cruz and in a most passionate young marriage with my second wife, four-hundred miles to the south. I did not want to break up my kid’s childhood so the first ten years of my marriage were spent in airplanes and making love a few days a month.

Da mojo came to me when I was in Topanga, CA for the last two months of my analysis. I was walking a broad circle around our rural spread, leaving offerings in the four directions and singing to the Orisha in Yoruba (a West African language)

(The Orisha are the multiple faces of God in the Yoruba tribal tradition. I was writing a book that involved the African origins of Black American culture – long since published as *The Village of the Water Spirits, The Dreams of African-Americans*. Spring Publications, 2005. I’d learned a handful of sacred songs and was being prepared to be initiated in Nigeria.

When the mojo first came, I was just learning the old way of communicating with the invisible with praise song, prayer and offerings.)

So I called on the spirit of the setting sun in the west, laid out raw beef heart and poured wine and sang to Shango, the Orisha of fire and lightning, known for passion and the tempering of passion for the sake of the tribe.

As I was pouring wine and singing, lightning -- actual lightning -- cracked not far from me.

And the thunder still resounds.

Just as the descent into the unconscious introduced me to a way of knowing (and undid another that didn't know the unconscious) so did my passage into the inspirited world of African medicine.

In the psychological frame we take for granted, only the inner world of humans is inspirited. What is unconscious is made conscious and rendered as a more truthful and complete story of who one is. In this way the self is made whole.

This self is a cultural and historical artifact, a product of the individualism that has taken European culture. It is a self without deep context, without community, and thus a trick done with mirrors.

What resonates from that moment when Shango came is that the world is inspirited. I did not, thank God, indulge the fantasy that "I" caused "it" but we are profoundly and tacitly in dialogue with the elementals.

There is reciprocal communication.

If the "inner life" is the sole place of depth and human subjectivity the lone domain of sentient intelligence then the demons of narcissism are not far. Other animals are "dumb beasts" and the earth is just a repository of natural "resources."

(As I was typing this last paragraph, my wife called me out, "Michael, come out. There is a rainbow!" She called me to the field where Shango came two decades ago and sure enough there was a rainbow, unheard of on a dry summer day. The mojo.)

A Circle of Elk

During the time that opened up with Shango, lots of other extraordinary things happened. Lightning came not once but several times and I came to know a little of his temperament. In Yoruba, the spirit of fire is young and at times impetuous. For the Huichol of Mexico he is Grandfather Tatewari.

As my old way of seeing broke down, I went into the forest in the mountains of central Arizona where my wife and I once had a writing



retreat. I brought offerings for Eshu Elegba – the spirit of the cross-roads – and chanted a Lucumi prayer to him. (Lucumi is the Yoruba/Spanish idiom of Afro-Cuban culture.

“Please tell me what this draw to Africa is about. I’m confused.”

I was suddenly overwhelmed with nausea and on my knees dry heaving. As I was gagging I heard the cracking of twigs nearby me.

O my! Hunting season. I

Pulled myself together, trying to piece together a plausible persona of a man not in the midst of a tribal rite and lifted my head to greet the hunter but what I saw was half a dozen elk gathered around me, browsing. For a half hour I sat still, breathing lightly, and watched them. A few feet away, a large stag with a massive rack of horns would look up into my eyes and linger unafraid, then continue browsing. There was a gunshot from afar, they momentarily startled and then continued browsing. Eventually there was another gunshot and they all scattered.

I knew then my call to Africa was about initiation into the way of mojo and the kinship of all living beings.

The Shadow of Mojo: Witchcraft

Ritual hexing and protection from the hex is Afro-European mojo: amulets, herbs, the Holy Bible, garlic over the doorway, a cross around one’s neck or over the bed, the Jewish hamsa to defend against the evil eye, the name of Jesus (or other magical words, “hocus pocus” being a peasant adaptation of the Latin Mass -- hoc est corpus meum) and on and on. When the world falls apart, one will reach for anything for protection, and so close are the African and European ways of going about it that students of Southern folklore used to engage in lively debates about where exactly any given ritual gesture originated.

African-American culture went through a vast epistemological shift from 1930 to 1960 with the Great Migration from the rural south to the urban north. Previous to 1930 “Africanisms” pervaded the south – root doctors, ‘hands’ also known as mojo, full immersion baptism like the ngoma of the water spirits, etc. These old ways, profound and wise, began to be diabolized.

Matters African became “hoodoo”—hexing.

When a culture is under assault, witchcraft accusation proliferates and the ones who honor the way of the ancestors are especially endangered. I've seen this with the Navajo in Arizona, the Garifuna in Belize and the Maya in Guatemala. This is the success of Christianized imperialism. It sets up traditional ways to auto cannibalize themselves. The witches – in Zimbabwe they are called varozi – are said to gather secretly in the forest to eat people's souls. Witchcraft accusation effectively eats the souls of very old traditions.

In Zimbabwe there is a 30% HIV rate. The life expectancy when I was first initiated in 1996 was 59 years. Now its 29 years. Moreover AIDS has a symptomatology very much like witchcraft disease and varozi accusations are common and lethal.

Salem was small potatoes.

I know what it is to be hexed – it is real – but here I'll tell a couple of stories about hexing.

But first a story of untempered mojo of which hexing is a variety.

It was a moment of desperation and heartbreak when I called on Ogun to do whatever he could to save the life of my friend B.

B. had a complete psychotic break and had barricaded himself in a trailer on our land. I knew him to be suicidal and for a week his paranoia had locked the door separating us.

Ogun, the spirit of iron it is said is the fiercest of warriors. In the old days, it is said, that we down here in the human village could not possibly understand the infinite nature of God, so the Divine refracted into the hundreds of Orisha such as Shango or Yemaya the spirit of the ocean and Ogun took his blade and cut the path between heaven and earth so the Orisha could dance among their children. I was intimidated by Ogun but also quite helpless.

It was the evening of January 16, 1994.

"Whatever you can do, please do!" I said, blowing cigar smoke on my altar.

At 4:30 am the Northridge earthquake happened and B. rushed from his trailer and huddled naked in a doorjamb of our bedroom. He began in earnest the long passage out of psychosis.

Did I become infatuated with MY power?

Unfortunately, yes.

When my mother was struggling with her brother, Frank Ortiz (Reagan's favorite ambassador to Latin America) over my grandfather's estate, Frank hired a rich man's lawyers to ensure my mother would be impoverished in her old age.

I invoked Ogun – and a lawyer on Frank's legal team had a heart attack. Not lethal but it was sufficient to begin instructing me in matters of ego and mojo.

I also called on Ogun to undo the presidency of George W. Bush who I saw and see as altogether evil. As it turned out GWB's second Saturn return coincided with his debate with John Kerry, October 12, 2004. I was more cautious this time, merely calling on Bush to hex himself.

I sang to Ogun and fed Ogun with a dash of rum on his altar.

“May he undo himself....”

This he did.

This exchange between Linda Grabel --no doubt an astrologically savvy plant at the debate.

Grabel: President Bush, during the last four years, you have made thousands of decisions that have affected millions of lives. Please, give three instances in which you came to realize you had made a wrong decision, and what you did to correct it.

Thank you.

Bush: Now, you asked what mistakes. I made some mistakes in appointing people, but I'm not going to name them. I don't want to hurt their feelings on national TV.

LAUGHTER

Laughing as they say, all the way to the grave.

Saturn return is a time of profound self- reflection. As my publisher – the astrologer Stephan Hewitt wrote me: “The Saturn return is a time of radical changes in life, the passage from one life cycle to another. The first is from child to adult, and the second Saturn return is a doorway that separates the adult from the elder. Major life changes come to pass

at the second Saturn return that will be the result of either preparing for a life of wisdom, or encountering circumstances that will compel you to make the necessary shifts in awareness“

Saturn return should be a time of profound self-reflection.

I confess *schadenfreude* as I watched Bush's reputation unravel after that debate from his refusal to face what destruction he had wrought, And ... by way of self-hexing, this effort to undo Bush seemed to provoke an exacerbation of multiple sclerosis

Tempering,

Initiation and the Etiquette of having Mojo

Ah! The wisdom of retrospect

I look back on these stories as gonzo shamanizing – at times radiantly benevolent, at others dangerous or self-destructive. They represent a passage of four years when I was being prepared for my first initiation in Zimbabwe.

The evening when the medicine man (nganga) Mandaza Kandemwa began initiating me into the *ngoma* of the water spirits, he asked me who sent me.

“Spider,” I replied. “She makes the connections.”

On reflecting now on my initiations into tribal medicine I see how true that remains.

A Hopi story says it precisely.

It seems that the first winter solstice was upon the old ones and they were frightened of no light, endless cold, the death of all beings.

The animals held council.

Bear said, “I can bring back the sun,” and he tossed his lasso and pulled and pulled to no effect.

“Let me try,” said Wolf and he tossed lasso and pulled and pulled and pulled without success.

Then little grandmother spider said quietly, “I can do this” and all the animals laughed at the thought. She spun a thread and tenderly pulled the sun back with little effort.

This story speaks of initiation and tempering, not brute spiritual strength but making the connection.

When I do a healing ceremonial on our land I finish the first evening singing to spider to bring a dream to the one who is healing. She unweaves the pattern of dis-ease and re-weaves a new life. After I “gave over” multiple sclerosis I had her tattooed on my coccyx with the long line of her thread moving up my spine to my brain stem: the “trail of tears” passing through where my lesions were. Spider re-wove my neurosystem.

The first night of my first initiation in Zimbabwe I dreamt there were two full moons and I was in a Bushman cave on the second. It was mine to read the message in the cave paintings,

I could not.

I told Mandaza this dream in the morning.

“Before your initiation is over, you will be able to read what the Bushman spirits want to tell you,” he said.

A couple of weeks later at the culmination of initiation at the Zambezi River, I had another dream in the Bushman cave. I could read it fluently.

“This one now has two mothers.”

My second mother is the one my people call Mambokadzi, the queen. She is the full moon (the stars are her children), the female elephant (Mandlovu – the spirit of kinship) and, in the syncretic poetry of African people, my Zulu clan sings to her as Maria, the mother of God.

She is also the mother of the water spirits, the spirits of healing and peacemaking.

Initiation (which is perpetual) is initiation into the web of interconnection that is the village of the living, the dead and the unborn. The young gonzo shaman couldn’t see this, couldn’t see the context of relationship that every ritual gesture takes place in and draws from.

He was famished for power.

Mitakuye Oyasín, say the Lakota. “All my relations.”

One thing I have seen initiating North Americans into the ngoma tradition alongside Mandaza is how spiritually HUNGRY we are. I remember one group we were initiating were getting

very publically trance possessed one after another and were such a

sight that a Zulu member of our clan rushed off to get her father to behold the spectacle of a bunch of white people taken by spirits.

"It's not true," he laughed. "White people don't have ancestors."

"Come! Come!" And so he did and was astonished.

It is with a kind sadness that I tell initiates before they return to America that now things begin.

From bitterly, blessed experiences I call return my est training – eat shit and thrive. The necessary ordeal of transforming humiliation into humility. With initiation it's easy the delusion that one has been made 'special' and 'precious,' that one's fate is so much larger than life.

"Of belonging to another, or to others, or to God," writes T. S. Eliot, "The only wisdom we can hope to acquire Is the wisdom of humility: humility is endless."

In the ngoma tradition one is initiated by the spirit of sacred illness. Water spirit disease includes an incapacitating empathy. Initiation involves making an alliance with the spirits that afflict so you can heal others.

My good fortune was that my initiations in Africa were completed by apprenticeship to the diagnosis of multiple sclerosis. Humility is endless and to walk the way of traditional medicine, the primary spiritual path is humility.

The est curriculum is about honoring the full gamut of being human – the sweetness of light and abject despair.

It's also about getting out of the way so Spirit can come through and minister to a suffering world.

And so it is.

When Percival came to the holy grail it was his to answer the essential question: what is the grail for?

The grail is for love.

Likewise those who would be initiated must ask: what is the mojo for?

The mojo is for healing.

Mitakuye Oyasin. All my relations.

## *Death, Killing and Beatitude*

The death that we see in movies has little to do with the quiet nature of how death actually is. We prefer *le morte du jour*, dramatic, perhaps raw and bloody. Such is the way of the movies but I have been at the side of many deaths and I can say emphatically that it's generally a much quieter affair

I've noticed an uncanny, silent awareness in people whose souls are getting ready for death. Days of being lost, quiet, in some far interior but also a knowingness. It's that knowingness that I call uncanny.

I noticed it with Mrs. Codrescu who was the first person who ever died in my presence.

I met Mrs. Codrescu three years before she died at 90. I was an incompetent nurse's aide in a dingy little nursing home before began my training as a RN, Our conversations were always the same: halved.

The first half: "I want to die. Kill me please. Please kill me. I can't live here. This is horrible. Can't you kill me?"

"It is horrible," I responded. "I am so sorry that your life's come to

this. But I can't kill you, dear. I really can't though I know it'd make you very happy. I'd lose my job for sure."

Every day we'd laugh at that one and I'd try to shift to our shared passion. Romanian music! I'd recently gotten quite fanatic about the cimbalom and what Gheorghe Zamfir does on the panpipes. Not to mention the gypsy music.

"Gypsy music?" She was intrigued. The Gypsies were despised when she was a girl but so alive for her. Sometimes she'd get a little flirtatious when we talked about their music.

And so it was day after day. I never did say goodbye to Mrs. Codrescu when I left that job to prepare for nursing school.

Mrs. Codrescu was admitted from the convalescent home to the small community hospital where I did my second semester of nursing school.

She'd had a silent heart attack and was unresponsive on arrival. I was the nursing student assigned to her, a mass of awkwardness under the gaze of my professor.

Came to visit her one evening after my school week ended, sat at her bedside and said, "Mrs. Codrescu? It's Michael. Do you remember me? It's been a long time since we've talked like we used to. Remember? We talked music, Gypsy music. The violin, Mrs. Codrescu, do you remember the violin?"

I talked this way for perhaps twenty minutes. It had been a week and a half since she had said a word, or opened her eyes. Just laying on her back and breathing. But she did open her eyes and said "I remember you" closed her eyes and returned to just breathing.

Back to the hospital after the weekend. I wasn't assigned Mrs. Codrescu by my professor so I quietly entered her room to see how she was. An uncanny silent awareness in people who are getting ready to die.

A knowingness even at the very threshold. I was in the room not a minute when she expired her last breath

It was clear – as it had been with Robert in chapter seven of my *Conspiracies of Kindness* book – that she had waited for me or perhaps



merely felt my presence, as I entered her room. She knew it was time to let go.

Her death fell lighter than a feather. I'd not seen the face of the death until that moment and I saw it in its most benevolent form, its beatitude.

I was surprised and moved to see such a death in a movie, *The Ballad of Jack and Rose*.

Jack's (Daniel Day-Lewis) an old hippie who lives off the Maine coast with his teenage daughter. He has an extreme heart condition and as he prepares for death.

To be alive, to be dying in all its biological rawness the breathing and thus the life

slowly shuts down the regulation center of respiration in the brain stem.

Ram Dass once asked a spirit ally, "what shall I tell people about death?"

"Tell them it's completely safe."

And death by unnatural causes?

The unmoved heart of the heroic or unheroic killer that is the staple of the movies has little relationship to the actual act of killing.

There is a wound to taking another human life, as any veteran will tell you if we would take the time to listen.

During this desperate moment, when the Bush administration attempted to make Empire respectable.

Perpetual war.

There is no time to mindlessly consume these lies.

And pondering five simple words of Clint "Dirty Harry" Eastwood as he responds to the young Hmong kid in *Gran Torino*. The kid asked the essential question of a boy who longs for revenging bloodshed with bloodshed:

"What does it feel like to kill somebody?"

"You don't want to know," says the Eastwood figure, a Korean war veteran who doesn't care much for "gooks" but nonetheless protects the young man from his impulse to kill.

"I wish I had never acquired the knowledge of my capacity to kill," said Lance Dickson to me when we were in Vietnam.

Eastwood made "make my day" the lingo of every twelve year old trying to look menacing in a dangerous world. America doesn't in fact want to know what it is to kill and so we kill freely. John Kerry among others testified to the killing of civilians in Vietnam in the first Winter Soldiers conference over thirty years ago and last March a second Winter Soldiers gathering convened.

A generation of Iraq vets is joining their grandfathers in the army of the homeless because America never did want to know.

In cinema we consume death hungrily and endlessly. I watch a lot of movies – a lot – and I've spent over half my life working with the dying and befriending those who have killed.

Strange amalgam. To consume death and killing but a fundamental taboo on telling the truth about death and killing.

What is it about this systematic falsifying of something so basic?  
And in what way does it falsify us in our very soul?

## ***The Passage from the Apocalyptic Rite of Initiation through Africa to the Craft of Compassion***

Four stories come immediately to mind – the first two foundational to the book, *The Village of the Water Spirits*, the third heartbreaking and funny, and the fourth transitional to my eighth book, *The Craft of Compassion at the Bedside of the Ill*.

Foundational.

My first book on this site, *Dreaming the End of the World: Apocalypse as a Rite of Passage* about the patterns between dreamers about the end of the world. I noticed that these dreams had the shape of tribal rites of initiation and the conclusion of the book involved a vision quest where I stole under the cover of night on the White Sands Missile Range in New Mexico to the Trinity Site where America tested the

first nuclear weapon in July, 1945 shortly before Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It was at Trinity that I performed a ritual of "healing the dream of apocalypse." At ground zero -- scouring my memories, my feelings and fantasies I gave to Spirit the impulse to make enemies in any way, to withdraw from the deep psychospiritual machinery of enemy making that so fuels American culture.

I made a "campfire" of little pieces of paper, each a moment of "enemy-making" and burned it where the nuclear fire first burned. Then under the ash of the life I was leaving behind I buried a figure of Kwan Yin, the Buddhist spirit of limitless compassion. Leaving behind this tender rite as the sun rose I was soon exposed to the desert sun and the fact that I'd trespassed on a missile range and indeed it took me a few years of reflection before I realized that when the planes flew over to drop bombs near me they were just trying to frighten me. In a poem I wrote about being bombed:

There was no place to hide. Became a dusty fetus curled up amongst cactus with only a small prayer in a small voice: "Please, if I die now regard the life of my daughter with kindness if she is to be fatherless, tend to her heart"

The American Air Force aptly added the grace note to my rite of giving up enemy-making.

Recovering from my time in the desert in a cheap hotel in Socorro, I was scribbling notes on a second book about white people's dreams about black people and black peoples dreams about white people.

Did I personally regard blacks as "enemy"? "Personal" was as irrelevant as was "personally" wanting to murder millions of Asians in Japan and Vietnam. On my father's side we held Gullah slaves in Virginia and h. The question, like with *Dreaming the End of the World* was about healing the nightmare of history. When LA burned in 1992 after the police were acquitted for beating Rodney King to a pulp, my own racial wounds were made vividly present. Both being biracial -- that is to say White and Mexican --- and an "ordinary" white all American distance from the lives of black folk I was also well aware of how deeply blacks had shaped who I am. I began to collect dreams and doing

much book study of the African origins of Black American culture. It was up late one hot August night when I was going through the dreams of a Mr. Cary, incarcerated in New York, when it first became clear that Black Americans were dreaming whites ``in exactly the same fashion that Bantu people have understood whiteness since the Portuguese first made contact with the kingdom of the Kongo in the fifteenth century. In other words, Africa has kept faith with the African-American soul. In spite of the bitter historic realities of separation upon separation upon separation, Black culture in America is an undeniably African culture even, if not especially, in the intimate matters of the heart.”

Foundational.

The sad and funny story happened perhaps ten years ago when I was a RN and shaman at UCLA Medical Center. A slow graveyard. I was working alongside a black woman from St Louis and an African woman from Ghana. With generous warmth and humor they were sharing the stereotypes that each held from both sides of the Atlantic. Teresa from Missouri said she grew up knowing Africans from Tarzan movies.

“You’all were definitely Jungle Bunnies, that’s for sure.”

Mary from West Africa had her own thoughts about the “primitiveness” of Black Americans.

The common ground was that African/African- Americans had “no culture.”

“Funny” as this is (and its definitely not funny) it underscores the historic wound that the Trans-Atlantic slave trade exacted on a profound world. The crazy ambition of Village is that this wound be healed.

Just as *Dreaming the End of the World* gave birth to *The Village of the Water Spirits* and *Twin from Another Tribe*, my passage through Africa and the healing of race gave birth to *The Craft of Compassion at the Bedside of the Ill*.

*Craft* had several places of origin – my wife emphatically insisting that it would be an offering to those spirits that would heal me of multiple sclerosis, for example.

In Bantu culture one is healed of sacred illness by being initiated by

the spirit of the affliction. I came back from Africa in the early part of this century numb from the waist down and eventually my legs started giving away.

I'd eventually say MS was a profound gift. The spirit of MS came to complete the initiations into tribal medicine that began in Zimbabwe.

After a few years of exacerbation and remission and exacerbation – falling down in public, unable to get up, wearing a diaper for incontinence of urine and shit, going mad with sleeplessness from steroids, etc., I went to the forest and spent two months alone meditating, praying, and ritually giving over the MS with gratitude that such a generous Guest had come to teach me.

Late into the night I wrote *The Craft of Compassion at the Bedside of the Ill*.

When I left the woods I thought was free of MS.

Now understand this common with MS -- shifting from remitting/relapsing MS to Progressive MS.

Try not to indulge nostalgia and despair for "remitting" the GOOD ol' daze and this quiet and relentless disintegration. Embarrassing being handicapped and following the PERKS to death--depth.

When an MRI confirmed this momentary healing my neurologist, Dr. Russ Shimizu said, "Whatever voodoo you are doing, keep on doing it."

In Africa they say God dreams this individual life whereas the ancestors dream the life of the village.

A few months after I left behind the MS I had a dream. Mandaza and I were walking on the beach and he was surprised to see me walking so free – without a cane.

"How did this happen mapatya?" "Well you always told me love heals, brother. "

We went into the water and I led him to a water labyrinth.

"This is not like a land labyrinth, mapatya. If you get lost you just dive under the labyrinth and then come to the surface."

Water is a common language between Mandaza and myself and full immersion in water is the central ritual of peacemaking, healing and

initiation in the ngoma of the water spirits. Yes -- to dive beneath the symptomatology of an “incurable neuromuscular disease” and come to the surface healed.

God is certainly kind.

The last time I was in Africa, Mandaza and I adapted the Craft to an initiation into the ngoma of the water spirits and lead a group of people to the village of the ancestors and back. This is the poetry of African culture on both sides of the Atlantic. Anthropologists call it syncretism – the way a culture improvises hybridity of different cultural elements and makes them local.

Africanizes them.

Indeed had I not been initiated those years into ngoma the Craft would never have arrived.

Step one of the Craft is self-compassion, which in Zimbabwe was about finding the crack between worlds through that moment when you were first brought to your knees in helpless supplication. Through this crack we were able to find our way to where the ancestors lived. Everybody had their story.

Step four – the mysterium – involved stepping through the gates of death at the Zambezi. Complete surrender. Step four is about stepping out of the way so that the spirit of compassion can come forth in all its radiant

intelligence. At Trinity it was Kwan Yin. In Zimbabwe the Mam-bokadzi who is known by my people in Africa to be also Mandlovu – the female elephant who is the spirit of kinship. And the full moon – the stars are her children.

And Maria—the Blessed Virgin.

## ***Bantu Marijuana: Smoking with Grandma***

Sacred Bantu marijuana was my miracle MS healer—it got me functional and even out of the diapers the necessity of MS incontinence.

May I be blunt? After being fired from Ronald Reagan Medical Center for being disabled with multiple sclerosis – this after being a registered nurse for 25 years - I think I have earned my piss and vinegar. So, shall we stop the lying already? Dare we? Shall we not just agree from the outset that Western culture is merrily addicted to drugs and to meds?

I've actually thought about calling this essay "What Western medicine doesn't know about drugs," but that's too fucking polite. Like many readers I know a lot about illegal drugs - first weed at 11 years old. And as I suspect is true for most readers, I've been discerning in this regard--and consistently so. I've stuck to my drugs of choice since I was a kid and I am an aging (63 years old) man now.

I lost a lover to methamphetamines. I was Jill's last friend in her intimate, anarchist community - which is to say as she descended into



paranoia and I was naive enough to think I could save her. Then, she committed suicide. An ordinary American story.

Meth for me? Nah.

Heroin? Uh, uh.

Crack?

Put it down brother, sister. I've long kept faith with marijuana - which is medicine. And psychedelics - which are medicine. But piss and vinegar wise, Western culture and Western medicine have long been addicted to meds. Without question the strongest and most destructive mind-altering substance I've ever taken, prescribed by my neurologist, was the steroid Decadron.

Last time was dosed by the IV med Solumedrol.

Was five days and nights without sleep and was admitted to a psych hospital from the nursing home was temporarily a resident of.

Danger to myself and others.

Even told had raped an old woman.

Listen told the MD this is totally pharmaceutically provoked mania. "Been here before" -- previous treatments of MS.

So, like before had her prescribe the antipsychotic Seroquel.

Actually too fond with "my" madness to mess with it pharmaceutically BUT needed to sleep.

And so I did.

I had the pleasure of hanging with a neighbor a couple of days ago that was long ago diagnosed with muscular dystrophy. We compared notes on the madness of steroid therapy.

My first meeting with my neurologist was when he diagnosed me with MS and tried to ply a steroid taper upon me. As an RN, forever working night shifts, one learns quite a lot about steroids. Not uncommon for an oblivious young doc to prescribe them at the beginning of your shift, thus doubling or tripling your workload.

Did I mention that Western culture is addicted to drugs and I've spent most of my adult life pushing them?

With the first flare up of MS, me falling in the street, couldn't drive cause it seemed I was losing my eyesight. (Not to mention I was

learning to wet the bed for the first time since a kid and would occasionally “be shit” myself.) It was with terror and abject humility that I approached Dr. S. for my first steroid prescription. ON THE OTHER HAND, steroids proved to be miraculous.

As an anti-inflammatory (MS is an inflammatory disease), Decadron in three days had me able to walk and to see that I wasn't going to spend the rest of my life blind, as happens sometimes with MS. Very soon, however, it wasn't clear at all that I wouldn't spend the rest of life psychotic.

With “steroid taper” one starts with a big dose and then halves it a few days later – and then half again – until it eventually disappears altogether. As a nurse I gotta say: elegant. As a patient? My language lacks sufficient cuss words. Steroid taper manufactures a pharmaceutical bipolar event. Delusions of omnipotence (I once looked into learning flamenco dancing and marrying a Mexican Mormon). When you're high, anything is possible. Anything! (I emphasize this knowing that some readers understand this by way of meth, crack and ordinary cocaine).

It's hard not to look with affection at those steroid seasons of being “up!” But then there is coming down. And down one goes. Very far down, one goes. “Up” on steroids I would sleep

an hour a night if I was lucky. One could say one gets a tad wiggy after a few weeks.

After first visiting Bonkersville, I re-approached my Dr. S. Of course, he prescribed the antipsychotic Seroquel along with the antipsychotics Haldol (injected in whatever muscle) plus Thorazine for tardive dyskinesia. Normally, I like madness too much to mess with it. On the other hand, the Seroquel saved my ass. Until it did the most intimate bond/relationship of my life was terminally and irreparably damaged from my season in hell. My conclusion: I knew I had to find a reliable non-steroidal anti-inflammatory.

In search of this, for several years I'd oscillated between tribal Africa and the UCLA medical center. I was studying the African origins of African-American culture. Since the 1930s it has been noted that the

Bantu tradition of the Spirits was central to what became black America. In Zimbabwe, I was literally initiated as a medicine man in the “ngoma” (medicine) of the water spirits. As I was immersed in this culture, I grew ever more cynical of the brutal drug pushing culture that I was born to.

Every year Western allopathic medicine kills 250,000 patients in American hospitals. How many have I killed? After I was fired from Ronald Reagan UCLA Medical Center (bless St. Ronnie: even after his death he continues), I wrote an essay

in my imagination called “The Patient I killed, the One I Tortured and the One Whose Life I Saved.”

Every MD and nurse knows these killing fields, which have taken every one of these 250,000. Western culture loves its addictions, including to meds, and we all have stories of who has fallen, so we turn a blind eye to the cause.

It was in Zimbabwe I learned about real medicine – and one of “our” medicines is “mbanje” or marijuana.

It is the way of Bantu medicine to listen to an herb and what it tells you. Mbanje, in one of the tribal languages of my people, is also called “ambuya,” which means grandmother. Of course, you ritually receive her as an elder who is generous in her wisdom. In the medicine of the Bantu, a disease like MS, is considered sacred. Illness is a gift. It opens the door.

The ngoma tradition is both a peacemaking tradition and a healing tradition. To make peace is to heal. To heal is to make peace. And grandmother says that you have to learn to listen to what undoes you. Of course, contemporary American so-called medicine very much loves the metaphor of war - war on cancer, war on drugs, war on Muslims (thanks Dick and Donald) – and we Americans who know the killing fields, really know a lot about these various battles.

I first began taking mbanje seriously as a medicine when I noted that with marijuana I was no longer peeing or shitting my pants. In retrospect, I laugh at how I was still stranded

between medical traditions. The nursing school which I once at-

tended in order to learn the physiological pathways, never taught me that (of all things) marijuana would make it possible for me to walk out in public without a diaper. Back then, when I was a smartass to beat the band, it was obvious to me that this medical marijuana business was hokum – the invention of stoner MD 's around their Hookah.

It is said by those sons-of-bitches who are wiser than myself that God has a sense of humor. Quite a card, they say. The last laugh was me without a diaper, and now the medical literature – I dare say “allopathic literature” – is becoming fascinating and extensive about multiple sclerosis and medical marijuana. Why, there was even a substantial piece in *Neurology Now* magazine.

And, that piece dares speak the Holy Grail of the reparation of the myelin sheaths, as accomplished by marijuana – the erosion of which sheaths, they say, makes for multiple sclerosis.

So, here is grandmother for me to attend to.

## *The Heart of Learning the Craft of Compassion*

This essay is written for anyone who takes the matter of learning compassion seriously. In such a time as we live, I dare say there is nothing more important. Simple-minded and stubborn, it speaks of the effort to understand and live the craft of generosity that proceeds from the heart.

As a practicing Buddhist and a psychotherapist, Aura Glaser was taken with the traditional Tibetan teaching that compassion is the ground of human happiness. She comments in her book, *A Call to Compassion*, that the “Tibetan tradition is replete with instruction and methodology” about the development of compassion “because while the rest of the world was focused on outer progress, Tibet was focused on inner development.” Moreover, “since love and compassion are understood in this tradition to be both the engine and elixir of transformation, enormous emphasis was placed on their cultivation.”

Drawing on these teachings, Glaser reimagined her practice as a

therapist, making the development of compassion the healing modality she offers her clients. She distills four major points “from the essential actions and principles of these teachings:

- Compassion for self
- Compassion for others
- Equalizing and exchanging self and other (what I call radical empathy).

- No self and no other” (living compassion). I draw loosely from Glaser and for the sake of a practical path I write of these four distillations as “steps.” I trace the arc from self-compassion to living compassion as I understand it.

“Steps” demand a necessary caveat for as one approaches the and will never be.

(This is even true of self-compassion.) Compassion is one's original nature and though we forever muddy this ordinary truth (what Buddhism calls dukkha -- wherever you are you want to be elsewhere) it is nonetheless present if we simply pause and open our eyes.

The New Yorker cartoon is apt: a doctor with his stethoscope draped over his shoulder tells the patient, “I’m afraid you are suffering from a paradigm shift.” The first two sections of this essay, compassion for self and others perhaps are written within a familiar personalized paradigm but as we proceed through radical empathy the fixity and centrality of the self begins to loosen.

In living compassion one sets the self to the side so compassion can move with its radiant intelligence.

Unimpeded.

With each step the opportunity to love is always now, the place this very place. From now and from exactly where you are – withhold nothing that the craft of generosity might become the vibrant truth that you live for. Or as the Zen teacher Cheri Huber puts it, “love as much as you can from wherever you are with what you’ve got. That’s the best you can ever do.”

STEP ONE:

SELF-COMPASSION AND HOW THE LIGHT GETS IN

Recently while teaching the craft of compassion in a large drug rehabilitation facility, one worker raised the question of helping addicts heal from shame.

“They are so consumed with self-hate,” he said.

He, like almost all sitting in the room, was himself a recovering addict so I asked, “How did you heal from your years of addiction, from your own shame?”

Hozro is the core of Navajo medicine. Healing ceremonials like the Nightway Ceremony are about drawing the ill person back to hozro. When I lay out the cards of the Amor Fati oracle my intent is to lay out a little field of relationships the way a singer makes a sand painting with pollen, crushed flower petals and different colors of sand for the patient to enter into and be realigned with the pattern that returns him to hozro. But hozro is not exactly beauty as the idea is conceived in English. Firstly Dine has nothing like the noun system that is the very fabric of European languages. Everything is effectively a verb, and activity, a way of being.

Secondly hozro means beauty as a feeling tone as much as the visual display we associate with the word. It is harmony, balance, and physical well-being. It is right and generous relationship with family, clan, and land. My translation of hozro is no better than any, and certainly lacking poetry is “right relationship” or perhaps, “right relating”. But respecting the limitations of English I translate, *sa'iah naghai bikeh hozro* as, “there is beauty in the making of beauty or the activity of right relating refines right relating”.

Adorned in white.

Would that Nietzsche were conversant in Dine', “fati” in Latin, German and English a noun instead of a torque of relatedness. Amor altogether insufficient and inexpressive of what a soul must submit to in order to make sense of the incomprehensible. To couple “Well, I let go and let God. I was brought to my knees,” he said.

Everyone nodded in assent. I also nodded in assent remembering how I was brought to my knees as a homeless teenage druggie. Unpack-

ing this collective moment of recognition we were able to speak of the nature of genuine self-compassion.

I quoted Leonard Cohen's well known lyrics: "Forget about your perfect offering. There is a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in."

How do we accept our radiant imperfection? How does humiliation transform into humble acceptance and tenderness for ourselves?

Latin offers the phrase *amor fati*, to "love one's fate." which I would argue describes the foundational stratum of self-love. One's fate – not you have chosen but what has been chosen for you. These parents, siblings, ancestors. This body and gender. The delights and terrors of your childhood and the hardwiring of your character.

What awakens love of one's fate and the sustaining of self-compassion? A spontaneous song of gratitude comes from recognizing that waking or sleeping we forever bask in gift.

Everything, every moment presents as gift – from the vastness of the universe to this very small life to your very next breath.

In the call and response between oneself and the world, one perceives the gift nature of everything and sings "thank you."

This simple thank you makes it possible to love one's fate and provides the most reliable source of self-compassion.

It is gratitude that allows one to love the gamut of oneself without judgment, unfettered.

In the years I was recovering from homelessness I kept a "GRATITUDE JOURNAL" in which I wrote ten things at the end of each day for which I was grateful. My little girl's laughter; the striations of red and magenta in a sunset; the small ways I was learning to be a human being. As I continued, learning gratitude became a spiritual practice in its own right. As I advanced into the complexities of living an adult life off the street, learning to love my fate became key to broadening and deepening gratitude and self-compassion.

So which came first – the chicken (gratitude) – or the egg (self-compassion)? Well gratitude does give birth to self-compassion. There is no



self-compassion until one can say “thank you” for being alive. And self-compassion undeniably gives birth to gratitude, truly and profoundly.

Our ideas of causality are confused by the radiant truth of love.

Which came first? Emphatically both – which makes the love of one's fate vibrant and durable. Whether one enters the door of gratitude or self-compassion one arrives in the same place.

The authentic interrogation of loving ones fate arises in any circumstance where one's undone by the unforeseen. You've lost your job. The father of your children has left you for another man. Your grandmother who you thought would live forever has suddenly died.

Your doctor has just informed you that you have multiple sclerosis.

I have sometimes asked friends or patients “what have you learned from your heart condition (or cancer or AIDS or addiction and recovery, etc.) that you could not have learned any other way? A pregnant question to be sure that invites the ethos of loving ones fate. When I was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis five years ago it was my turn to ask that question of myself and ask it fully and completely.

Time to walk my walk.

MS found me a stubbornly young and arrogant man when a range of “symptoms” I'd seen from the outside as a nurse now took my body. Falling down in public and unable to get up, incontinent of urine and shit, a unreliable set of legs, sleepless and out of my mind on steroid therapy, losing my eyesight not knowing if it was mine to be blind.

Etc.

Early on, not yet recovered from my first exacerbation, I hiked to my refuge on the Big Sur coast to spend two weeks alone in prayer and reflection. It took eight hours to hike what I knew to be an hour walk and I didn't know if I'd be able to walk out. This was amor fati proper.

“Let go and let God.” I had to give up the fetish of certainty. For twenty years I'd assumed it would be mine to see my older wife through the end of her life but that was suddenly far from certain.

Everything – everything – was far from certain.

To my knees. To my knees.

Now, these years later, only gratitude remains of my passage

through MS. Indeed the medicine of gratitude, of embracing my fate, seems tied up with my healing. It's been two years since my last exacerbation and I don't anticipate another. As I wrote this chapter my neurologist, Dr. Russ Shimizu, was shocked at my recent MRI.

I'm free of MS .Few would recognize me as someone with an "incurable" neuromuscular disease.

The transformation of humiliation to humility was, like with so many, a passage through dis-ease. The catalyst of that transformation was gratitude.

That is how the light of self-compassion gets in.

STEP ONE: SELF-COMPASSION AND HOW THE LIGHT GETS IN

STEP TWO: COMPASSION FOR OTHERS

The Buddha defines compassion with such clarity. Compassion, he says, is sympathetic joy and sympathetic sorrow – sorrow over another's sorrow and delight over another's delight.

This is the stuff of profound teaching. It is sacred for its homely truth.

These ancient understandings can seem abstract but when we live by them they are vivid, warm, sometimes intimate.

"How far you go in this life," writes George Washington Carver, "depends on you being tender with the young, compassionate with the aged, sympathetic with the striving, and tolerant of the weak and the strong, because one day you will have been all of these."

Sympathy is grounded in the fact that we, or someone we love, did or will experience the same thing as those we take care of. It's just a matter of time before you or a loved one is ill, perhaps hospitalized. One out of two men and one in three women will die of cancer. We know, don't we, it's just a matter of time before you or someone you dearly love dies.

We diminish our own hearts if we deny the jeopardy that is the common truth of being human and mortal.

Sorrow and joy are the fabric of the everyday, renewed with each new life experience. "Joy and woe are woven fine / A clothing for the

soul divine” writes William Blake. They are the raw material out of which a compassionate life is discovered and lived.

If we live our lives consciously – that is to say with the intent of extending compassion to ourselves and everyone we meet – then all that we are and do is the act of weaving.

This weaving is an act of joy as is opening to another’s sorrow. Meeting sorrow we are freed from our self-preoccupation, which is where our suffering renews itself.

Compassion is, in fact, joy.

We hold our experiences of sorrow and joy as stories and these stories instruct our souls in the range of experience that makes every human life a common and blessed thing.

The work of anyone who seeks to awaken compassion involves gathering his or her own stories like seeds. They hold the possibility of sprouting and in time perhaps bear

fruit for nourishment or flowers for beauty.

We all know sympathetic joy. Your friend’s HIV test comes back clean, your sister had her first child and she’s a doll, the lump in your aunt’s breast turns out to be benign, your cousin finally got out of a very bad marriage and she’s starting to smile again.

I emphasize suffering not to deny the sheer blessed fact of being alive but because we would rather deny suffering. But the denial of suffering is a machine that itself generates such suffering!

Joy that relies on the denial of suffering is a superficial and fragile fiction. Eventually it will be undone. Misery can be hidden away in the shadow of an overly optimistic culture, but when it is brought out into the open as the common ground of suffering, it can awaken compassion.

In this sense, linking your personal suffering to that of others becomes a gift to you and through you, a gift to them.

A few examples. Roland has AIDS, and will likely die soon. He’s only thirty-five. I lost my friend Charlie, a Vietnam vet who worked with the criminally insane, to AIDS when he was the same age. My friend Alberto had AIDS too. A month before Alberto died I did a Tarot

reading for him and of course he picked up the Death card. He was so relieved to talk about it openly. All of his friends in his large gay community had lost loved ones and it was unbearable to them that it was Alberto turn. "It's time," he said.

When I bathe Roland, I think of Charlie and Alberto.

My youngest brother, Paul, was psychotic. Mad, he wandered off into the New Mexico mountains and died there. Every young psychotic could be my brother.

Carl is homeless, in his early thirties, an addict and diabetic, cellulitis oozing on his left foot, soon to be an amputee. What broke him so? I was homeless for three years as a

teenager. I'll know how to love him remembering how fierce and cold it can get.

Each of these stories of my friends and loved ones is intimately real to me, but when linked to another's suffering it is no longer mine. They are now not a burden but an opportunity for connection, which offers a kind of freedom. A naïve individualism infects the Western world, so much so that we imagine freedom to be a lonely, even alienated thing. The kind of freedom I speak of here is not independence but interdependence, the vibrant community of we who sustain one another and sometimes set one another free beyond the edge of our own precious but small life.

Clutching at personal suffering amplifies and distorts it. Sympathetic joy and sorrow delivers us into a lived understanding of living, of the human community.

Empathy is where two stories run parallel to each other and then meet.

It was one of those shifts on the oncology floor, the beginning of a double and very busy. For the first three hours did little but rush up and down the hall doing this or that. I kept passing a tough-looking Latino kid, maybe fifteen, weeping outside a patient's door. Couldn't possibly address whatever was happening with him - too much to do.

A couple of hours later it was a bit slower and there was much fuss around the nurse's station. It seems that Armando, that kid in the hall,

had stuffed the public restroom sink with paper towels, turned on the water, and caused a little flood. The staff agreed to call security, “Just to scare him, that’s all,” said the secretary. More to the point, he and his extended family were gathered around his mother’s bed. She was in the last stages of liver cancer and probably wouldn’t last till morning.

I was called to act before security arrived, but I can’t say I felt anything other than awkward and afraid. Had to consciously

remember I’d seen a broken kid in the hall, a frightened child.

Courage is not about having no fear, It’s when you honor the fear and act as you must.

Opening the door and introducing myself. La familia listened expectantly while I talked clumsily in my pocho Spanish to Armando.

“Armando, you flooded the bathroom, didn’t you?” He said “yes” weakly, his eyes to the side and down. “When I was a few years older than you, my father died. I didn’t know how to handle it at all. Is it true that you messed up the bathroom because seeing your mom like this made you feel too many things all at once?”

“Yes.” “And you’re not a bad person and won’t make any more trouble?”

“Yes.” “Take care of him,” I said to his family. “His heart is breaking. Some of the staff got scared and called security. I’ll send them away.”

Empathy is located where two stories intersect. I was once a boy who lost a parent and, like Armando, confused in my grief, acting out. We shared the common knowledge of heartbreak. From that point where our stories connected I could respond not to the “bad boy,” with humiliation or calls to security. The more compassionate way was sheltering the grief of a child who was seeing his mother die in front of him.

There was a flicker of grace in those few moments with Armando and his family. I knew I wouldn’t see them again but we connected. I had prevented an act of violence born of ignorance, and Armando wouldn’t forget it—just as I will never forget those who were kind to me when I was out of my mind with grief.

I’d walked many a moon in Armando’s moccasins Across the thresh-

old I was able to see the moment of the dying of Armando's mother through his eyes and speak to him and

his family accordingly

We are forever meeting "ourselves." Grandmother and grandfather, mother, father, brother, sister. Friend, neighbor or the strangest of strangers. They deliver us to the family and community in us and community and next of kin..

Everyone we meet presents an opportunity for self-compassion because we are not different from them.

We walk through the life that we've lived even as we walk through whatever comes our way, the two meeting each other in a field of sympathetic sorrow and joy. Here we can see sorrow and joy as the possibility of compassion that lives within the stories of our lives and the lives we bear witness to.

The spirit of kindness is deathless. Perhaps you've met it in moments but it existed long before your birth and will persist long after you're gone. It is the bedrock from which we all spring, the God that is love and the love that is God.

I call the place of shared humanity the village. You are – we are all – of the village simply by virtue of being born.

Those who can meet another's joy with joy, those who have transformed a portion of their suffering into compassion are walking a very old path.

Many have walked this way.

STEP THREE:

RADICAL EMPATHY

John Howard Griffin's book, *Black Like Me*, exemplifies what Tibetans call *dakshin nyamje*: "equalizing and exchanging self and other." I call *dakshin nyamje* radical empathy. Griffin, a white man, had his skin color changed with a pharmaceutical, shaved his head and arms and traveled through the deep south as a black man during the height of the civil rights movement. I write of Griffin as metaphor. There is a profound education of

the heart when one slides from one's own point of view to the perspective of another.

In my early twenties, a passionate and earnest feminist, I became a housewife. My first wife, Marsha, was a speech therapist with elementary school children and I was a high school dropout. When we had our daughter it was most sensible that I stay at home with Nicole and learn the arts of bottle, diapers, potty training, the terrible twos and getting a meal on the table. While Nicole napped I'd read feminist literature and was disciplined in my efforts to understand the mind of the "other half."

Dakshin nyamje rhymes with the Cherokee proverb that you can't understand another until you've walked three moons in their moccasins.

In 1992 Los Angeles burned following the acquittal of four white policemen who had beat to a pulp a black motorist, Rodney King. The beating was caught on videotape and the black community was outraged over the decision of the all white jury. Being a biracial Mexican white guy, my concerns with the racial divides in the world had been with me since I was a child. I began what I imagined would be my second book about white and black peoples about one another.

As I began collecting the dreams of African-Americans and studied the African origins of black American culture, I was stunned to find that the dreams showed the same realm of imagery that Bantu people used to make sense of whiteness since the Portuguese turned up in the kingdom of the Kongo in the early 1500's. To do justice to what I was seeing, radical empathy was called for and would in fact change my life. First I had to put aside my peculiar biracial story and see these dreams through a black person's eyes. I eventually went to Africa and was initiated into tribal medicine.

Griffin's brave example was with me. Though I certainly didn't change my skin color, I was recognized as *mapatya*, or twin brother, of Mandaza Kademwa. Together he and I looked at the dreams of African-Americans from

the culture at the headwaters of black America.

These three stories speak of the education of the heart, the sensibil-

ity of radical empathy. On the intimate day by day level it is, of course, much quieter. Radical empathy follows through on the question, “what if it were I or someone close to me who is suffering so?”

Amber is twenty-five and has leukemia. She loves the theater and at her bedside there is a photo of her in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. For the moment she’s undone by a stem cell transplant, her gums bleeding, asleep on Ativan. My daughter is Amber’s age and I whisper this to her father when I bring him a cup of coffee. A swift, silent understanding.

Nothing more needs to be said. This is radical empathy. Mrs. Brown just had a mastectomy, as did my wife, and she is painfully self-conscious of her flat left side. Such was the rapport between us that I borrowed from my love of my wife’s beauty. I laughed, “The running joke with my wife is that women with two breasts have come to look a little unnatural to me.” Mrs. Brown confessed that she seemed to have more trouble with her mastectomy than her husband. “Borrowing from my wife’s beauty” was radical empathy.

Carl is homeless, in his early thirties, an addict and diabetic, cellulitis oozing on his left foot, soon to be an amputee. What broke him so? I was homeless for years. I’ll know how to love him remembering how fierce and cold it can get.

This is radical empathy: equalizing and exchanging self and other, one’s own story is not privileged over another’s.

With radical empathy one is prepared to cross over to the mystery: living compassion.

#### STEP FOUR: LIVING COMPASSION

No self and no other is how Glaser explains the mystery, the (non) vision that is living compassion. I will try to describe it though the lived truth is outside of language. Glaser merely says, “The self-other axis cannot be separated from the no-self – no- other axis if our compassion is to achieve full expression. Both are equally true, but taken alone, each is false. Self and other, and no- self and no-other, must be understood as coexisting and inter- dependent realities if we hope to find the grail of compassion.”

Just as self-compassion done for real slips into compassion for oth-



ers, radical empathy can give way into the spaciousness and clarity of living compassion.

“To study Zen is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be enlightened by all things,” says Dogen Zenji.

Across cultures living compassion reverberates from “not I but Christ in me,” and the Muslim *fatiya* of forgetting oneself in God’s will. I and Thou momentarily drops away and one is amidst the forever plural truth of living beings, loving them unconditionally.

Unconditional love is another way of expressing living compassion.

In this, one is enlightened by all things. You are no longer self-consciously kind towards another – you step forth as compassion un-self-consciously. You are fully identified with the process of compassionate activity.

You know when you have entered into living compassion when the profound gift nature of the loving act reveals itself. You are not compassionate if you are expecting anything in return.

Living compassion is the essential nature of human freedom. And living compassion is a pure gift. Zadie Smith describes it

precisely: “The moment when the ego disappears and you’re able to offer up your love as a gift without expectation of reward. At this moment the gift hangs, between the one who sends and the one who receives, and reveals itself as belonging to neither.”

Compassion as a presence – as presence – is most relevant here. The person who meets this or that situation compassionately is a vehicle for this quality that the bottom line of which is not personal. The spiritual practice of living compassion requires that the self step aside. It is radically and blessedly simple, and its experience extraordinarily ordinary. Compassion is the environment that one is in. One is alert to its presence available to being its vehicle but one doesn’t for a moment possess compassion.

The imp in me writes in the margins: “Bodhisattvas are numberless I vow to recognize them.”

When I met Lewis I was not well. I’d just returned from Africa and

my body and soul were in the African time of my friends – which is to say a slowness not at all compatible with what is required to endure a twelve-hour shift as a hospital nurse. I took to the poison of course – half a dozen cups of coffee – thinking it would help me meet the tasks at hand.

No go.

I was in a dream, agitated, the other staff members spinning around me like so many drunken dervishes. And so when I was told at 3 a.m. that I had an admit, I was less than enthused. Nonetheless, when I came to the door of his room I took a deep breath and sighed a hopeless, exhausted prayer, “Make use of me.”

Lewis was fifty-five years old, Downs syndrome, his head a lopsided melon bulging in front, his hands and feet curled up, a wheelchair at his bedside because he couldn’t walk. His elderly mother had brought him to the hospital because he had a nasty infected abscess in his left foot.

Admitting Lewis, I got a little of his story – very little, very sparse. His father had died recently and it was not altogether clear how long his mother would live. And then? An institution, I suppose, but it wasn’t the content of his story that touched me so much as his inscrutable manner. The lack of self-pity or melodrama could certainly be read as a “cognitive deficit,” but the indefinable nature of our interaction left me stranded between interpretations.

An imbecile? A holy one? Neither or both? I simply could not read him.

“You are a remarkable man,” I told him later as I cleaned his wound, laid strips of wet saline gauze across it, and wrapped it in Kerlix dressing.

“Thank you,” he replied. Did he understand what I meant? I left his room feeling put back together again, grateful and humbled by a humble soul.

Where was the spirit of kindness with Lewis? In him? In me? Or hovering between us in the neon glare as he told of his father’s death while I tended his wound? It was my meeting with Lewis that convinced me that the spirit of kindness is indeed a spirit, for I could not

locate it but was nonetheless healed by it. The closest I can get is to say that the meeting itself healed me of my fragmentation. Lewis's story carries light, gentle, and lucid, and through the simplicity of two men meeting across worlds I learned that compassionate activity itself is medicine. I was incoherent before we met, and was rendered whole. I could not find the thread until we received one another.

Lewis drew something out of me that was new and unanticipated, and I've tried to fold the lessons into the day-to-day life of living compassion inside and outside the hospital.

To approach another person, each interaction with quietly stated intent, hopeful, hopeless but reaching towards being available to kindness. Yes – to keep the faith with the intent.

And then we meet – I to Thou. In this life the spirit of kindness “bloweth where it listeth.” One can be responsive to its presence but cannot control it. One can only be hospitable to it, alert to its movement in oneself and others in whatever situation.

And one can be attentive to the crazy discipline of being available as its vehicle. This is a fierce and glorious path. Fortunately, there are many teachers and, as they say, “a teacher touches infinity.” It is for us to recognize them, discern their teachings, and live by what we learn.

With Lewis the self-other axis was illuminated up by a third – the spirit of kindness – and with that there was an aware self- forgetting. The thought of me being compassionate toward him would be simply false. He and I met in the environment of compassion, radiant and fresh.

My time with Lewis adds a twist of paradox to Shakespeare:

“The quality of mercy is not strained. It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven Upon the place beneath, it is twice blessed. It blesses him that gives and him that takes.”

Lewis and I were thrice blessed because the spirit of kindness allowed us for a few moments to extend and receive mercy from each other.

Self and other are not abolished by living compassion. They are con-

tained within selflessness but they also lend body and ground to selflessness. They are necessary to one another, interdependent truths.

The sacred nature of plurality is honored but in the meeting of two, the Hasidic Jews say, an angel is born.

## *Time on the Cross*

The journalist Andrei Codrescu once wrote of a friend of his who got the job on an assembly line, nailing little wooden Jesuses to crosses for 40 hours a week. Eventually he had quit because it was driving him crazy. Sometimes it seems to me that my work as a medical surgical nurse of the large urban hospital bears a strange resemblance to that of Codrescu's friend – night after night, I mindlessly nailing people to the cross.

A couple of stories: two dying patients, one week.

The first was Ruben, a 27-year-old Mexican man with brain cancer. His family had come from Mexico to be with him during his last days alive. They gathered around the bed weeping and praying, but clearly accepting with grace the inevitability of the final moment. As I watched Ruben's blood pressure drop on the cardiac monitor, I could see that the oxygen in his blood was thinning out, and the peaks and valleys of his heartbeat were leveling towards the moment of silence and death. Because the doctor had the kindness and good sense to write in order to Ruben simply be kept comfortable (one of only three such orders I had seen in a year and a half at this facility), my work was to protect the profundity of the situation. Ruben also, thank God, had an order not to be

resuscitated if his heart should fail. Roughly 20 minutes before he died, the nursing supervisor and charge nurse insisted that Rubin be moved to another room so that a difficult patient across the hall could change roommates. I registered my outrage at this crude decision, but to no avail. Ruben was hurriedly disentangled from his monitors, his oxygen, the apparatus to suction his lungs, and wheeled into the hallway, where he died. I tried to explain to his family in Spanish the logic of all this as they wept.. My Spanish is good enough, but there are things that don't translate between cultures, and probably things that cannot be said in any known language.

Three days later I was with another Mexican, a woman named Maria with end stage AIDS, acquired from her recently deceased husband. She was in and out of a coma, all of the systems of her body failing. Her heart was beating irregularly at over twice the normal rate. The oxygen in her blood covered at 70% which meant she was suffocating even though she was receiving 5 liters of oxygen a minute through a face mask. Nonetheless, after days of struggle, she looked quite tranquil as long as she wasn't moving too much, in which case she cried out in agony. Her mother sat at her bedside around-the-clock, also quite tranquil. Since Maria, too, also had an order not to be resuscitated, she had all the makings of a good death in the company of one who clearly loved her deeply. But Maria had a very high potassium level in her blood, and a young intern insisted that I give her a liquid medication by mouth that would lower it. I refrained from

mentioning to the doctor that it could be given as an enema. I left work at sunrise, kissing Maria on her forehead and offering her my blessings for her passage to the other side,

The next evening I met her doctor in the hall, who with great enthusiasm told me that the drug she ordered could be given as an enema, which of course, it was. "We are doing everything we can for her," she said. My heart sank as I smiled, trying to pretend that I shared her delight. My pathetic effort to spare my patient had failed. She lived several more days; her enema was one of the lesser of evils visited upon her.

It's always easy to wax self-righteous in these situations. Sometimes

it seems to me that most eight-year-olds have more complex ethical self reflection than many of us in the “healing professions.” I question the sanity of medical “standard operating procedure” that makes the patient’s body and mind the battlefield where we fight death with our full arsenal, even when death is attempting to come gently and can only be briefly postponed at best.

But self-righteousness is always beside the point. Because I’ve participated in such dramas, I’m aware how easily

such violence is enacted while pretending it is healing. Thinking with the heart in such situations is an extraordinary challenge and much more compelling than self-righteousness are a few simple questions. What happens to us in these institutions that we disconnect and forget the simple fact that any given patient could easily be our grandmother, our child, all our best friends, a childhood buddy, or for that matter, ourselves? Would we treat our kin this way?

Why is it that doctors often fail to recognize or fail to act on the recognition that making a patient comfortable is often the best, the kindest, and the most appropriate treatment? Why is it that even the most reputable hospitals in the world seem to rarely address practical issues of healing, death and dying, that have been discussed in the public forum for over 20 years? “Dying with dignity” is a commonplace idea in the Sunday editorials in any newspaper in America, so much so that it’s been transformed into a cliché. How can medical professionals participate in a culture of obliviousness to the extent that we enact “medicine” with less depth of thought than mainstream America?

What is the etiquette of skillfully and compassionately addressing the issues surrounding “Do Not Resuscitate” orders? Ruben and Maria were amazingly among the more fortunate: the situation was explained, the options offered, and choices made. Why does this routinely not happen even as death beckons? Why do we allow people to be violated on their deathbeds when it’s clear that with a little courage it could be avoided?

How can we quietly be better allies for those who are most helpless? Immigrants and non-English speaking people are the most likely to be

martyred by hospital “business as usual,” alongside those who are senile or demented. Some are dazzled by the technology and have unreasonable expectations of it. Others are engulfed by a world that they can’t begin to understand as they stand helpless before the stark realities of disease and mortality. This is a dire situation, one alien to most of us, and one where basic concerns such as patients’ rights and informed consent rarely penetrate. How can we change this?

Finally, how can we support each other through the real work of thinking and acting from the heart, and entrusting the heart’s intelligence in the midst of the cynicism that allows many to accept what is patently unacceptable? In what ways do we suffer when we don’t think and act according to what we know is right and true?

These are just a few questions. There are many others. Some I know, many I don’t. I lay them on a table with bluntness and with a great deal of both joy and sadness, having wrestled with him all my adult life, aware of both how much I’ve learned and how little I understand.

The twin mysteries of death and grief had made me who I am. When I close a patient’s eyes with my two fingers I congratulate him or her for one journey finished, and another just begun. When I prepare the flesh to be returned to the earth, I think, inevitably, of that day when, God willing, the end of my life will be sheltered by kindness. In truth the way is clear; it’s just doing what we know in our hearts is so often muddied by circumstance and fear that, even in the most precious of moments we forget: “do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”



## *Water Spirits, Multiple Sclerosis, and Poisoned of a God*

Sacred illness is first and foremost poesis. Flesh rendered poem, praise song, lament. And so I begin and end this essay with poetry.

This I wrote after my last multiple sclerosis exacerbation. Losing my legs, losing my mind with steroid therapy. Recovering my legs with steroid therapy and, weaned from decadron, recovering a portion of my mind. In this, Spirit prepared me in its fierce and generous way to accompany a few Vietnam vets and fellow travelers like myself to Vietnam with Dr. Ed Tick for healing and reconciliation.

Amalgam: Hope/Hopelessness

Beginning of sum

Darkness revealed by harshness of light

Surprised by fright of old friend death

Lust for old enemy the longing for the last breath

Now equinox double ought six

Hope tempered by hopelessness

Hopelessness tempered by possibility of hope

Tranquil heart of mandala

Multiple sclerosis

And soon I will be with the beggars of Saigon

Sacred illness is firstly *poesi* --: to be conceived in the body of metaphor, gestate there, birthed perhaps in this life or through death. Among my people in Africa, the Shona and the Ndebele (Zulu) of Zimbabwe, sacred illness comes from God and returns to God in this life or through the end of it. Healing can mean either. The essential thing is to listen to the spirit that afflicts, yield to its

wisdom, be undone as one will be undone, be stripped and stripped again to what is most elemental and true, most true and most uncertain. I will write here of three sacred afflictions: water spirit disease, multiple sclerosis and the spirit of etiology – poisoned with the God Mercury, Mercurius, the one the Yoruba call Eshu Elegba. These three are inter-related – in fact continuous with one another.

Water Spirit Illness

In the early nineties I began gathering racial dreams: white peoples' dreams about black people, the dreams of blacks about whites. I wanted to honor the dreams of black Americans by looking at them through the wisdom traditions of Mother Africa.

As I went further into my studies of the African origins of black America it became clear that whites were being dreamed within the same field of imagery that western Bantu people had understood "whiteness" since the Portuguese friars turned up in the kingdom of the Kongo in the fifteenth century.

In the *Village of the Water Spirits: The Dreams of African- Americans* (Spring Publications, 2006) I look to the tribal strata beneath the African diaspora in America and particularly the seminal water spirit tradition. It was Melville Herskovits in 1941 who was the first to note that the primary ritual of black Baptist culture in America, full immersion baptism, was African in origin. The "intransigence of the priests of the river cult", wrote Herskovits, "was so marked that more than any other group of holy men, they were sold into slavery to rid the

conquerors of troublesome leaders.” (Herskovits, Melville J, 1941, *The Myth of the Negro Past*, Boston: Beacon Press).

The ngoma of the water spirits was once the sacred way of royalty and persists today in healing ceremonies and peacemaking. Anthropologists call the way of the water spirits a cult of affliction. “The stitch of pain leads to the village of the ancestors”, says the Bakongo proverb. The understanding is that the midzimu – the Invisibles – call one to being a nganga (healer) through water spirit illness.

After years of preparation, I found myself in the house of Mandaza Kademwa in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe.

(Who was this white stranger who had traveled thousands of miles knowing himself to be called to the way of water?

Who indeed. It’s been years now of the piercing initiations through sacred illness and only now am I beginning to understand the strange ways of the boy I was. The boy would say simply, “I was called”. True enough, but when I saw Africa inherent in the nightly dreams of black Americans I knew I had been called to Africa to bring back the gift of a tribal dream teller understanding of these dreams.)

Mandaza seemed to recognize me on our first meeting. “You are a typical water spirit person,” he said. All the symptoms: vivid dreams and waking visions, afflicted with an empathy that incapacitates, swings of emotion, stomach problems, a life rich in tragedy.

The only cure for water spirit disease is initiation as a healer and ritual practitioner into the ngoma of the water spirits. As a peacemaking tradition one begins by making peace with the spirit that afflicts. Only then can the water spirits be allies in the activity of healing – one’s own healing through perpetuity of initiation. and the healing of others.

#### Multiple Sclerosis

Forgive that I quote at length the book I wrote with my wife “Sacred Illness, Sacred Medicine” (Elik Press, Salt Lake City, 2005):

“My apprenticeship with multiple sclerosis began very slowly, retrospect being the only angle from which one might even see its beginnings. I was in Africa in 1996 with my wife introducing her to the Bantu people who had initiated and received me as a medicine man.

We were in the stony waterlands of Masvingo, southern Zimbabwe. My wife was initiating Mandaza into the mysteries of the Hebrew letters, when I noted a garden variety of white male arrogance rising up in me. After all, I was 'the expert,' much a part of the tribal world and quite well read on Bantu anthropology. How much I wanted to interfere, be the master of ceremonies. So I pulled away to a small pool of water to curl up in and prayed in the traditional way of the ngoma of the water spirits. I yielded to the field of spirits that were carrying the poetry of the moment quite without my advice. It was then the snail parasite schistosoma slid through the skin and apparently laid eggs in the lattice of my nervous system.

That night a fever, strange but transient, two weeks later, numb from the waist down. And so I walked eight years with this numbness. Eighty percent of peripheral neuropathies are undiagnosable, I was told. With reluctance, accustomed to a young man's oblivious vigor, I settled into the constant reminder of the frailty of the flesh.

All this started changing when I lost the full use of my legs. It was then that my apprenticeship with the sacred illness, soon to be named multiple sclerosis, truly began. How fortunate I am that MS insinuated itself into my body at a moment of surrender, and has kept such perfect faith with the teaching of surrender, and

surrender, and yet again, surrender. And then there are the gifts that come in the wake of surrender.

"Surrender? What do I mean by surrender?" Anagarika Sujata says that there is dishonesty in any mind that insists reality occur in a specific way. MS says that healing requires a strange alliance with what I am facing, and so the way of surrender has demanded an uncompromising honesty. Not a passive acceptance, but a very active meeting.

My first serious rendezvous with the spirit of the illness was last August 2005, when I walked to the cave on the Big Sur coast where I'd been blessed to spend two years during my twenties and thirties in solitude and meditation. It took me ten hours to walk what had been a one hour hike. In my two weeks alone I surrendered my legs not knowing if they'd return or even if I'd be able to make my way out of the ravine.

Later I surrendered my life. Undiagnosed as yet, I didn't know if that time had come. Finally, there was surrendering the fetish of certainty, knowing that God is the one who shapes what is before me. Such has been my spiritual practice during this time and through it I have begun to taste freedom.

Occasionally!

Surrendering my legs, perplexed that I would be asked to do so, but with whom do I argue? Surrendering my life was a different matter, that truculent fantasy that my life and my death are possessions of mine, Body be damned. Wife is twenty years my senior, and it's been many years of renewing the vow that I'd see her to the other side, a betrayal of her and God's betrayal of both of us should our lot be otherwise. But yes the tearful moment five minutes before the New Year's kiss, insisting that she continue should I go first.

The third lesson from the illness was surrendering the fetish of certainty. A few months ago I was delivered vividly between worlds. I was between lives, one life dead and gone and the next unborn, that place the Tibetans call bardo. Flailing in rage, indulging in an orgiastic fit of self-pity, and as my wife, bless her, said, "You have to let go of the way you think and talk about these things." The space of the bardo echoed with the "let go, let go, let go" as if to harangue. I knew that spiritually I seem to be called to let go of most everything, or perhaps merely any shard of certainty.

Ah, the Fool card of the Tarot! My father gave me my first Tarot deck before he died, and I've long used it to understand my fate. Did I not see the Fool as a photograph of my soul, satchel at the end of a stick stepping over a cliff, dog nipping at my heels? Did I not always yearn to dance at the edge of the abyss? And yet quite denying now years of my public and private rhetoric that could well be the fiction of having a self, I'm seduced by the fetish of certainty – that fetish that I've always scoffed at with contempt. Affectionate though he was towards the young man's flamboyance, now he places the older man's meditation cushion at the edge of the uncertainty that has become his life and says, 'Sit still.'

How little I've understood the Fool. A little psychosis, a bit of entertainment, half-time in the rites of surrender. I'm left with the question, stripped bare – what is the authentic and ensouled truth of the story I am in?

Such was my first rendezvous, the beginning of making an alliance with multiple sclerosis. A year later I was cast to sea in what Mandaza would call “proper initiation.”

Exacerbation.

Thank God my ngoma initiation had taught me a little about befriending a spirit.

The rite of descent was relentless – dis-membering who I thought I was and re-membering slow and thorough. In *Meeting Sacred Illness* (Ortiz Hill and Metzger, Elik Press, 2005) I try to give words to it:

“And this initiation into sacred illness? How does one speak of the illness that undoes one even as it heals? How does one tell the story about the undoing of one's story? Who is the self that bears witness to the undoing of the self? Does one contrive a self to tell the story? And who is this contrived self? Is he at all an honorable fellow? A trustworthy witness?”

“All lies in retrospect and all retrospect lies. The land of memory is terra incognita but what of the land of the disintegration of the memories that I knew as terra firma? The place of memory is always contested ground, isn't it? What is true? And what a tissue of lies rendered believable?”

“In this lonely place do I sing the body electric, the gimpy walk, the curious torque of mind? Do I sing through the invisible wound that so shapes me, the lesions in my brain stem, frontal lobe, corpus callosum, trailing down the core of my spine through the throat and heart chakra? This wound some call multiple sclerosis I call the Guest. MS is an autoimmune disease. The self attacking the self. For that reason I cannot call the Guest an enemy. The deep questions are how to be hospitable to one so fierce in his wisdom.

“Dare I encourage the Guest to sing?”

“Dare I not?”

The Guest's song is nigredo. Putrefaction. Decomposition. The vertigo of the mirror of oneself facing a thousand mirrors: Three decades of patients covered in shit and now myself beshitted.

People I have cared for unable to string together a coherent sentence and now I was unable. Staggering. Falling. Getting up and falling again. Eyes failing. The dissolution of a couple of months of sleeplessness and the spurious omnipotence of decadron psychosis.

I went to the forest for a few weeks alone to make sense of it. There I read a transcript of wife's keynote address at the American Holistic Medical Association conference called *The Soul of Medicine*.

"Michael sometimes speaks of the spirit of MS," said wife. "He means that he, as patient and healer, is apprenticing to the disease and what it reveals about the needs and nature of the body and the body politic. MS is an inflammatory autoimmune disease of the central nervous system wherein damaged nerve fibers are unable to fully or reliably transmit communication signals to the rest of the body. It is a disease on the rise in a society, a world, that is enraged, violent, and militant...We think Michael succumbed to MS because we must learn to heal our inflamed hearts and souls and he has the capacity to address this. Don't give yourself to being healed until you know the story of the disease," says wife..

In solitude I wrote my response:

"I couldn't quite understand these words when she spoke them. Perhaps this is the way with disease. It inheres so much in your character that you are the last to see it – until you fall apart. Decadron! The great anti-inflammatory! What, me inflamed? Inflammatory? On fire? Setting fires? Playing with fire? Sweet pacifist Buddhist hippie me? And yet my life tells the story of an inflamed sense of self, fire forever seeking more fire, forever the nostalgia for Vietnam knowing it only in my nightmares. Hearth and home for me has been mostly the stoking of hearth. I was most myself in the flames." (*Meeting Sacred Illness*, Elik Press, Ortiz

Hill, Metzger, 2005).

I groaned when wife called decadron "my sacred medicine" but have

come to call her *ambuya* (Shona for grandmother) and to ritually engage her in those rare, bitter seasons when I've had to partake. Her dark blessing is that she shows shadow, sometimes flagrantly, publicly. Visibly undeniable and by virtue of that softening to hospitality that the Guest might be at ease.

#### Chapter 4

##### Epistemological Interlude

There is a path between one medical way and another, a path I learned to walk those years I practiced as a registered nurse and *nganga* at UCLA Medical Center. Of such a path the Yoruba have a parable about Eshu Elegba.

They say there were two friends who were initiated together among the boys, and as men tilled the soil together in adjacent fields. They were inseparable, they thought, kin beyond the blood of it and they often praised such a friendship.

Eshu decided to play a trick. Painting one side of his face black and the other white he sauntered down the path between the fields as each friend hoed their respective plots.

"Who was that strange white man?" one asked across the path.

"White man? White man? That man was coal black. That was no white man."

"What, you crazy? I know a white man when I see a white man."

It went like this, got hotter and hotter until the two were wrestling in the mud.

Eshu Elegba loves to undo us in our certainties because in our certainties we are most blind. In our certainties we are deaf to the sacred nature of what afflicts deaf to the profound intelligence of what ails us.

His persistent and sometimes cutting wisdom reveals what is eclipsed by certainty.

##### The Spirit of Etiology

##### Who is Eshu Elegba?

Several years before I was initiated into the *ngoma* of the water spirits I was "in the ashes" of race relations in Los Angeles. Just two months after the Rodney King riots/uprising I was taken by Eshu Elegba, the



Yoruba spirit of the crossroad. He or I took the form of a “mobius strip.” For a couple of hours I writhed alone on the living room carpet – he becoming I then I, he. I’d sob over the hell of race and he’d taunt.

“Whassup with the blues song white boy?” and then, flipside, undone with laughter.

“What you laughing about now?”

Back and forth, my first undoing by an African spirit.

The Lord of the roads and keeper of the doorway, he carried me into the mysteries of the many faces of God, the Orisha.

I’ve named a dozen common motifs between Eshu and Hermes/Mercury. (It seems likely that by way of Egyptian Tehuti/Thoth this spirit found his way across the Sahara and the Sahel to west Africa.) There was a thud of the inevitable when I

tested extremely high for mercury. I had a complex ritual relationship with Eshu/Mercury within which I received the allopathic etiology for multiple sclerosis. I was thickly mercurial, toxic via dental amalgams since childhood and to a measure before birth.

Mercury torques/shapes the nervous system in the fetus. I was conceived in iatrogenesis and as far as I can tell was born as his Siamese twin.

European Catholicism assimilated Hermes as St. Michael the Archangel. Likewise in Haiti Eshu became St. Michael.

Thus my flesh has a certain intimacy with the god, but the fleet footed god entangled, imprisoned in my body, enraged. The god made poison.

That blasphemy.

That arrogance.

The Yoruba consider Eshu Elegba the spirit of the individual self – its idiosyncrasies, passions, flaws. The way it dances the sacred. This is also true of the alchemical Mercurius who Jung saw as the archetype of one’s individual nature.

To be poisoned by the mercurial leads to self devouring breakdown, having an almost allergic reaction to one’s peculiar familiar self. Most curious mania: Mercury and I inseparable, maddening one another.

Pathophysiologically the portrait is autoimmune. In my case – multiple sclerosis.

Alchemically the poesis of mercury toxicity renders the body an alembic. There is again the nigredo of breakdown: all piss and shit. And then there is separation – chelation – ultimately leaving the gods quintessence, for his residue remains. One cannot completely expunge the god. Mercury remains an ally.

Something began shifting when I started separating mercury from my central nervous system – that holy of holies. A mercy for the god himself arose, that he might be exorcised of me, that he might be set free from the dank prison that I am.

Thus separation – the strange sometimes hallucinatory absorption of “me and my demon” untangles to the obvious. The refining of Mercury to quintessence in the alembic of my life delivers me to solidarity with a poisoned world, a solidarity with we citizens of the food chain who like eating one another.

In the environment mercury finds itself in the sludge of streams and bacteria methylates it – converts it to its most toxic form.

Likewise, in the econiche of a person’s mouth the oral bacteria methylates the mercury of dental amalgams.

Amalgams are 60% mercury.

I’ve come to feel affectionate towards the “little ones” that have so composed my life: schistosoma entering at the ritual moment of surrender and the tireless labor of millions of generations of bacteria delivering mercury to the pit of my karma. They are most certainly water spirits. It seems that the bacteria that made me mercurial softened my nervous system so that schistosoma could erode and inflame the myelin sheaths for the ritual descent into multiple sclerosis.

Schistosoma – water spirit illness – multiple sclerosis – bacteria and methylated mercury poisoning is a single syndrome, capacious enough to accommodate the Bantu and the allopathic. From the Bantu point of view the path is clear. The ngoma of the water spirits is a healing and peacemaking tradition. To make peace is to heal. To heal is to make peace. Make an alliance with that which

would kill and let that alliance work through you that you might, perhaps, practice as a healer.

It is the essence of anthropomorphic narcissism to imagine my body is the locus of poisoning. I cannot forget to sing gratitude to the spirit that afflicts, for it is that spirit which even now is initiating. Such is the craft of the schistosoma and bacteria that I've been cracked open to the vulnerability of this dear planet.

I spent a few months alone inviting my fifth decade with meditation and ritual on the Big Sur coast. Every morning I'd gather seaweed, sea snails, chitons, gooseneck barnacles. I'd dry them on a river rock and mix them with my evening ramen. After offering a tablespoon to the deer mice I'd glut on my nightly mercury.

My beloved California is mercurial. Abandoned mercury mines upstream in the Los Padres national Forest and further to the east, the Sierras.

In the eighteenth century those rude alchemists, the "forty-niners", flooded the food chain with mercury used to process gold. And in the early nineteenth century mercury amalgams were first placed in peoples' mouths.

In 1868 Jean-Martin Charcot first named multiple sclerosis as a clinical phenomenon.

It is said that a third of the airborne mercury in the San Francisco Bay is from cremation. Vaporized amalgams of the teeth of corpses.

The alembic again is this body, but most certainly also this fragile world. Of alchemical Mercury Robbie Bosnak writes, "From this dark, untrustworthy, poisonous and crafty being, the alchemist had to make the elixir, the remedy that consists of poison and of the

poisoning that brings healing. They call it pharmacon, 'healing poison'". (Bosnak, Robert. 1998. *A Little Course in Dreams*, Boston, Shambhala Publications).

There is a strangeness of being poisoned by a god and within that god living ones remembered life. Phillip K. Dick would be equal to the sinister, visionary truth of it. Mercury, as in 'mad as a hatter' damn near

toxic as plutonium placed in the mouths of children to leach into their minds its peculiar mind-altering ways.

I could never imagine how radically mind-altering systemic mercury was until I began to chelate it from my nervous system.

I began to notice that I live in a house and have since those years I was homeless. Quite simple and absurdly startling. I wanted a little yogurt, walked across the kitchen, opened the fridge and knew exactly where it was. I took it out and ate it.

Miraculous, no?

A couple of weeks later eating cherries with my daughter Nicole I inadvertently dropped one; it bounced off the edge of the table and I snatched it in midair.

How marvelous. How utterly extraordinary!

I know this is the enlightenment of an imbecile but the cascade of cognitive shifts continue to surprise. These elementary forms of cognition were much off the map for me. Locating things in space – the yogurt at the lower left side of the fridge, the cherry plump to the deft gaze, the quick hand. They are vivid to me those studies linking mercury toxicity to autism. An autistic child can't imagine the reality of another human being. For myself at the edge of the poison there was a solipsism that makes the world quite un compelling, yet I had to forever improvise a relationship to it.

The first few weeks alone I struggled with the finding and refinement of the prayer of the leave-taking of mercury, his chalice a urinal.

I complete this essay from my cave among the redwood and madrone on the coast of California where I'm alone for a couple of months inviting my sixth decade. There is much I cannot say, cannot even articulate to myself.

The first time I tried in earnest to call mercury from my central nervous system – cilantro extract, the medicine of choice – I was aggressive in my desire to be free and provoked a MS exacerbation. I've begun to learn slow and thorough the ritual craft of such healing.

The first time I "emptied the chalice" I sang a Yoruba song to Eshu

and talked to the crickets and tiny Argentine black ants who then were my closest kin.

“This is poisonous. I am so sorry. Please stay away.” Either they listened or they caught the scent of death.

In 1989 each American produced twenty five tons of toxic waste – five hundred times more as per capita 1973. I know what that meant as a nurse. A lot of children with cancer are buried beneath a greedy economic putsch. A couple of grams of mercury poured from the fronds of my myelin sheaths is most certainly a pittance but there is something unabashed and intimate to my frequent ritual offerings to my private waste dump.

Alchemically the process has been from the *massa confusa* of *nigredo* to *separatio* to the breaking of circulation.

Perhaps an excruciating breaking of the heart or maybe the heart of the world itself breaking. One cannot celebrate the offering of poison to a poisoned world.

Mercury has always been in circulation in me but this in-breaking of circulation declares the double alembic of my flesh, this planet.

In Buddhism the fiction of self is a trick played with mirrors and before things began settling in my meditation practice the three stooges – “me, myself and I” made almost operatic the passing of a little water.

Gotterdammerung!

But the ethical truth is non-dual. Short of passing water on another planet (Mercury?) there is nowhere to hide the alembic of my poisoned body nested into the alembic of a poisoned earth.

This life brief as a flash of lightning, says the diamond sutra. (Ten years since I was alone like this, come and gone like a cup of coffee.)

The true and unplumbed healing takes place in the alembic set within the alembic of nature – nature and the fictitious “I” inseparable. My healing is inextricable from the healing of the earth.

This is the Bodhisattva vow – to practice this two vessel alchemy until all beings are liberated from the delusion of separateness. What remains of poison within me may it transform the nectar of compassion.

Everything began shifting a couple of weeks ago. The moon was darkening and I'd taken to "telling the rosary" of my MS lesions. I got up to empty the chalice after midnight and heard damned near audibly, "Your ancestors held slaves in Virginia and Georgia. Your contemporaries – the lot of you – are killing the earth." I felt a pinch in my brain stem, the primitive brain, medulla oblongata, and when it wouldn't let go I was frightened. I never physically felt the squeeze of a lesion, the pulse. My nurse self thought, "Am

I provoking exacerbation? A stroke?"

This lesion bearing an ancestral wound, so utterly not of this life but also the lateral wound of living in an apocalyptic time and unable to lie about it.

I think of my black kin in America – those Hills and Halberts who I've never broken bread with. and my black kin in Liberia, settled from the plantations before emancipation. Telling the rosary of my secret life, inadmissible.

When I was a boy I heard rumors of the penitentes in the mountains of Mora, not far from where we tilled corn. They flagellated themselves, some say crucified a man every Easter. It seems that an alter ego began his life then, devoted to the blood and the ecstasy. Decades of flagellating my central nervous system. I hum Leonard Cohen:

"Forget about your perfect offering.

There is a crack in everything

That's how the light gets in."

The antics of the three stooges soon went silent. I stopped my Yoruba singing. Mercury became "have mercy," then just "mercy."

Mercury went through a change of character that I'm at a loss to describe. When we first came to be alone here the familiar horseplay between us would sometimes make me laugh when I was trying to meditate.

"What, you think this urinal is some great improvement to your precious nervous system: Chalice my ass! Let me out!"

Once he offered me some of that 181 proof rum he likes so much. I told him I'd rather drink sterno.

At first I was intrigued that his absence – or absencing – was such a vivid presence, but when Mercury became mercy he became the dust of a wandering thought, then random sensation.

As I was meditating a couple of days ago he and the Guest became figures in a limitless field, substantial as smoke and it seemed quite untethered to my body. Also in the field were the phantoms of being healed or not being healed. Both plausible and implausible but ultimately not worth investing much passion in.

Being taken by sacred illnesses is showing me that I hadn't a clue what the dimensions of healing are and maybe now I can live into it. The trail of water spirit disease, schistosoma, MS and methylated mercury seems to have led me to this cave.

Mercury has become mercy and now – silence.

Cut for the Harvest For Ambuya Bwebwe and Mandaza Kandemwa  
And I lie in bed sleepless, raving, urinating on myself, body slowly unraveling how is it that Spirit plants medicine in the body through illness? multiple sclerosis

What is it through illness utters wisdom dares say the Name of the god that reweaves the world?

“Michael it is time you sing of how your body has become medicine.” I trust now only what is small and true the soft touch of the hand the sudden light of the eyes the impulse of the gut toward compassion

Love is the only medicine I know and I know it is not mine passed swiftly from Lover to Beloved weaving from hand to hand the gift given never owned utterly ordinary and also, perhaps, a song to those spirits knowing what healing is healing as I most certainly do not. The Lover sometimes feeds on suffering and of that the world

is generous. I pray to those who have made my life common and kind that changes not water to wine but wine to water for refusing the common fate we become thieves in the night too dark to ourselves to see thief or blinded by light staggering unable to see blindness. First before the legs start giving way, before forgetting the English language light sucked eyes dim can no longer discern the mind of kin wife beside me twin ten thousand miles away. The body lost, stuttering, falling

again and again, drooling, beshittin myself. Love is the only medicine I have ever known. Love cut for the harvest at last real in my own defeat.



## *In Praise of the Little Ones*

The medicine tradition that I was initiated into in Zimbabwe – the ngoma (drumming) of the water spirits – says that the ancestors call one to be a medicine man by sacred illness. Mandaza Kandemwa saw in me the classical symptoms of water spirit disease: powerful dreams and visions, an empathy that incapacitates (feels like you have no skin), a life rich in tragedy. The only cure for this affliction is to be initiated as a practitioner of tribal medicine.

The spirits that afflict become allies in healing others.

Dedicated this book to the relentless teachings of elder Covid-19.

Certainly , one of the “little ones.”

May We all be equal to his teachings.

What the hell did I mean?

The poet WB Yeats wrote that if you didn't face your mortality the time you were in your forties, you would be  
spiritually blinding yourself.

This the gift of the Covid-19 virus has arrived to collectively wake us up.

Or more precisely, WE are our brothers and sisters keeper..

In Tibetan Buddhism, the Hell realms (which are spiritual/psychological locations not the “places” we know in the Christian world) are described by claustrophobia coupled with the panicked defending of territory AKA “the self.”

Claustrophobia

Metanoia is exactly the opposite.

Can only sing gratitude.

“May we all be equal to covid’s generosity”

AND BE MOST KIND to one another as being real that by covid-19 or whatever

You will not get out of this life alive..

Alive ...

Recognize and honor the life you have chosen.

Honor and recognize the wisdom that has been yours to receive.

Harvest the full measure of your life.

In ordinary, contemporary English, the vernize the acular for metanoia is ‘PARADIGM shift.”

Our collective fate..

First gift, ,moment by moment basking in the preciousness of being

Regarding my progressive Multiple Sclerosis diagnosis, the prayer has always been, “Thank you God for visiting upon me this disease.”

Continues with this virus.

“Teach me how to listen” for the spirit of illness is in its own right a powerful healer.

My life has been shaped -- physically and spiritually -- by the little ones (the viruses). How can I but sing their praises?

The ancient Chinese spoke of *ji*, "the smallest possible thing," almost invisible, which is "the precise place where turning and change happens" as the scholar Stephen Karcher.

In Africa I call the little ones, *njuzu*, (the water spirits) who are the agents of healing and that I'll speak chronologically through the little ones don't really live in the time that we big boned mammals share.

They do share with us being born, living and dying – the tender vulnerability of being mortal -- but they seem to descend from timeless. My first meeting of the little ones was in every respect fated. My mother's womb was a broth of mercury as was her mouth. Mercury's' deft hands shaped my fetal brain and spine. I was mercurial long before my birth and almost 50 year after my nervous system torqued towards multiple sclerosis, who I call the Guest. I've apprenticed with the Guest to learn about healing these last sixteen years.

raise be to Mercury, the friendliest of the gods. Fleet-footed, stealthy, clever beyond telling. By the time I was diagnosed with a toxic level of mercury I had a long ritual alliance with Mercury – the one the Yoruba call Eshu Elegba.

My healing proceeded from familiarity.

Elemental mercury is methylated -- transformed to its most lethal form -- by bacteria in the mouth and in the river beds of California. Those rude alchemists, the 49ers, rendered California mercurial -- using mercury to process gold. Now

mercury amalgams in the teeth of the dead cremated and sent skyward mix with the forty eight tons from coal burning power plants.

The water we drink.

The air we breathe.

The food we eat and the teeth we eat with. Mercury is the god of connections, and yes, I gestated with him.

I am connected to a poisoned planet in her duress through Mercury.

Common jeopardy.

At-one-ment with a poisoned planet in her duress has been mediated by the bacteria that delivered him to the pith of my karma.

My first initiation by the little ones was a colony of staphylococcus in my navel when I was a week old ,and the big guns were pulled out -- sulfa drugs – to which found out I was allergic to..

I received the last rites by a Catholic priest, who did not spend eternity in LIMBO.

Hoc est corpus meum.

This is my body.

In Tibetan Buddhism it is said we choose the circumstances of our birth. What was I thinking floating about in the bardo that I would choose to be born into an intimate knowledge of torture?

It took a few decades from that my infantile initiation to find my way out of the horror and terror of being embodied. And it's been only recently that I have found my way out of the mercurial womb. This is the way of the little ones. Their work is deep and thorough and requires a complete transformation of the self.

"Time" as we dimwitted humans understand it, is quite irrelevant.

But -- to the "ordinary time" of my non-ordinary adolescence.

Homage to *Sarcoptes scabiei*, that lowly arthropod that saved my life.

I thought I was at the bottom when I got scabies. I've been homeless for two years, had snapped with psychosis, fell in love and moved in with dear Peggy, to an apartment in the Haight. There was no decent garbage to eat in San Francisco so I ate at St. Anthony's dining hall with the derelicts and junkies and whores and "so it comes to this and wasn't it a long way down" sings Leonard Cohen.

A long way indeed, but longer still with scabies

Unlike its cousin, the lobster, scabies is a mere mite, pregnant with little mitelets. It crawls under the skin to lay its eggs which hatch into nymphs, mature into adults and are dead a month later,

Was a sarcophagi of these dead little ones

The mercy of them was twofold.

They saved me from AIDS.

Jinxed my efforts to whore myself which were greatly unsuccessful. Who wants to screw a pretty boy covered with open sores who can't stop itching?

AND bloody from violently scratching.

Altogether not sexy.

AIDS, unnamed then in 1975, was percolating in the bath houses of San Francisco.

The second blessing, of these children of God, is that they delivered me to the bottom from which I've since constructed a vibrant life.

There are things one cannot know and until one has been undone.  
And then there is the sweet water spirit schistosoma, affectionately known as bilharzia.

Bilharzia is a snail parasite that inhabits fresh water in Zimbabwe. I was in fact, in an ecstatic water spirit ritual in Masvingo

(the holy land) when they slid under my skin and laid eggs in the lattice of my central nervous system. So began, initiation proper, into the way of sacred illness which is fundamental to my training as a medicine man.

I was with my wife and she was doing a ritual on behalf of Mandaza Kademwa, with whom I was apprenticing. I felt a certain "white boys smartass" spirit rising up in me, very much wanting to offer advice.

because I'm the expert, am I not?

I did have the good sense to give them over to the intelligence of what they were in and climbed into a pool of water to pray.

In the water was "displaced from myself" – which is to say the three stooges

(me, myself and I) momentarily died.

"We are God's arm and God's legs," says Mandaza.

I stepped through a door that afternoon and in a week I was numb from the waist

down: peripheral neuropathy.

When I returned to America, a neurologist told me I was likely undiagnosable and so I remained for a few years until I stopped having reliable use of my legs. It was then I was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis.

And so, again,, praise be, to the little ones -- the millions of generations of bacteria that allowed mercury to have his way with me, the bilharziasis which softened my neurosystem and – voila' – the Guest (MS) arriving with such panache!

And so it is my body as zoo for the Invisibles. Not difficult to remember the rigors of their ministrations but what I most remember is their kindness.

They have completed a labor that I could not have done, what is undoable by any act of will. They have, perhaps, rounded off my apprenticeship.

Maybe.

## *Addicted to Elsewhere*

Sometimes a simple statistic opens up the shadowlands that border all that we love.

In the US, seventeen percent of people over the age of sixty are addicted to prescription meds.

A sixth of our grandparents are addicts.

Every nurse knows this as does every doctor. We are, after all, the pushers. Anyone who has been to a narcotics or alcohol anonymous meeting knows how vast and ordinary is the geography of addiction.

Twenty seven percent of Americans will suffer from a substance abuse disorder during their lifetime.

One of four Americans will die of substance abuse.

Utterly ordinary.

We are America and Drugs 'R Us.

A friend suggested that I write about how the crucifixion of Britney Spears distracts America from our complicity in crucifying Iraq and Afghanistan. No doubt about it: we drink the blood of the addict du jour with our morning coffee. A sexy young thang that we drag through the mud is always compelling, and we seem to require such scapegoats to die for our sins.

But the truth is that this addict, and all the others. are sister or brother.

Blood relative or dear friend: they beckon from the shadowlands of all that we deny.

That we might get real

My father died a drunkard's death.

I was eleven when my parents separated. Dad had his first major heart attack three months after my mother left him. I came of age watching his slow motion suicide. Liquor and cigarettes. He was my first spiritual teacher and my first partner in intellectual dialogue.

And I knew there wasn't a damn thing I could do to save him

Dad taught me to meditate and even those years as a homeless teenager I was a creature of his library.

Buddhism, Jung, Thomas Merton, St. John of the Cross, Sri Aurobindo, Alan Watts, Herman Hesse. His library carried the voices of the ancestors and I knew it.

As he descended into the dark night of the soul.

My life was gathering garbage to eat, sleeping under the freeway bridge if it rained. Meditation, reading, prayer, solitude, dysentery, lice, scabies and madness. I had dropped out of high school, thank God, and was getting a real education.

When I was mad I called my father and spoke to him of ecstasy and terror. He listened deep and said, "I know it's frightening but it's a rite of passage and you can trust it. I went through the same thing when I was your age. I am now exactly the age my father was when he said these words to his psychotic kid. When I reflect on stepping forth as an adult it carries

In the shade of that moment, and in the layering of time ...  
that moment is now.

NOW

He seeps through. I witnessed my father stepping forth as a junior elder and now he speaks to me of the open secret My father went crazy as a teenager when his uncle was shot, over poker, in Cloudcroft, New



Mexico. We shared this, he and I. For the two of us this baptism in the waters of psychosis was formative.

My father was a profound man and profoundly broken. Radiantly imperfect. His slow suicide was swift enough. It took him all of nine years to find death.

A week before my father died he dropped me off at a freeway on-ramp to hitchhike four hundred miles home. There was a lack of grace between us, a clumsiness we shared. The previous night I'd burst into tears.

"I think you are dying," I said.

A sorrow song carries the dark notes of what a son knows of his father's soul and what he knows they share in common.

"God bless you," were his last words

"God bless you too, dad."

So I'm sitting in a parking lot eating chicken with anonymous Bill and pondering the mind of the addict which is to say "all of us." In Buddhism the suffering we perpetually live is called samsara – wherever you are, you refuse to be. There is always a "better now." An addict is not really addicted to a drug.

He/she is addicted to elsewhere.

Nirvana (Enlightenment) that we perpetually avoid is the simple fact of this present moment – not another.

A light comes over Bill's face.

"You mean where we are now?"

"Precisely. Now."

I recall the month and years I've spent alone in the forest, meditating.

Returning again and again to the present moment. Blessedly stark and uncompromising. Where could I conceivably be but the present moment?

But forever the mind of the monkey, barrel-assing to nirvana.

"Elsewhere."

And here I am inching up to being my dad's age when stumbled off

the edge of this life to... elsewhere. Drugs for me? No. But this is a totalitarian world and I sometimes jones for the fascism of distraction as my wife called it.

## *The Day of the Dead/ The Dregs of Hope*

For a Latino child the Day of the Dead is an exciting event, similar but with different poetry than Halloween. Calaveras are everywhere - skulls, skeletons, skeletal nurses and doctors doing surgery on a skeleton, farmers plowing with a skeleton of a workhorse, skeletal priests raising the host in their bony hands, calavera hunters taking aim at the skeleton of a deer, and los novios swooning cheekbone to cheekbone. Little putty figurines or candy. And then there's the picnic in the graveyard where the old ones are buried. Horchata and tamales for the children, beer and tamales for mom and dad, and wine and tamales for your mother's uncle under the ground.

As an adult I've only been a part of Dia de los Muertos twice. Once in El Salvador in 1986 as a nurse. Hundreds of thousands of people were homeless from an earthquake that shattered the capital and from the carpet-bombing to the north. After sunset on the Day of the Dead I see a skinny boy in black full bodied leotards and a skull mask but scurry soon to the next homeless campfire and from there I quickly move on.

After nightfall, the death squads come out and kill their political enemies. And further from my hotel than I want to be.

The last Day of the Dead I honored was much darker than my time in El Salvador though in truth it was just the doorway to the bitter blue dark of being stripped to the bone by tragedy. The police had found a plastic bag with my brother's wallet, some Xeroxes of *How to Survive in the Wilderness* and his bankbook. "The trail is cold," the Tesuque tribal policeman said.

Those three words never want to hear a cop pronounce.

Paul had been gone three months and winter was coming. So I headed from the end of the cold trail overland towards my grandfather's ranch trying to find my little brother's corpse.

A mind emptied of hope, for years can still find the DREGSs of hope to spill in the dirt. I knew I would find nothing and that I must suffer, whatever I must to come up with nothing and step by step the land I'd known as holy since I was a boy was simply cold with hunger and pitiless to anybody's soul. I looked and looked exhausted by the heat. Finally as I approached the ridge bordering my ancestral land I sang a Yoruba song to Ochossi the spirit of the hunter. I was quickly startled by the cackling of a single pinon jay and after he got my attention he spurred to the ridge of an arroyo and then into scrub oak.

I walked down into the dry riverbed trembling, of course, knees weak, and dizzy with nausea. When I parted the scrub oak I suddenly saw it, exposed, a stunning white: the jawbone of a mule deer. How much like a deer Paul was, lithe and nervous like a fawn frightened of the cars at night. I took the bone to place on my ancestor's altar. Alive or dead I would pray for the passage of his soul. I looked at it and gently said, This may be the last I will ever see of little Paul. I knew it would be a long time before the tears would run.

Paul was the smallest of the six of us, born with his cord wrapped three times around his neck. Some attributed his strangeness to that, being suffocated at the moment of birth.

The Invisibles were always a part of the family. My mother's visions and dreams. The poltergeist that came when my sisters were first bleed-

ing, turning the washing machine on at three a.m., plastering the inside windows with mud.

And that strange but useful new technology taking over the neighborhood. Perry Mason didn't explain our household but the Twilight Zone certainly did. What with all these disembodied ones along with Elvis, Bonnie and Clyde, Ed Sullivan, and the Beatles, the house was a hive of incomprehensible others.

Into this Paul brought his own retinue of shades. Officer Krupke was a virtual Nazi trying to whip the two street gangs into shape. He'd put on Westside Story barking "Officer Krupke, you at it again, these boys don't need a shrink they need a year in the pen. It isn't a matter of misunderstood, deep down inside them they're no good" and with the refrain, "they're no good, they're no good, they're no stinking good," Paul Krupke would hit us with a stick. I don't recall whether, being biracial, Krupke was beating the Latino Sharks or the White guys.

Anyway it hurt

Paul's Invisibles changed when he got Jesus. At 15 he knew the exact day Christ was returning and that it was soon because the star wormwood had poisoned the waters of the earth and he could taste blood in the faucet water and had my mother change water filters every few days. He felt compelled to tell all the Christians in Santa Fe about it and most thought he was mad, for some reason, except the Latter Day Saints.

They listened.

Paul carried his conversion with the perfect presence of a staid and earnest missionary (he yearned for a few years teaching tribal people about Joseph Smith's vision in New York, the angel Moroni and how Native Americans are the lost tribe of Jews). He also, often, pulled off a rather tight rectitude, a 19th century Latter Day pioneer in the backcountry of Utah. He was taken with the alarming idea that practicing Christianity was actually possible in the twentieth century and cast his lot with the homeless, sometimes bringing them home for a bite to eat. The hour was short. He knew that. So why withhold Christ's generosity from anyone?

I began to get worried when I went outside late at night and found Paul standing on the roof of my car in full baritone singing *To Dream the Impossible Dream* to a circle of spaceships hovering above his head. Paul saw Don Quixote as a patron Saint (he once told me quite soberly that my grandfather's ancestry hails from La Mancha, Spain).

Paul was evidently in a state of abject ecstasy and extreme paranoia so I drove him to an acquaintance's solitary cabin and decided to heal him. A la R.D. Laing. A la the miserable, sleepless, incompetent Nganga I always was. But alas he was a man mainlining ecstasy, truth, the book of Mormon, and the belief that extraterrestrials have come to take him from this place. A man awaiting rescue from the Mexican guy in the trailer park he lived near our mom, that wanted to kill him and even from the Devil doesn't sleep much. Nor did I when he soaked our bed in urine in the cold cabin. I'd have thought nothing quite feeds sleeplessness as when big brother gets angry but Paul met it with surprising kindness and lucidity.

You went through this when you were my age didn't you?

"Oh yes I did. And I passed dad's words to you cause he told me he went through it also. It's a rite of passage, he said. It happens when you're young and trying to find out how to be an adult. He said you can trust it."

I knew I was lying. I knew Paul couldn't trust what he was in and this was not the mad vision I had when I was homeless, probably not my father's mad vision either. Nonetheless I made a fire in the woodstove, sang a traditional Zulu Song and ritually went about scribbling things on paper, Paul giving them to the flames: Burning up the Paul that lived by the story of being a victim.

"You don't have to get crucified, Paul. Jesus did that for all of us. You are free. His blood spilt made you free. Sing freedom brother."

My hand, still warm from the ash. I knew truly that there was nothing I could do to stop Paul's eventual crucifixion. He had an appointment to make. In fact a few years later he charged into the low chamisa, the edge where the high desert shifts to pine and then aspen. He disappeared a couple of months before his thirty-third birthday. Time to

prepare, I guess. For years we didn't know whether he was dead or alive, murdered, suicided or living in the backcountry of Utah.

For those years I went down to the place one must go when you're served the indigestible. Bless those cultures that know that you place the forsaken in a hut of mourning for I effectively gathered such a hut around myself, a little island in time to pray, weep and scratch at my skin.

Eventually I went to a cabin in central Arizona to spend some time with my wife. The smell of the land and the flowers so much like New Mexico and mercifully far away. I could not yet enter the forest, that place of solace, now, in my mind dank with fear but I did spend a day at a lovely creek to sing, confess, make offerings.

I made a small circle from elk dropping and placed Paul's jawbone in the middle and went to the bloody altar of accountability. Who killed Paul? Murdered or not he was nonetheless killed. Was it my father, posthumously? A seventh child, unwanted, not the bright light of intelligence, that dad valued.

Or how about myself? Refusing to be poisoned by the extremity of selflessness after his first psychotic break I watched my heart thicken to stone. I was skilled at that simple confusion of gestures that will drive anyone crazy and send a paranoid person over the brink, the perpetual twist of the hands. Come closer Paul, you are loved, coupled with stay away. I don't know what to do with you. He'd approached me about living on the land with my wife, and myself, a couple of weeks before he disappeared.

And I refused him.

Was he, in truth, murdered? Some family members think he was. Is my story a fairy tale? Did he really follow a mad vision into the wilderness; did crucifixion bring his fragments together?

Some fairytale.

Besides, crucifixion is murder, too. Not knowing whether he was even dead I made offerings on behalf of his murderers. What hell they must live in where no one knew that for such as they, prayer is the fiercest of obligations. Besides, I was in their company and I refused to

lie about it. When a family is swallowed by a Greek tragedy each has their role. Weeping, I recognized the blunt truth: If it were all replayed, a second chance, we'd likely fail as we failed before not for lack of love but because we were aghast before the unhealable.

And then, things turned mid-afternoon. What had been dark and accusatory softened to seeing the web of human frailty, much including my own. And I began seeing Paul in his astonishing strength and endurance, his kindness and solidarity with the homeless however much he suffered. I began to feel an affection for his crazy visions and ambitions, his Mormon screenplay about Mickey Mouse and a little human girl off to the planet Zot to confer with the disembodied elders of the church.

To dream the impossible dream! Paul was good at that.

I placed a wildflower on a stone in the creek and returned just across the street to cook supper, I had been with her for perhaps a half hour while the sun went down when we heard the mewing of an elk cow just up the creek from where I had my conversation with Paul. Unearthly. Soon there was a chorus of them, under the moonlight, a couple of dozen coming from the forest and browsing in the field. Rightly restrained myself, was momentarily adamant that I should be among them, join their tribe. "They've come to get Paul," said my wife. It's not for you to join them." I knew she was right. And I knew Paul was free. Resurrected would be his word for it.

Shortly after that (a month, a year I don't know but it seemed short) my mother called. A deer hunter had found a cracked skull and half a human pelvis not far from where Ochossi had the jay send me to the underbrush for his jawbone. The DNA proved positive. Paul had arrived.

Flying to New Mexico to claim the remains and lay Paul down I cast the I Ching. I wanted to know how to stand alongside my mother, the grief of a mother who lost her youngest son to be honored next to my own. Adorned in white. The culmination of the procession. White is the color of death and thus what is plain, clear, pure, and releases the spirit. Don't hide things. Bring out the essentials. Adorn yourself with



real virtue. Accept the difficult task. It releases bound energy and delivers from sorrow. The situation is already changing.

There is no white like bones bleached by the desert sun. A radiance remained of Paul. Georgia O'Keefe could not do justice to. Lifting his skull from the blue plastic box I tried to recognize his face but could not. I ran my hand across his forehead and my index finger to where the skull knit in the center, remembered touching the soft indentation of his fontanel when he was a baby. When I handed it to my mother she unabashedly kissed it.

White radiance reduced to three or four handfuls of ash and that given to the red earth next to my grandfather. My God how we played on this land, I thought. I prayed in Shona and my mother read from the ragged missal she'd kept from her childhood: Even as you have done unto the least of these my brethren you have done unto me.

There is a Dine word that very much belongs to the understanding of Amor Fati but it doesn't in the least translate into English. Hozro is usually translated "beauty" as in Matthew's gorgeous translation of the Nightway Ceremony:

*With beauty before me. Held in my hand.*

*With beauty behind me. Held in my hand.*

*With beauty above me. Held in my hand.*

*With beauty below me. Held in my hand.*

*With beauty all around me. Held in my hand.*

*Now in old age wandering. Held in my hand.*

*Now on the trail of beauty. Held in my hand.*

Amor Fati with hozro suggests that closure may be one of those fads that take America every generation or so. From the point of view of hozro the question is not how to live with an unbearable fate but how to dance alongside it.

It is possible to find the right relating to a tragic event.

When the indigestible arrives, gather to yourself all you know gives succor in solitude, friends, faith and when you're ready give yourself to being digested by that portion of being human that belongs to the

gods of sorrow. Let their truths work you and pray that bitterness cedes to a compassionate heart because it's never been otherwise suffering in the most reliable source of compassion. Amor Fati reveals itself in reflective retrospect yet the smallest statement of someone who knows tragedy is manna. Art Paterson, a Pentecostal friend, who lost his brother in a drive-by shooting simply quoted scripture, Though he shall slay me, still shall I praise Him. Paul wanted nothing more than his family to be united and loving. We refugees from the explosion of the nuclear family in the sixties. I was mostly irritated by his yearning since it seemed to involve a very un-Mormon family transforming into something we could never be. But big brother be damned, his martyrdom changed us all into a coherent and loving family unit despite great geographical distances and sometimes it seems little in common other than the happenstance of the same parents.

Speaking for myself, I'm indebted to Paul for making a healer of me. His crisis coincided with my first initiation in Africa and as I walked the path to the spirit world he accompanied me. That education that any young man must submit to that shapes the faults and frailties that are the lot of us humans became a crucial part of my training as a nganga. And sorrow? Well who could trust a healer that didn't know sorrow?

I finish here with a poem for my two little brothers on the other side, Christopher died at only four hours old.

Velada for Christopher and Paul

*(por mi familia)*

1

*Even now the ancestors*

*lay it all out:*

*salmon*

*red wine*

*ancient*

*the full feast*

2

*Along Ghost River*

*Flowers float white  
Grief  
so swift this passing on  
born ,  
dead in four hours*

**3**

*birth, death  
breath and the lack of it  
Sacrament of pain  
flooded red  
Then dead cold blue*

**4**

*You sweet of face  
have faith  
take down this grace  
nailed to the tree*

*Now*

*Amen*

**5**

*And then the other brother  
On the other side  
no way to say it  
Say grace gone crazy  
And so the blade of night  
Cut of the cold desert  
ecstasy, fear and faith  
coyote food  
meat chewed from bone*

**6**

*Bones strewn*

*til deer hunter finds  
the broken skull  
mother kissed before burning little brother  
back to ash and dirt  
the mix of it*

*7*

*Sing release  
Sing death berthed last blue breath  
from the cross drawn back  
to the first embrace  
In light and dust and dawn  
have faith  
Sing amen  
then again  
have faith*

## *Among the Cannibals*

Among the cannibals

Was a dapper young cannibal. Almost the only time I ever wore a tie  
-- a nifty bow tie with plastic fixin's that connected to my white shirt.  
As bopped to church sang quietly:

“Sons of God Hear HIS holy word,  
gather around the table of the Lord,

EAT HIS body, DRINK HIS blood and we'll sing a song of love,  
HALLELU, hallelu

Hallelu-- u-uu --yah”.

Was seven years old.

Had just confessed had filched a dime from dad's wallet so could buy  
a chocolate covered ice cone

from Dairy Queen

Was so damn IMPERFECT obviously eternal hellfire was my desti-  
nation.

Dante Allighri lacked the imagination of a prepubescent kid.

Not a Vergil to be had, so wandered aimlessly for an ETERNITY  
what with the wailing of fellow  
damnitards.

an Ice Cream cone the OBVIOUS medicine.

DANTE had it sooo easy

as it was clear that my hunger for sweets got me here in the first place.

Forgive me father, for I have sinned

Mea culpa. Mea maxima culpa.

When, in doubt, pray in Latin.

OR

In ANY language you don't know

Once read that "hocus pocus" was a paisano (mis)understanding of the Latin Mass,

"Hoc est corpus meum" In English "take for this is my body"

Once was friends with the poet Bill Everson.

When the Beatnik, Bill Everson, became a Catholic monk.

Brother Antoninus

(Not the last of terminally horny celibates.)

His erotic poetry is priceless.

Asked him about this and he cracked open one of his books, *Nihil Obstat*

No obstruction.

"It's all theologically correct."

Also told me, "I became a Catholic cause they gave me a God I could eat!"

Hard to argue with that..

Brother Antoninus lusted mightily, for a young woman, once did a public poetry reading

And stripped off his monkish getup and ran off the stage naked.

Tis said "once a Catholic, always a Catholic"

Have said so of myself.

## *A Conspiracy of Kindness*

As a registered nurse at UCLA Medical Center and an initiated healer in a Central African tribal tradition, I try to be scrupulous about when my two vocations must be kept strictly separate. Sometimes, however, they are one and the same.

I'd arrived on the oncology floor at the change of shift and within minutes was called to the bedside of a Middle Eastern woman, mid-forties, metastatic cancer: two interns arranging the paraphernalia for a needle biopsy of a rectal mass. The woman spoke little English and hadn't been forewarned. She grabbed my wrist in terror. With my free hand, I ran my fingers through what little hair she had, and while she winced with the injection of Lidocaine, I sang a Shona song to the Mother of the water spirits. "Close your eyes and let the song carry you," I said. Her grip softened, and I was happy to see the young doctors had also softened. Initially bearing the clinical distance of an unpleasant task, they became warm, affable, and impeccably kind to this dear, frightened woman. In Zimbabwe, we would say that the spirits had descended.

I always arrive at work a few hours early to meditate and pray before the long night begins. Last week I got up and walked out of the chapel adjacent to the lobby to stretch my legs and came upon a Lakota Indian, Lone Eagle, and his companion Mourning Dove. Lone Eagle was explaining to the receptionist that their son, David, had a car accident and was in ER. "I have brought my medicine," he said, opening a small suitcase with an eagle feather, braided sweetgrass, ritual objects, "and I need to do some doctoring." I introduced myself as someone who also carried a tribal medicine tradition and told him I would be honored to mediate with the hospital. Off we went to the ER, sharing stories about bearing these old ways within hospitals. He was not in the least surprised that we would meet this way. "Spirit is bringing medicine holders together from so many parts of the world," he said.

ER was sheer chaos, and so I clipped on my name tag, draped my stethoscope around my neck, and drew to myself a professional persona. The beleaguered charge nurse took me to be staff relief, until I explained, "Actually, we have a very unusual situation here..."

As someone who has practiced as a nurse for fifteen years, I'd never seen such responsiveness, elegance really, in which a little sanctuary of silence opened up within the madness of a very busy emergency room. Within minutes, David, his broken neck in a brace, was wheeled in on a gurney from CT scan. In a corridor between patient rooms and the nursing station, Lone Eagle arranged the ritual paraphernalia of doctoring, ran the eagle feather over David's body, prayed quietly in Lakota, and wept.

When he finished, I offered to sing. "Please do," he said. I ran energy through David's feet. Singing, I called on Obatala, the Father of light.

These stories are really two moments in the same story. There is much that could be said about the beauty of traditions of medicine converging, but what lingers is the luminosity that abides when people stumble into a conspiracy of kindness. Recently I've wondered if it's simply the presence of the healer, the willingness to step forth as a healing presence that is the gist of the matter, not our technology or our



ritual acumen. In that presence, the work of medicine can move with grace and generosity, whatever the tradition.

The initiation of a healer in Africa is about being stripped to the bone so presence can shine so that one can begin to rely on its intelligence. For myself, the path that led to initiation was curiously direct. The unrest following the Rodney King verdict in 1992 led me to ask hard questions about racism and interracial reconciliation. I began exploring the dreams blacks and whites have about one another and was intrigued to note that African-Americans carried the same core images of whites that Bantu people have borne since the Portuguese arrived in Central Africa in the late 17th Century. Further studies showed me how important the water spirit tradition was among those who were taken as slaves. Eventually, I went to Africa to talk to a native dream teller about the patterns I was seeing Mandaza Kandemwa, a healer who works with the water spirits, understood my intent from our first meeting in 1996. A child of apartheid Rhodesia, my questions touched his own longings. "The water spirits are peacemakers," he explained. That very night he began my first initiation into the way of the ancestors. Stripped then to the bone and stripped again and again: My apprenticeship continues.

Much of my training the past few years has involved assistance in the healing of sacred illness -- those diseases caused by the ancestors themselves so that the afflicted might be a vehicle for spirit's efforts to serve the living. A young healer such as myself had to learn how to bridge the world of the Invisibles with the village, for only the Invisibles are able to heal sacred illness and their way is initiation.

At first one might think nothing could be further from the ambience of a modern American hospital than a little African community wrestling with spirits, but once I started seeing UCLA Medical Center as a village, the differences became less and less important.

An anthropological oddity I face whenever I return to work is that in Western medicine, doctors and patients live in distinctly different cultures. Matters of the sacred haven't been a medical concern in the West since the Renaissance, but the majority of my patients and their

families see healing as intrinsically tied up with spirit. I don't expect "sacred disease" to enter into the Western lexicon any time soon, but there is no doubt that for many the ordeal of illness and the possibility of healing call up the deepest questions of faith. I see the hospital as a hive of initiatory dramas that I meet as well as I can.

A few milligrams of morphine sulfate to take the edge off the pain; a little conversation to take the edge off the fear; coffee for sister, or father at the bedside -- these ritual acts in a different key are familiar from Africa: circling the sacred grove to protect the heart of vulnerability in which the soul is transformed. Sometimes I'm asked to pray, sometimes merely pose the pregnant questions. "How do you make sense out of all this?" or "You've been through hell. What is it that sustains you?"

This last question is almost always answered in the same way: "My faith keeps me going," and "My kin or community hold me up." If I had to name the essence of the rite of initiation that happens in a thousand ways in the hospital, it's about being undone by fate and reimagining one's life within a web of human interconnection which is in turn sustained by an unseen source. Again, this is familiar from Africa -- but Americans bring their own wild poetry to it.

Mike DePonce, for example. At 29, Mike was diagnosed with a rare form of bone cancer. Months of chemotherapy and radiation, bleeding gums, nausea, unit after unit of blood, the loss of a third of his femur, he and his wife Sheba finally entered that mysterious country called "remission" where they lingered for two years.

There is something unsinkable about Mike and Sheba which I can only describe as the appetite of life for life. Together for only nine months before Mike's diagnosis, when I ask what keeps them going, it seems to boil down to loving each other passionately, wanting to bring a child into the world, faith, prayer, and a rather astonishing community of support.

Mike is a firefighter by profession. He explained, "When there's a problem, firefighters just go in and fix it. But when I got sick, it's the first time nobody knew what to do. My hair was all gone from chemotherapy, and a buddy came up with an idea for a fundraiser --

The Great American Shave Off. For a \$20.00 donation, folks had their heads shaved. They also sold baseball caps with my badge number on them. Guys on duty would drive up in the truck, jump off and in five minutes drive away bald." Firefighters, some of their sons, friends from high school -- altogether about 170 bald heads became a public event on the streets of Santa Barbara. In addition, for well over a year, Mike's buddies have been working his shifts, protecting his medical benefits.

I confess I've known Sheba since she was a girl. A "daughter-once-removed," I've watched her become a woman of great presence and integrity. When things get dark, the prayer she has come to rely on is, "Teach me what I need to know."

"What we are going through is so life-changing. The prayer is not about a cure exactly. Of course, we want that. But the prayer is deeper. It's about faith, about listening, paying attention to what God might want."

There are very few tribal rites that equal the intensity and risk of a bone marrow transplant -- the obliteration of the immune system and the razing of the body's capacity to produce its own red blood cells -- and then, the regeneration of this fluid world that makes life possible. Many don't survive. When I heard that Mike and Sheba had made the choice, I knew we were at the threshold of what Mandaza calls "proper initiation."

Every night at work I would gaze stolidly at the computer, watching Mike's lab values crumble as intended. When his already low white blood cell count dropped to a twentieth of what it had been the previous morning, he was in danger. I knew it was time to sing.

The threshold songs are songs of support and protection, the Invisibles in a circle around the bed. They are also songs that the spirits might reveal what God intends so the soul is fed by the mysteries. Mike had been asleep much of the day, but when I sang, he roused, soft and lucid. I took a drop of blood from Sheba's finger, mixed it in water with Mike's fever sweat, and called the ancestors -- a traditional offering in a Styrofoam cup. I also called the spirit of fire to this man who knows something of fire. An incomparable ally, that one, a fierce warrior. Fi-

nally, Mike and Sheba cast the oracle to discern the path through: challenging but ultimately benevolent. When the clock said 7:00, I saw I must step back into time. Down the hall, my night shift was starting.

As Mike prepared for his bone marrow transplant, his community once again came to the fore, eagerly donating more than enough blood and platelets to carry Mike through his descent. At this writing, I leave an orange, a little honey, sweet wild lilac at a creek and sing her a song on Mike's behalf. The blood of Mike's community will soon be his life's blood. Such is the mystery that his life has delivered him to.

In traditional societies initiation is never a private matter: It renews the culture itself. When Sheba quoted a poem by one of Mike's friends, "Stand together we stand tall/We will not let a brother fall," I hear the vigor of a loving community but also an echo of the Yoruba proverb: "If we stand tall, it is because we stand on the shoulders of many ancestors." And I imagine the young men fresh from the forest, their heads shaved and the ritual white clay washed from their bodies. They have returned to the village, these ones, and now they are men and greeted with drumming and song. The elders smile because they know the world will continue.

## *Following the Thread*

Common, fragile, frightening to some -- yet I rarely stop thinking about the old woman. Singular but everywhere -- gauze of webs between dusty oak and low chaparral, hunting at night or sitting for weeks completely still around an egg sac in the center of her orb. The Navajo call her Na'acjei edza, Spider Woman.

They say she carries the sacred wind, the nilchi'i, that swirls clockwise but also counterclockwise, meaning she weaves but also unweaves. She blesses the hands of the women at the loom, the children who make figures with string; but I believe she also follows the line of this pen across the page: image, story, pattern, the making and unmaking of meaning. It is she who extends the thread in the darkening maze, and the thread itself is the beginning of a story.

My favorite story about Spider Woman is told by the Hopi.

Long, long ago, it seems, before the Winter Solstice, the world grew cold as it drifted from the sun. The elders, which is to say the animals, held council.

Bear, all hair and muscle, cast a rope to pull the sun back but couldn't. Wolf tried but collapsed in exhaustion. Finally, to great laughter, Grandmother Spider said, "I can do it!" And so she did: Casting out

a thin thread, she drew the sun in, deft movement of eight thin legs, effortless.

When I was in Africa the first time, Mandaza Kandemwa asked me the name of the spirit that sent me to seek initiation. "The spider," I answered. "She makes connections," I told him the Hopi story and sang a song to her I'd composed from my scant Navajo. Although Mandaza hadn't heard of Spider Woman, he'd had visions of interconnectedness; so he helped me translate my song into simple Shona.

When I returned to Africa a few months later, I was surprised to find that the old woman had begun trance possessing him when he did healings: frail, bent over, his long fingers now her legs running over the bodies of patients.

A year later, my wife and I were performing the wedding ceremony for Mandaza and the clan dreamer, Simakuhle Dube. At the beginning of the ceremony, I was pouring a bowl of traditional beer into the dirt for the ancestors and noted a lovely green spider on the back of my forearm. When I stood up and raised my arm, he received her in his cupped hand and began trembling, eyes rheumy, teeth clattering. I was cross-culturally out of my depth. I'd never performed a wedding ceremony before, much less one in which the groom suddenly became a spider. But when I tried to understand "her" point of view, looking out at this ragtag community of Shona and Ndebele tribes people, a sweet Jewish woman from Brooklyn and her young Anglo-Mexican husband from Santa Fe, I could see there was weaving to be done. I circumambulated the group, clockwise, silently singing, and my wife performed the rites.

This brief story is like a spider just hatched -- wisp caught by the wind to land where? Trance possession isn't part of the Navajo or Hopi tradition, but in Zimbabwe, it's at the core: The spirits come from elsewhere into the bodies of devoted souls to share wisdom and healing with the community. Where a story alights one can never know nor can one guess its consequences, but it's clear that Spider has woven meanings that are completely African.

Human culture began a few hundred thousand years ago in the

African bush, the clan around a fire telling stories. And culture began ending a few decades ago in the blue glare of the TV, the story-telling machine that plugs us into the most trivial possible reflections of who we can be.

Few are truthful about the real dread of the times we live in. The bleaching out of the dimensions of a layered story -- laughter, pathos, ambiguity, sorrow, imagination -- leaves us without a sense of meaning that is convincing to the soul. Without story the ancestors have no place to be, no place to breathe. Without story they are vagrant, can't find the path to the home they might share with the living, and thus can't impart what we need to know. And so it is for their sake and ours that we're alert to the telltale threads and where they might lead. The future may well depend on it.

Following the thread: Having written those last solemn words last night, it's become clear this essay demands a postscript if only because one story always leads to another.

I call my typist, Anne, to arrange to drop this essay off after my graveyard shift. She apologizes that she's late with Faxing my previous piece. "The room where the FAX machine is full of spiders," she explains. "I counted four black widows."

"Black widows?" I said, smiling absently. "They're really very quiet. They won't leap at you. I used to collect them when I was a kid. Sweet creatures, actually." My mind was in two places -- feeling slightly embarrassed that once again I'd lapsed evangelical and sentimental about the lives of bugs and at the same time thinking about the occupation of the FAX machine, which I can only read as a political act. FAX machines, cell phones, e-mail, the World Wide Web, etc. -- technology has engulfed whole myths, cycles of interconnectedness, and sucked the poetry out of them. If I were a black widow, I might occupy a FAX or two myself.

"Now, Michael," says Anne, "I know you like spiders." (I didn't know it showed.) "I don't dislike them myself. My house is filled with little webs, and I don't bother them. It's just these ones that kill you -- the widows and the little brown fiddlers, and then there are the ones

whose front legs curl sideways that are just mean. They've got to go. I'm getting rid of them all on Friday."

"Don't worry, Anne, I'll take care of them when I drop off my article."

Summer solstice and a full eclipse of the sun in Zimbabwe: connections. Why not a little ritual of gratitude?

And so it will be. Following the story where it leads, I'll have breakfast in the hospital cafeteria, then drive to Anne's house armed with a Styrofoam cup and a plastic grocery bag and say good morning to the grandmothers. Where to take them? Well, there's the edge between the low chaparral and the dusty oaks downhill from my ancestors' altar. Spiders seem to like that place.



## *The Way of Sacred Illness*

James Baldwin wrote that to be truly alive is to make love with what you most fear. My lover has arrived in the form of a diagnosis of multiple sclerosis. The Bantu tradition that I practice medicine relies on sacred illness to initiate its shamans, known as ngangas. The ancestors visit certain illnesses on those called to heal. MS is certainly such an illness because it beckons toward a deeper understanding of healing. When I told Mandaza Kademwa (the nganga who initiated me into tribal medicine) about my diagnosis, he listened as a dear friend would and then said, “Well, you have your heart and your voice. You can do without your legs. Nothing now should get in the way of spirit coming through you as a healer.” Bless his lack of pity. It was true.

Though my legs seemed then to be fading beneath me, I’ve never been so unimpeded.

My apprenticeship with multiple sclerosis began very slowly, retrospect being the only angle from which one might even see its beginnings. I was in Africa in 1996 with my wife, introducing her to the Bantu people who had initiated and received me as a medicine man.

We were in the stony water lands of Masvingo, southern Zimbabwe, and wife was initiating Mandaza into the mysteries of the Hebrew letters when I noted a garden variety of white male arrogance rising up in me. After all, I was “the expert,” much a part of the tribal world, and quite well-read on Bantu anthropology. How much I wanted to interfere, be Master of Ceremonies. So I pulled away to a small pool of water to curl up in and prayed in the traditional way of the ngoma of the water spirits. I yielded to the field of spirits that were carrying the poetry of the moment quite without my advice.

It was then that the snail parasite *Schistosoma* slid through the skin and apparently laid eggs in the lattice of my peripheral nervous system. That night a fever, strange but transient, two weeks later, numb from the waist down. And so I walked eight years with this numbness. Eighty percent of peripheral neuropathies are undiagnosable, I was told. With reluctance, accustomed to a young man’s oblivious vigor, I settled into the perpetual reminder of the frailty of the flesh. I believe it made me a better nurse, a better nganga, a more compassionate human being. All this started changing a few months ago when I lost the full use of my legs. It was then that my apprenticeship with the sacred illness, soon to be named multiple sclerosis, truly began. How fortunate I am that MS insinuated itself into my body at a moment of surrender, and has kept such perfect faith with the teaching of surrender, and surrender, and yet again, surrender. And then there are the gifts that come in the wake of surrender.

Surrender? What do I mean by surrender? Anagarika Sujata says that there is dishonesty in any mind that insists reality occurs in a specific way. MS says that healing requires a strange alliance with what I am facing, and so the way of surrender has demanded an uncompromising honesty. Not a passive acceptance, but a very active meeting.

My first serious rendezvous with the spirit of the illness was last August when I walked to the cave on the Big Sur coast where I’d been blessed to spend two years during my twenties and thirties in solitude and prayer. It took me ten hours to walk what had been a one hour hike. In my two weeks alone I surrendered my legs not knowing if

they'd return or even if I'd be able to make my way out of the ravine. Later I surrendered my life. Undiagnosed as yet, I didn't know if that time had come. Finally, there was surrendering the fetish of certainty, knowing that God is the one who shapes what is before me. Such has been my spiritual practice during this time and through it, I have begun to taste freedom.

Occasionally!

Surrendering my legs, perplexed that I would be asked to do so, but with whom do I argue? Surrendering my life was a different matter, that truculent fantasy that my life and my death are possessions of mine, God be damned. My wife is twenty years my senior, and it's been many years of renewing the vow that I'd see her to the other side, a betrayal of her and God's betrayal of both of us should fate decide otherwise. But yes the tearful moment five minutes before the New Year's kiss, insisting that she continue should I go first.

The third lesson from the illness was surrendering the fetish of certainty. A few months ago I was delivered vividly between worlds. I was between lives, one life dead and gone and the next unborn, that place the Tibetans call bardo. Flailing in rage, indulging in an orgiastic fit of self-pity, and my wife, bless her, said, "You have to let go of how you think and talk about these things." The space of the bardo echoed with "let go, let go, let go" as if to harangue. I knew that spiritually I seem to be called to let go of most everything, or perhaps merely any shard of certainty.

Ah, the Fool card of the Tarot! My father gave me my first Tarot deck before he died, and I've long used it to understand my fate. Did I not see the Fool as a photograph of my soul, satchel at the end of a stick, dog nipping at my heels? Did I not always yearn to dance at the edge of the abyss? And yet quite denying now years of my public and private rhetoric that could well be the fiction of having a self, I'm seduced by the fetish of certainty – that fetish that I've always scoffed at with contempt. The Fool, at last, has the last laugh.

Affectionate though he was towards the young man's flamboyance,

now he places the older man's meditation cushion at the edge of the uncertainty that has become his life and says, "Sit still."

How little I've understood the Fool. A little psychosis, a bit of entertainment, half-time in the rites of surrender. I'm left with the question, stripped bare – what is the authentic and ensouled truth of the story I am in?

Certainly, I'd lie if I didn't say that part of the truth has been hell, nailed to a diagnosis, compelled by the pornography of prognosis. Yet within the nightmare, I see Mildred smiling. Mildred was my first patient. I spent four years at her bedside, learning to meditate, learning to be a nurse. One night I came to work (her home) and she asked how I was. (I read her lips and also pressed air through an Ambu bag through her tracheotomy and vocal cords for a word or two.)

"Oh, I feel a little sad," I said.

"Why?" she asked.

"I don't know. Life just seems sad to me sometimes."

"I rarely feel sad," she said.

"That surprises me, Mildred. Some people might think you'd be bitter," I said.

Mildred had been diagnosed with MS in the 1950s. "Bitter? Oh no. I just don't let things bother me."

And so I finally "saw" her. She was virtually bathed in love. As am I. And she

radiated light. I spent those years suctioning, medicating, bathing, and giving a bedpan over to an angel.

And so the continuing truth of initiation: the affliction itself has drawn me as a healer into a circle of healers, some alive, some spirits. This circle itself is the place of healing, the place of initiation. Healing and initiation are one and the same, the weave of many hands.

The circle of the living.

My community of friends singing, praying, drumming on my behalf as my legs began giving away, as I staggered with my walking stick. The medicine of a prayerful community: the next day I put my stick down

only to use it, as my wife said because the time had come for me to lean on the ancestors.

Dr. Lobsang Dhondup practiced Tibetan medicine for five years in Mongolia, and is now in a clinic in San Diego. He met me with silence as he spent ten minutes taking my pulses in both my arms, his eyes closed in deep focus. Then he looked up and said, "You have MS don't you?" Lobsang collaborated with neurologists at UCSB regarding MS.

My pulses, he told me, showed chronic inflammation, and he prescribed herbs and a rigorous diet to calm my inflamed self. Initially, I resisted. No chili! No sugar, wheat, alcohol, mangos! No etc! This diet messed seriously with my inner Mexican.

Because of Lobsang and his kind Buddhist demeanor, I've ceased to see MS as an enemy. The diet behooves me to regard it as the Guest, that it be at ease. My meditation is how to be hospitable to this one who has so much to teach me. Again, surrender.

Dr. Bill Gray is a homeopath who knows the poetry of symptoms. In homeopathy, there is compassion in the activity of diagnosis, so that my symptoms in their strange peculiarity sing, call-and-response with the possible remedies: gold, sulfur, falcon's blood. Bill, like myself, is a refugee from allopathy, a Stanford trained MD, taken almost thirty years by another paradigm. "Laws of cure!" he marvels. "Symptoms as the body's native wisdom about healing." This seems close to the understanding in African medicine that with sacred illness one is healed by the spirit of the disease itself.

Multiple sclerosis has drawn me as a healer into this circle of healers, some that I have named, others that I'm just beginning to know. Again, healing and initiation is the medicine of community, the weave of the many hands. MS itself is the subtlest and most deft of healers, a true and vivid spirit ally, the one who knows the intimate cellular truth, undisguised, undeniable, and utterly transparent. Among the living and the spirits, this Guest turns a face that is not without beauty. Who am I to argue that fate has delivered me here by accident, has called me towards the dance with this one so real in its intelligence, so relentless in its wisdom.

## *Between Africa and America*

The moments that open and deepen the story of giving one's life to the sacred always involve the breaking of the heart. I think of Saint Francis of Assisi, who gave his life to seeing Christ in the shattered, the mad, the hopeless, the afflicted when he first met a leper and felt disgust. Or the young Prince Siddhartha, who would become the Buddha wandering beyond the palace walls and, overwhelmed by the dreadful anguish of the streets, committing his life to the realization of compassion. These stories move us because they are archetypal, commonplace: the stuff of our aspirations, the naked truth of the world we live in, and what is asked of us to meet it.

For myself, three moments come to mind.

April 1992. My wife and I at the bedside of our friend Hella Hammid who is dying of cancer. This last night of her life, I am her nurse. Her pulse slowing, her breathing first jagged, then soft, and then the final gasp when she shot upright and collapsed in her son's arms. Meanwhile, Los Angeles burned: four white police officers acquitted of beating Rodney King, and rage-filled the streets. Hella's room was filled

with the tranquility a good death leaves in its wake, yet there was smoke in the air. Helicopters flew over. I wept for the world my young daughter was born into.

The spirits take note when one weeps for the world when in terror and hope, one can say, "Make use of me." I began writing a book that required that I understand the tribal world African Americans originated from tracing, for example, the origins of the full immersion baptism that swept Christianized slaves in America in the 18th Century across the Atlantic to its original form among Bantu speaking people; the ngoma of the water spirits.

Four years after the Rodney King verdict, I found myself in Africa at the doorstep of Mandaza Kademwa, a healer or nganga in the water spirit tradition. He recognized me from a dream as did his wife Simakuhle. That very evening, he began initiating me into the way of the ancestors and continues to do so.

At the beginning of my second initiation, I awoke from a terrifying racial dream: late night in the San Fernando Valley facing off against a huge black man in the employ of a white gangster, both of us armed with crowbars and covered with blood.

When I told Mandaza the dream, he laughed. "That was a good workout," he said in his Britishized English. "I know that spirit well. He is a slave that your ancestors kept. When I was being initiated, I faced many such spirits. Remember, my ancestors were kings, and they also had slaves. I know just what to do. Follow me."

At the side of a pool of water, he put a little herbal snuff in the palm of my hand and said, "This will send that spirit home." As I inhaled, he dipped a fly whisk in the water and flicked it across my back. For perhaps three seconds, I was that black slave, enraged, humiliated, and absolutely powerless beneath the master's whip. And then gone.

"That one will soon be back in his village, and he will be greeted with a feast because a warrior has returned and will protect the people. Now climb in the water and pray thanks. Now your spirits can be free."

The third moment

The third moment took place two years later in another world alto-

gether: the 10th floor, UCLA Medical Center, bone marrow transplant, oncology. By now in Africa, I healed alongside Mandaza and initiated others, but returning to America was always more than a little confusing. What could African medicine possibly mean in the high tech world I work in?

It was a busy shift when a call was transferred to my portable phone. A patient's wife, crying, telling me her husband's story. Mr. Blanchard was sixty-two, with few symptoms whatsoever, when a CT scan found extensive and effectively terminal metastatic cancer. Given high dose chemotherapy two weeks previous, he was suddenly comatose and in kidney failure. The bottom had fallen out of his family's life, and his wife expressed confusion and rage.

"Would you like me to pray for him?" I asked. She said she would.

Mr. Blanchard lay pale and flaccid, an IV dripping, a face mask delivering oxygen. As I checked his vital signs and changed his diaper, I sang a song to the spirit of the crossroads, the one they say carries messages between worlds. Then I sat on his bed and directly addressed his prone body.

"Listen, Mr. Blanchard. Forgive me for bothering you, but I just talked to your wife, and she is very upset. Your teenage boy and your daughter are suffering. I think they are afraid that you will die without coming back first to be with them. I know it's a lot to ask, but could you possibly return?"

Unresponsive, of course, but I knew somehow I was heard, that he would try. When I went home at the end of a long night, I was surprised by my confidence.

When I returned later in the day, he was sitting up, his wife feeding him. Two days later, he walked out of the hospital, had even begun to stutter.

A healer without a village is not a healer. Mr. Blanchard was one patient who showed me the hospital is my village, mending a life split between Africa and America.

The education of a healer begins with heartbreak and returns to it again and again. My training in the ngoma tradition has moved be-



tween the heartbreak of ritual initiation and that of everyday life and, by way of both, the blessed disenchantment from that narrow fantasy that my life belongs to me. The way of the nganga demands that one's life belongs first and foremost to the village, to the numberless beings that suffer, to the world itself. In Africa when I pour the sacred maize beer into the earth as an offering to the ancestors, I am actually pouring my very self to those spirits that uphold and mend the world. And the prayer, quiet and tender, is always the same: "Make use of me."

## *Distressing Disguises*

Though I am no Christian, I saw Christ in him -- that light we serve, said Mother Teresa, in all its "distressing disguises." Though Charles did not speak except to rave, from the beginning, it seemed we were gathered towards a "knowing" beneath words and most certainly beneath the absurd personae of "patient" and "nurse."

He had no face, or rather his face, like much of his body, was a mass of scabs given to bleeding, and bleeding profusely. Sometimes we tied his hands down because in his confusion he tore at himself, once actually tearing off part of his nose. Yet from the moment I met him, I saw beauty, possibly because I was fortunate enough to first catch his image in his daughter's loving gaze -- she, a slip of a child just thirteen.

African-American, younger than myself, end-stage AIDS with a rare form of skin cancer. Many of the staff were frightened of him or felt helpless when he bled or couldn't bear the manifest presence of tragedy. Understandable. Who can judge? But I felt compelled to a meeting, a rendezvous, a quality of light behind the veil of appearances.

Shortly before Charles died, I took my 3:00 a.m. break to spend an hour at his bedside meditating: my eyes wide open, breathing in his suffering, breathing out loving-kindness. While he slept, I saw light

spread from his body to fill the room -- he and I in it, not it in us. "Charles," I said, "you can let go.

You really can. You are well-loved, and you will be received on the other side." One eye opened (the other pasted shut with blood) -- mute, hearing, inscrutable. A presence already in another world.

A couple of days later, he was silent at last, his wife and daughter with him. Heart rate and breathing irregular and sinking down and down. After letting his family know what to expect, I kept vigil at a distance until they approached the nurses' station and told me they thought he'd passed.

When I entered the room, he took a long gasp, and that was it: our rendezvous which was a leave-taking. The drama which is the end of drama -- a door open, a moving through but to where?

His daughter wailed, "Daddy! Daddy!" How could I not think of my own daughter at my bedside that terrible, holy moment of parting? In Africa, they say keening belongs to the circle of women. How can the dead find their way to the village of the ancestors if the women don't cry out? Alongside lament, inconsolability, I whispered, "Go well, Charles."

As I slept off the long night, Charles visited me in a dream, his face bright and intact. He cheerfully showed me his new house full of African artifacts -- Yoruba, if I'm not mistaken. When I awoke, I called his wife, and she laughed. In his last weeks of confusion, he kept talking about refurbishing the house and adding a new room. "That's all he seemed to think about," she said. He was very concerned that he wouldn't finish it in time."

Beauty and the Beast: While Charles challenged everyone who came near with the horror of his face, his fate, Joyce was always stunning even as she wasted to skin and bones. An Ndebele tribe woman of exquisite bearing, sister of my African sister Simakuhle, AIDS drew her from us one flake at a time until it seemed there was little left. I was always shy around Joyce as a man can be around so lovely a woman, lovely with whom he shared but a few words of a common language.

Still, I like to think about when she was so ill she could hardly walk and I made her laugh when I coaxed a dog into dancing with me.

Joyce's brother-in-law, Mandaza, and I were asleep in a little cement dare', or spirit house when we were awakened by a scream as I'd never heard before. We clothed up, Mandaza tying a leopard tail around his waist, and went into the dark to find Joyce scarcely visible, sitting in the dirt, weeping. I held her feet gently, singing an Ndebele song while Mandaza practiced his craft, methodically taking into his own body the intense pains in Joyce's gut. When she stopped crying out, I carried her to a blue Peugeot and wrapped her in blankets. Mandaza drove us far into the countryside to her mother's land near the Botswana border.

Pavement turning to dirt, dirt to dust, cow trails to thin grass until at last under a slivered moon, we came to a clutch of round mud houses. Mandaza and I under each of Joyce's arms, she collapsed at her mother's doorway.

Again wailing, but this time something different happened, something unearthly, something even as I witnessed it, I knew I'd scarcely ever understand.

Mother came with a dozen kinswomen and their tired silent children. They tended to Joyce by the light of a torch, but it was not Joyce they tended. It was clear to all but my non-African self that grandmother had arrived, Joyce bearing her; so mother placed her own mother's shawl over Joyce's thin shoulders. Everyone clapped their hands and ululated the way women do when they greet an ancestor. "This one will soon be gone," said the grandmother spirit. "We cannot save her. It is time to say goodbye."

And so it was Joyce died a few days later. In Africa, it is said there is an invisible world parallel to this one. One passes into that world when one dreams or when one dies. In initiation, one goes there and returns with gifts for the living, like Mandaza's gift of healing or Joyce's capacity to yield to her grandmother's voice in a time of trouble.

The Kikongo word for the threshold between worlds is *kalunga*, and for the coastal people of South Central Africa, so many of whom ended up in the slave ports of Charleston and New Orleans, the *kalunga*

line was specifically the Atlantic Ocean. The soul after death follows the arc of the sun as it crosses the sky to set in the west. Those enslaved believed they were being taken to the land of the dead, never to return.

Conversely, slaves in the Americas often believed when they died, they would return to Africa. For African people of the Motherland and the Diaspora, the concern of ancestors is never simply a matter of biological lineage. Engaging the world of the ancestors is what completes us, makes us whole, brings together the visible and the invisible, makes wisdom possible.

Ritually, the kalunga line is sometimes understood to be the glass of the mirror that separates us of flesh from those "over there." The image of the mirror is apt because, in Bantu metaphysics, it is not inaccurate to say that Africans and African-Americans bear each other's image, one completing the other. When Charles invited me into his spirit house so full of Africa and when I was honored to meet Joyce's grandmother that bleak night in the Zimbabwe desert, I was delivered to a world entirely outside of the violence of history. In Africa, it is understood that without a connection to the world of spirit, you will be trapped in appearances, and your life will only superficially make sense.

## *Coyote's Gift*

The old stories tell of something wild and untamable, grievous, terrifying, or just plain strange that cuts through the heart of the experience.

A young Navajo man told me when he gave up the bottle, "The Singers say liquor belongs to Coyote; so I gave it back to him."

"What do you mean that it belongs to Coyote?" I asked.

"Well, they say that First Man laid all the stars out on a rug and one by one was placing them in the sky all orderly and Coyote came and watched, full of impatience. When he had enough, Coyote grabbed the blanket and scattered the stars down the middle of the sky. Coyote just can't stand too much harmony. He likes liquor; so I gave it back to him. The Singers, you know, sometimes their ceremonies can bring us back to beauty, but they can't get rid of the streak of craziness in the sky. That's permanent."

My Navajo friend had seen Coyote's reflection at the bottom of a bottle, but one way or another we all walk or wobble between First Man's delicate and loving ordering of the Cosmos and the Trickster's irrepressible need to throw it askew. I like this story because it places us

all, vulnerable and very alive, in border country. And the borderlands apparently are a place where one meets the extraordinary.

It had been only two days since I'd returned from Africa, body sluggish with jet lag, to be sure, but beyond that my soul uprooted from another dimension of time. I'd been in "the village of the ancestors," the continuation of my apprenticeship as a healer in the tradition of the water spirits. My mind just wasn't in America, in fact couldn't imagine quite how to get there. Such was my dilemma as I stepped out of the elevator to start the night shift as a floor nurse at a large urban hospital in Los Angeles.

The old dream of wading through molasses, the flash of movement all around me but my body lumbering. I tried to meet the necessary stress, took to the poison -- half a dozen cups of coffee, but it all seemed so unreal. "You are in a different mind," said my friend Annie. Indeed.

A Buddhist prayer says, "Sentient beings are numberless -- I vow to save them." But occasionally this oath is startled into something like "Buddhas are numberless -- I vow to recognize them." At 2:00 a.m. I was assigned to admit a fifty-two-year-old Buddha from the emergency room. Hydrocephalic, born with water on the brain.

A small body, his head hugely swollen, feet and hands curled in on themselves, benevolent and inscrutable. At his bedside, I was suddenly and quietly if not in America, at least in the present moment. As I performed the routine admission interview, I felt both at ease and awkward -- at ease because I knew I was with a being completely lacking judgment of me, awkward because I couldn't for a moment grasp who he was. Complex or simple? An imbecile or a saint? His father had died, he told me, and his mother (his only caretaker) was getting old. He couldn't walk and was in constant pain but was completely without complaint of any sort. "You are a remarkable man," I said. "You carry your suffering with such grace." Did he understand these words?

"Thank you," he replied. I think he understood, but part of the mystery of the meeting was that there was no way of telling.

An abscess in the foot, ugly but easily treated with antibiotics. I cleaned out the wound and wrapped it in gauze -- the undeniable plea-

sure of a gesture akin to loving. I call this man the Buddha because he called forth loving, called it from a cloud of disorientation.

He could be loved, this wizened child or whoever he was, but he could not be healed of his fate. The fate that has marked him is the fate he will die with. He was born to a particular community -- one that most of us will join, never willingly. He is of the tribe of the incurables.

As a young man, I was given to the idea that the evidence of a true bearer of the medicine is the miracle: The lame walk and the blind see. Such healings happen. I've seen them, participated in them, been astonished and moved by them. For this I sing my medicine songs -- always will -- but lately, I'm thinking that perhaps the soul of a healer is most truly revealed by the incurables, those who reduce us to mere hopeless loving: those we cannot fix, often cannot even alter.

January 1, 2000. For three days a small community gathered with my wife and me to pray and hold council and invite the next millennium. The Messiah once again did not arrive but apparently was inclined to send a young angel in his stead by the name of Jason.

A couple of dozen of us were sunk in the deep, serious discussion -- how are we to live given the anguish of the world? We were interrupted by noises in the next room like an animal being tortured: the advent of Jason. But what sounded like pain, his mother explained were Jason's cries of ecstasy.

"How can we make him feel welcome," I asked.

"He likes to drum," she replied.

And so Jason's caretaker brought him in, Brain-damaged since birth, flailing against the drum skin, drooling, grunting, laughing -- when I say "the advent of Jason," I mean this thirteen-year-old wild child completed the circle and thereby consecrated a little community.

How is it that the incurables heal us -- the madman at the street corner, the woman shattered by war, grandmother a bit demented, your child with metastatic cancer? How small we would be without them, how narrow our preoccupations: self-certain, complacent, blind. The healer knows well his or her own wound, knows that incurability be-



longs to the fact that one was born human. Nonetheless, it is always possible that one might be healed of lovelessness. Miracles do happen.

## *Through the Narrow Place*

We saw the old Bedouin walk for miles across the desert before he arrived with a burlap sack of stones from the Holy Mountain. Geodes cracked open with many crystals, flat shale stained with the dust of fern. We bought more than we wanted, and then he walked away. The graciousness of this stranger, no common tongue. Face wrapped in brown cotton except for his vivid eyes. Where did he come from? Not a house in sight for miles, just a few stray camels.

For a week we prayed at Sinai. The wail of the muezzin at dawn, the piety of Muslim people. This place, they say, where the Law was revealed in stone, the Eternal Mind inscribing sacred order. I am compelled by the story, but moonlight, granite, dust, stars are as much as I can take in of this endless act of ordering. My wife says she came that we might receive the Law implicit in creation, and for a few days outside of time, it seemed like we did.

In Jewish scripture, Egypt is called Mizraim” the narrow place from which the Jewish slaves escaped.

Returning to Cairo was to return to the full tilt of contemporary

chaos. Headlines on the International Herald Tribune about riots in Jerusalem. How many shot dead at Damascus gate? I can't recall. My Jewish wife and I of Catholic origin spent our last day going from mosque to mosque to pray for peace.

But it is not the cool silence of the Blue Mosque that I remember now but the terrified eyes of a little girl and how I betrayed her. It was Thursday, the Muslim Sabbath. One of the five pillars of Islam is giving alms to the poor, and so on Thursday, the street children know they will eat. We were pursued by a dozen, harried, dropping coins - too much or so it seemed. I was reeling from the day's news and wanted to shut out the exhaust, the desperation, the sheer unraveling hopelessness of the world.

She was probably about nine years old and followed us for blocks, crying out, and my heart shut with fury. We hid in a public building, and when we left, she was gone at last.

A few weeks later I was at work, receiving report with a few other nurses. The one patient that unnerved all of us was a thirty-two-year-old who had been deeply depressed. When her husband left for an errand, she put a bullet through her head. As the desperate eyes of the girl in Cairo were never far from me, I volunteered to be this woman's nurse.

Except for her mouth and nose, her face was covered in bandages and from her mouth gray bloody ooze. Hour by hour I checked the saturation of oxygen in her blood. When death would come, it would likely be from inhaling too much of her brain. Drowning.

When the heart narrows we place another's suffering as far as possible from our own fate. I am not the hungry kid on the streets of Cairo. I will not blow my brains out. But this night I am able to apply myself to a slow dressing change, unraveling the Kerlix sticky to the exit wound by the ear, cleaning with peroxide, daubing with antibiotic ointment, then rewrapping her bruised face.

This cycle seems to go on forever, forever moving from expansiveness to the petty defense of territory and back to expansiveness. And then another round. We've all known what it is to leave the Holy

Mountain to the valley of anguish and how seductive it is the sense of futility when once again one has lost the thread. But how else does the Law actually enter into the lived life if not through failing and then again remembering.

## *Macaroni and Jesus and Barbecued Barbie*

Child abuse has so many faces, doesn't it? The horror of pederast priests and the Church covering for them is one thing but the molesting of a child's soul with received teaching gets under the skin and persists. Century after century the doctrine of Hell and Original Sin has been institutionalized child abuse – a way to “control” the wild souls of children (and other primitives) by preaching a loving God alongside His Infinite Brutality This came vividly to me when, to call on my fifth decade, I went to the forests of Big Sur to be alone for a few months to meditate and pray. I'd occasionally been a freelance hermit over the years but these months were initially quite rigorous. I'd meditated for several weeks before the obvious was at all obvious. From Catholic catechism onward – since I was seven – I had lived every gesture under the gaze of an omniscient and punitive God. Not “believing” in hell as an adult was apparently irrelevant. Until I “saw” - and saw through the pervasive and tacit “fact” of this merciless Catholic impostor of a “God” - I was stained with His relentless Presence. I was among the damned. In some ways, I'd intuited as much years before. Phrase by phrase the terza

rima of Dante Inferno showed how familiar I'd been with the geography of hell since I was a kid and my years as a homeless teenager confirmed. Like the church, the commercial world (of which some brands of Christianity are a variant) forever seeks to snatch the soul of a child and render it unrecognizable. Every parent knows this and the feeling of helplessness itself erodes you. Conspiring with the powers that be is common enough – adults are far from immune to the seductions of consumer imprint. And our “Amish” impulse to shelter the youngin’s are far from convincing. A long, long time ago when I was a recovering hippie single dad with a six-year-old girl, I knew it was my duty to preserve my daughter’s soul from the banal violence of American culture. I didn’t quite know the measure of the stink of hell that lingered around me – didn’t know how much I saw America as a place of damnation – so I was perhaps too much a flamboyant. “fundamentalist.” Specifically regarding this fellow claiming to be Jesus and that plastic babe of all babes, Barbie. Jesus himself was a precocious young rebbe [rabbi] but daughter Nicole had come home once from playing with a fundamentalist friend asking me about sin and I began speculating how to save her from the savior. And so in my early days of creating shamanic rituals, I cooked up some Kraft macaroni and Jesus. The recipe did not even tax the culinary imagination of single dadhood. Take a crucifix and boil it a few minutes till His plastic body was soft enough to know His Eucharistic essence had been imparted. Remove Jesus, boil until squishy macaroni and mix in the cheese powder. Voila’ – macaroni and Jesus. I’d read some choice scripture over the sacrament, like God being love and all that, and then we chowed down. The transmogrification of Barbie was another matter. No way at all to make her edible. And no scriptural redemption. What to do? Well, we went to the Salvation Army and got a cheap used Barbie and decapitated her so we could invite her cousins from New Guinea into the house to live with us. “Barbarella,” we decided, was a mudwoman from the Goroka Highlands. After we affixed a clay head to Barbie’s body and painted her naked body, Barbarella told us - or so I translated - how it was that when neighboring brutes chased her into the Asaro river she covered

herself with mud and they ran off. “They thought I was a ghost!” she laughed. Barbarella was not in the least interested in Ken, thank God, and I set her on the altar as a protective spirit to shield Nicole from the demons that haunt American pop culture. All of this was a bit much for Nicole who really didn’t think much of Ken either and was much more into the Care Bears anyway. Was I to decapitate a clan of Care Bears? And replace their heads with what? When I found myself fulminating about the Bears - “What do those sentimental twits know about feelings?” – I could see my efforts to protect Nicole had an edge. Girls, after all, just want to have fun, don’t they? I conceded to trusting my daughter’s good sense and it was mine to play with my own damn Barbarella. \* \* \* This essay was just visited by a necessary postscript. I was recently telling the story of Barbarella to Ki’na Darkcloud, an Arikara woman who grew up on the Navajo reservation in Arizona. As a child, her Navajo brothers used to get her all sorts of used Barbies which she’d melt on a barbecue and bury. “I imagine the archaeologists of the future will be excited about the find: melted Barbies with their eyes sliding off and such.” And there it is – a full meal of Barbecued Barbies and macaroni and Jesus served to you by a mudhead. What indeed might the archaeologist make of post-apocalypse America?

## *Sometimes a Man Without a Nose*

And sometimes a bat is not a vampire.

The bat and the man without a nose arrived the same week. Is that a sign?

I was long predisposed to look for signs. An imaginative kid becomes a fourteen-year-old evangelical preaching the end of the world. He becomes homeless and psychotic. And then one thing leads to another, he gets grey, becomes a grandfather, and is initiated as a four-eyed medicine man in Africa. To have four eyes is to see what seeps through from the world of the Invisibles into the poetry of what can be seen with another pair of eyes. As a healer and keeper of the oracle, paying attention to “the signs” is much in my job description.

And so I was initially shocked that the bat was not a vampire. To be merely a bat under the circumstances showed a real sense of humor, irony laced with chutzpah.

And the circumstances?

Well, my wife’s a cinephobe and she’d left town for some reason or another. A mixed marriage. Cinemania’s my game.



So I rented a DVD of *Shadow of the Vampire* and opened the door cause it was so damned hot. Willem Dafoe treks to Transylvania to meet Count Dracula. Dafoe and his comrades are sitting in the dark around a campfire with the Count, ordinary awkwardness, and new acquaintances. Then, swifter than swift, the Count grabs a bat out of midair and bites its head off. A little snack. Dafoe and friends are properly blown away as am I. Even more so when a moment later an actual bat flies into the open door that was ventilating dog day Topanga while I was just getting into the perverse pathos of the Count.

A sign? And if so what the hell does it mean? When I left the door open was it really the heat or was the bat communicating to me via sonar because a rendezvous was in order?

Never did finish that movie.

One really can't shoo a bat anywhere a bat doesn't want to go. They are most admirable that way. I opened up all the doors and windows and sat with batness for a couple of hours. Batty doesn't describe them though I think it can occasionally describe me. It circled around my meditating head and the rest of the house until I got the message.

The bat was an angel of the Lord and saith he, "Behold. I am but a bat. Fear not!" And with that, it flew out the front door.

I acquired a few months ago a hole between the septum of my nostrils and the week of Brother Bat was when I visited Dr. Shiskowsky to check it out. In my hyperactive nurse mind, I wondered about dysplasia, maybe even cancer. I knew the culprits: Buté and Modumbé. Both are sacred medicines. Buté feeds the water spirits and Modumbé the grandmother spirits. Wild tobacco is understood among Bantu people to be holy. Same as the Native Americans.

"No doctor. I've never much done cocaine but Buté and Modumbé I've inhaled by the bushel."

He concedes to swabbing my nostrils even though he's sure it's a waste of my money. "You don't have cancer."

"I believe you but I know my mind. I'll wander around not knowing." "Not knowing" was an actual landscape when I spoke it. I've been to "not knowing" in so many ways.

I left the doctor's office back to Topanga, feeling quite proud that I "took care of myself." Had a doctor probed the "black hole" secretly tucked in my nose and assured me my nose was just a healthy nose with a hole?

Lost in these thoughts I pull up to Topanga Market to get a tamale and, sitting quietly in the driver's seat of the car next to me is the man without a nose.

I've had a couple of patients who lost their noses. One before facial reconstruction, a black undergrad visiting home in Crenshaw shot in his face while pumping gas. A gang initiation. The other lost his nose from cancer, the smooth cavity of it like the fellow in the car.

Like the bat, this spirit without a nose showed a real sense of humor, irony laced with chutzpah. Such timing. And did I really go into the market for a tamale or did I have a rendezvous with the man without a nose that his spirits were calling me to? The bat angel prepped me. Sometimes a bat is just a bat and sometimes a man without a nose is just a man without a nose.

Maybe.

Freud famously said, "Sometimes a cigar is a phallic symbol and sometimes a cigar is just a cigar." But what did Freud know? He was a stone-cold cigar addict and died the most miserable death from throat cancer. Sometimes Buté is food for the water spirits and sometimes it is just a carcinogen.

When my nose swab came back (predictably) negative for cancer I began to see the noseless man as one of those genius loci. A "spirit of the place" – the place being the land of not knowing. Knowing the place of not knowing is important for all of us, which is to say all of us who are temporarily alive.

I can only speak gratitude for having crossed paths with the spirit of not knowing at just such a moment.

And the bat?

Bats are cute beyond telling and Count Dracula has no business biting their heads off.

# **PART THREE**

Essays On Peacemaking

## *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory*

"We are lived by forces we scarcely understand," wrote W.H. Auden.

What forces live us now as America again torques toward war?

George W. Bush is certainly the plaything of such forces as the geopolitics of oil but it seems that he is susceptible to other even darker archetypal concerns. Let me be blunt. The man is delusional and the shape of his delusion is specifically apocalyptic in belief and intent. That Bush would attack so many vital systems on so many fronts from foreign policy to the environment may seem confusing from the point of view of realpolitik but becomes transparent in terms of the apocalyptic worldview to which he subscribes. All systems are supposed to go down so the Messiah can come and Bush, seemingly, has taken on the role of the one who brings this to pass.

The Reverend Billy Graham taught Bush to live in anticipation of the Second Coming but it was his friendship with Dr. Tony Evans that shaped Bush's political understanding of how to deport himself in an

apocalyptic era. Dr. Evans, the pastor of a large Dallas church and a founder of the Promise Keepers movement taught Bush about "how the world should be seen from a divine viewpoint," according to Dr. Martin Hawkins, Evans's assistant pastor.

S.R. Shearer of Antipas Ministries writes, "Most of the leaders of the Promise Keepers embrace a doctrine of 'end time' (eschatology), known as 'dominionism.' Dominionism pictures the seizure of earthly (temporal) power by the 'people of God' as the only means through which the world can be rescued... It is the eschatology that Bush has imbibed; an eschatology through which he has gradually (and easily) come to see himself as an agent of God who has been called by him to 'restore the earth to God's control', a 'chosen vessel', so to speak, to bring in the Restoration of All Things." Shearer calls this delusion, "Messianic leadership"-- that is to say usurping the role usually ascribed to the Messiah.

In *Bush at War* Bob Woodward writes, "Most presidents have high hopes. Some have grandiose visions of what they will achieve, and he was firmly in that camp."

"To answer these attacks and rid the world of evil," says Bush. Grandiose visions. Woodward comments, "The president was casting his mission and that of the country in the grand vision of God's Master Plan."

In dominionism, we can see the theological source of Bush's monomania. Not to be distracted by the fact that he lost the popular election by a half a million votes, that the Joint Chief of Staff at the Pentagon was so concerned about his plans to invade Iraq that they leaked their unanimous objection, that he has systematically alienated much of the world, that roughly seventy percent of Americans remain unconvinced of the imminent threat of Saddam Hussein and the same percentage object to war if there will be significant American casualties-- none of this is in the least relevant. He believes his mandate toward action is from God.

As humans, we live within stories. Some stories, like the apocalypse are thousands of years old. The scripted text that informs

Bush's understanding of and enactment of the End of Days (Revelations 19) depicts Christ returning as the Heavenly Avenger. Revelations is the only New Testament book that justifies violence of any kind, and this it takes to the limit: Christ himself the agent of mass murder.

"I saw heaven open and there before me was a white horse who is called Faithful and True. With justice he judges and makes war...He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood and his name is the word of God...Out of his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the Nations. And I saw an angel standing in the sun who cried in a low voice to all the birds flying in midair--come gather together for the great supper of God, so you may eat the flesh of kings, generals and mighty men, of horses and their riders, and the flesh of all people, free and slave, small and great." Such is "the glory of the coming of the Lord." Truth, carnage, and the ecstasy of vultures. In a ruined world the Messiah slays the antichrist and creates "a new heaven and a new earth." The dead are judged, the Christians saved and the rest damned to eternal torment. The New Jerusalem is established and the Lord rules it "with an iron scepter."

It is not inconceivable that Bush is literally and determinedly drawn, consciously and unconsciously, toward the enactment of such a scenario, as he believes, for God's sake. Indeed the stark relentlessness of his policy in the Middle East suggests as much.

It dishonors the profundity of the Christian tradition if one doesn't note that Revelations has always been a rogue text. Because of its association with the Montanist heresy (which like contemporary fundamentalists took it to be literal rather than allegorical), it was with great reluctance that it was made scripture three centuries after the death of Christ. Traditionally attributed to St. John, most Biblical scholars now recognize its literary style and its theology has little in common with John's gospel or his epistles and was likely written after his death. Martin Luther found the vindictive God of Revelations incompatible with the gospels and relegated it to the appendix of his German translation of the New Testament instead of the body of scripture. All the

Protestant reformers except Calvin regarded apocalyptic millennialism to be heresy.

But Revelations is also a rogue text because it is unmoored from its origins, which are far from Christian. It is a late variant on a story that was pervasive in the ancient world: the defeat of the wild and the uncivilized by a superior order upon which a New World would be established. Two thousand years before Revelations depicted Christ slaying the antichrist and laying out the New Jerusalem, Marduk slew Tiamat and founded Babylon.

This pagan myth recycled as a suspiciously unchristian Biblical test found new credence in the 19th century when John Darby virtually revived the Montanist heresy of investing it with a passionate literalism. Given to visions (he saw the British as one of the ten tribes of Israel) Darby left the priesthood of the Church of Ireland and preached Revelations as both prophecy and imminent history. In this he inaugurated a lineage in which Bush's mentors, the Reverend Billy Graham and Dr. Tony Evans are recent heirs. Revelations is much beloved by Muslim fundamentalists and like their Christian compatriots they also thrill to redemption through apocalypse. Jewish fundamentalists of course do not believe in Revelations but have nonetheless made common cause with the Christian Right. "It's a very tragic situation in which Christian fundamentalists, certain groups of them that focus on Armageddon and the Rapture and the role of a war between Muslims and Jews in bringing about the Second Coming, are involved in a folie a deux with extremist Jews," said Ian Lustick, the author of *For the Land and the Lord: Jewish Fundamentalism in Israel*. The Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition (and yes it is a single tradition) is being led by its fringe into the abyss and the rest of us with it.

The world has been readied for the fire but the critical element is the Bush Administration. Never in the history of Christendom has there been a moment when this rogue element has carried anything like the credibility and political power that it carries now.

## *Chokwe and the Praying Mantis*

"When I was born, a little lion was born with me," says my friend Mandaza Kademwa, laughing. I've often been delighted while traveling with Mandaza in the backcountry of Zimbabwe or Botswana to see the way African people rely on the animals to recognize kinship with one another. As a way of greeting, strangers will exchange their totemic affiliation. No matter that they are of another tribe far from Mashonaland; no matter that no common language is shared; those born of lion are kin.

It was a little praying mantis that made the bridge between Mandaza, myself, and the San Bushmen of the Kalahari. Bushmen have good reason not to trust the local Africans (whom they call blacks), much less white people. After centuries of marginalization as "primitives," and three decades of being caught between Africans of both races making war on each other, the traditional Bushman way of hunting and gathering is profoundly endangered.

The day before we set out across the Kalahari, I gave Mandaza a ritual gift—raw wood from Yardenit in Israel where Christ was baptized



by John the Baptist. I know the power of the gift for Mandaza, a healer who works with the water spirits. As I hand it to him, I notice a praying mantis at the end of the stick. “Zvakanaka ambuya!” I say: “Welcome, Grandmother!” A good omen for our journey, for the insect is holy to the San.

Traveling for hundreds of kilometers through the desert, occasionally digging our car out of the sand, we arrive in the village of D’kar. Never have I felt so much the stranger in a strange land. Mandaza is not distracted in his quest, for the spirits have led him here. Myself, I enjoy the company of the children, who know one “English” word: “Kung Fu.” They are entertained by the mastery I’d acquired watching the TV show when I was a kid.

Eventually, we are told to seek Beauty, a Herrero woman. By now, night has fallen. A scant few campfires light the village. Beauty is nowhere to be found, but we are soon approached by an Iswane-speaking man who also speaks English. He knows of a cranky old shaman named Chokwe who probably will have nothing to do with us, but he agrees to take us to his hut and translate. What an honor to sit in the dirt across from this elder of the oldest spiritual tradition on the planet. The planes of his flat face shift in the firelight. Cranky, I suppose. He does rather interrogate Mandaza, who claims a dream called him to be initiated by a Bushman healer. Both testing and teasing us, not without warmth but certainly without naiveté, he tells us to return the following morning. When we return with meat, bread, and sugar, Chokwe is a different man— hospitable and uninhibited in his humor. Mandaza approaches Chokwe as a doctor. “When I am trance possessed by my ancestors, I am cut off from the crown of my head,” he complains. Chokwe throws the bone oracle to diagnose. He then describes with remarkable accuracy troubles between Mandaza and his family that have long entangled him. “Very true,” said Mandaza. Mandaza is a formidable healer, and I am moved by his exquisite deference to this man so much our elder. Chokwe is clearly impressed by his sincerity. “Grandfather,” I say, “We know that the San have no reason to trust a black or a white man. I want to thank your spirits for receiving us with such kind-

ness.” “Before we left Zimbabwe, we performed a ritual, and this little one came to us. I think you know more about her than we do.” Our Iswana friend doesn’t know the name for praying mantis. So I mime her, hands together and elbows out, her wide expressive eyes. “Ah,” says Chokwe. And then to Mandaza, “Now you are like a child learning to walk, but I will tell the elders about our visit. You are welcome here. We will initiate you, and soon you will stand strong on your two feet.”

## *Unbecoming War and Terrorism*

Czeslaw Milosz at ninety -- decade by decade keeping faith with poetry through the bloodiest of times, fought the Nazis who killed a tenth of his countrymen; knew the scent of the crematorium, the grip of Stalin, exile, the collapse of the Soviet empire. Time, he says is "an hourglass through which states, systems and civilization trickle like sand." Who can argue? Human beings, he says, are "foredoomed because the order in which they establish themselves and which shapes their every thought and feeling is, like every order ripe for destruction. Again, who can argue? I was sitting in an employment office trying to get a day's work. At eighteen, I'd been homeless for two years, and though most of my food I got from garbage cans, I very much wanted a few bucks for drugs. Into this bleak moment came Jerry, a friend, a little mad, a Vietnam Veteran Against the War. "Cambodia has been liberated!" he said. And yes, I was overjoyed. "The Khmer Rouge has taken Phnom Penh!" It would be ten years before I'd understand we were celebrating the beginning of yet another genocide. I became a fellow traveler with a terrorist group, the Black Liberation Army. Why

not? A life, after all, is a trivial thing when weighed against "the anguish of the oppressed." And what could be more trivial than whether or not this confused white boy really believed in the imperative of the gun or didn't? And so the regimen: smuggling drugs into prison, being a courier between comrades behind bars and us on the outside, preparation for "boot camp" in Italy with the PLO before setting off to fight apartheid in Rhodesia -- a sense of a mission in a desperately meaningless life. I was as ripe for destruction as a boy can be -- in fact, eager for it. Then my daughter was born -- at twenty-one, a father. It would be twenty years before I would go to Africa, to that country once called Rhodesia. It took two decades before the romance of war would break down in me so that I could become a healer in an African tribal tradition. When I was introduced to the Shona and Ndebele tribe's people who were to become family to me, my friend Mandaza Kademwa told everyone that I almost fought in the War of Independence. "He is Shona like us," he said. "Like us, he is Ndebele." Later he confided to me rather sensibly, "I know why you didn't become a freedom fighter. Your spirits are peacemakers, not warriors." And so he began initiating me into the ancestral tradition of peacemaking, the ngoma of the water spirits. At one hundred and six, the renowned Huichol healer Don Jose Matsuwa said something like "At last after ninety years, I have finished my apprenticeship." Every day I repeat his words to myself; The only point of orientation in my present life is a couple of decades in solitary retreat meditating, twelve years a single father; twenty at the bedsides of the ill and the dying -- and it's been only thirteen since my first initiation in Zimbabwe. I won't indulge the old habit, that my life experience has given me some kind of credentials. Eating garbage, changing diapers, scoured by loneliness along a mountain stream, emptying bedpans -- from the angle of a man finally an apprentice, these years are the undoing of a self, not its triumph. The heroic willingness to kill stripped me to something perfectly uninteresting, mere kindness in a world gone mad. For a young man, say a soldier or a terrorist, the draw to the heroic can be nearly irresistible. One would hope that the older man, a president or a mullah, might know that the world was never

redeemed by bloodshed, might even be challenged towards wisdom by the unbearable stuff of this historical moment. But I write this now as bombs fall on Afghanistan as they once fell on Vietnam and Cambodia, and leaders who are evidently children call other children to kill and die for yet another "noble" cause.

## ***Conclusion of The Village of the Water Spirits***

*The Spirit of the Gift No creature ever falls short of its own completion.  
Wherever it stands, it does not fail to cover the ground.*

Dogen Zenji

When I told Mr. Baldwin that I was writing a book about black people's dreams about whites, he said, "I don't think I ever dream about white folks." But a couple of mornings later as I was drawing up another syringe of morphine, he was happy to offer the dream that Mandaza and I claim as our favorite: "I was back in Louisiana someplace on this farm, and I was on this pole like I was a scarecrow. All the birds was black, and the corn was white. A machine would pick the corn from the field, and I would throw the birds into the machine with the white corn, but behind this machine all these little white babies was being planted. They was being pushed into holes, but I was strapped to my pole, and I was hurt that I could not help these babies." All of Mandaza's adult life has been involved with the welfare of children, and I

think it's safe to say that alongside healing, tending to the little ones is his true love. As a teenager, he was an avid leader in the Boy Scouts, teaching children the stars, the way of the bush and how to care for the old folks. His professional life found him teaching the children of the British South African Police, and for the sheer pleasure of it, he'd often organize evening classes because, as he put it to me, "I loved those little ones." At the time of his sudden retirement, he had been promoted to be in charge of all the police schools in Zimbabwe. Of Mr. Baldwin's dream, Mandaza says, "This is a very unique and powerful, a very accommodating dream. The dreamer has a spirit that looks at the world from a very powerful perspective. The spirit wants to feed the world, feed the hungry. This one has got work to look after children. By looking out after the children, he's planting new seeds in the ground. "What resurrects results from the children growing up and making a new world. "The world lives on the corn. It's an evil spirit that makes him reach for the children, a confused act of kindness. He thinks he should rescue the children when he's really preventing them from growing. It is the work of God to plant these children, but he is trying to rescue them! God says, "Why are you not allowing them to be planted in the soil?" Once you remove that spirit, God will help him take care of the next generation." What is this spirit that would interfere with our children being planted in the soil? And if the children find no place to sink their roots, what harvest will there be, what future? In Mandaza's analysis a keyword, thoroughly Bantu and for that reason thoroughly African-American: resurrection. Planting seeds, yes. Harvest, yes. But let us not forget that the new world depends on the resurrection of Spirit and that it is through our children that the resurrection of possibility presents itself most vividly: "What resurrects results from the children growing up and making a new world." Let me dance slowly around the essential connection between resurrection and education. I admit it is a strange way to write an essay, this winding of a theme (resurrection/ education) between stories, but I don't know how else to do justice to the Bantu point of view. I'll begin with two stories that from the Bantu perspective overlap though from a contem-

porary American point of view, they may seem quite different. When my daughter Nicole was six years old, on the anniversary of my father's death, I went to the ocean with her to scatter a few handfuls of his ashes. As we walked back to the car, I noticed that Nicole was in an unusually reflective mood. "I never look out over the sea," she said. "Why is that, Nicole?" I replied. "I don't think I can tell you," she responded. I chose not to question her further, but after we walked a ways, she said, "I've decided that when I'm old and it is time to die, then I will look out over the sea." The second story I'll let James Hillman tell: "Amateur Night at the Harlem Opera House. A skinny, awkward sixteen-year-old goes fearfully onstage. She is announced to the crowd: 'The next contestant is a young lady named Ella Fitzgerald.... Miss Fitzgerald here is gonna dance for us.... Hold it, hold it. Now what's your problem, honey?... Correction, folks. Miss Fitzgerald has changed her mind. She's not gonna dance, she's gonna sing...' 'Ella Fitzgerald gave three encores and won first prize. However, she had meant to dance.'" The English word education comes from the Latin educere, literally to bring or draw forth. What exactly do we seek to draw forth in our children? What nourishes them, in fact educates them from the root upwards? In Bantu culture, education -- bringing, drawing, calling forth -- addresses those old spirits that want to come through us to extend their gifts to the community. It is in the awakening of the gift, the nourishing of it, the honor given to the spirit of the gift that brings together education and resurrection, the world of the living and the generosity of the ancestors. The interaction with Nicole was in no way ordinary between us. I saw other such glimmers perhaps a half a dozen times during her childhood. In America we are likely to call such a child precocious, which often leads us to treat them as precious little ornaments on the parent's narcissism. If they are less fortunate, they will be dismissed or even punished as weird. The violence of conformism exacted by both teachers and other students is not a small part of what is called education in America. I do not expect to see the day when what Mandaza would call a grandmother spirit is acknowledged, protected and perhaps drawn forth in an American school. What or who is it that we



draw forth and from where? How do we call out to the spirit of the gift? In Shona the spirit that came through Ella Fitzgerald when she was a skinny little thing is called a shave. If I were to translate shave, I would call it the spirit of the gift. A musician is said to have a music shave just as a skilled thief or a talented lover are said to have shaves that know the arts of thievery or making love. Such a person is gifted, a gift has been extended to them, or they are vehicles for the spirit of the gift. Just as Mandaza and I initiate people into the ngoma of the water spirits, so do we initiate people into relationship with their shave. (Mandaza also casts out shaves that are troublesome and destructive to the community.) Mandaza says, "A good shave brings not only prosperity but gifts such as poetry, mbira, dance and so forth. If you resist such a shave, it's as if you are saying to God, 'Get out of my way!' If you resist the gift that the shave offers to you, the spirit will disappear. The shave will say, 'He is resisting me. I will leave and find someone else.' The shave may be invited by good spirits that are upon someone else, and with those spirits it will find a home. "To be initiated, you learn how to serve the shave. For example, the spirit might say I want you to have a walking stick to take with you wherever you go or mbira, or when the shave is with you, it takes snuff. It is not you taking the snuff; it is the shave. It is his food. "When a musician has a guitar or mbira, it belongs to the shave, not to the person. When a musician who is initiated picks up the mbira, it is also the shave who is picking it up. You are trance possessed by the shave as you play mbira. And what do you find? The audience is excited, and they throw gifts at you, but they are really throwing gifts to the shave. "One can say the same about a writer who picks up a pen. "There are also shave that heal. It can even show you herbs. Some shave can heal with touch or with water." "It is not only the shave who picks up the musical instrument or the pen or who heals. It may also be one of your ancestors. The ancestors and the shave work together." Shaves often appear suddenly: Ella onstage belting out the spirit of song. Mandaza tells his equivalent of Ella's story in *Gathering in the Names*. "One time -- I think I was probably under ten years of age -- my uncle was hit by a lightning bolt that came with the rain, and his hand was curled

up like a chicken foot. My elder aunt was there with her daughter, crying, looking at my uncle. He was lying there, and they couldn't do anything. So I went into the bush and brought some fiber from a tree and tied it with a stick like a splint, opening his hand and fingers, tying the stick up to his elbow. After two days it healed. He was able to spread his fingers. That was my first experience as a healer." Shave are always on the lookout for windows of opportunity to come into the human world, and children are especially susceptible to the spirit of the gift. When my brother Eugene was about seven years old, his favorite activity was to sit along the street we lived on with his eyes closed and listen to the passage of cars. Eugene had the uncanny ability to distinguish the different kinds of cars by the sounds they made. Perhaps in another era he would be listening to the sounds of the forest, and his parents might think a hunting shave was at work. It is not surprising that in Eugene's case he grew up to be a musician. Windows of opportunity. The shave wants in. I remember sitting under a mountain lilac with my granddaughter Jamie when she was four. Jamie started pulling leaves off the tree. I winced at my lack of words for why that was no way to treat a living being until I remembered Grandmother Willow, the ambuya spirit in Walt Disney's *Pocahontas*, who imparts her wisdom to the young squaw. Jamie got it immediately. A couple of years later, I began to teach her the wild herbs I learned when I was a child and how to ask permission of the plant before one picks horsetail, wild strawberry, burdock, blessed thistle, salsify. "Look here, Jamie, this is yarrow. In China they dry out the stalks and throw them on the ground to talk to God." "Really?" "It's a known fact. And this plant here is called plantain. We use it in the hospital. If you can't poop, you grind up the seeds and mix them with juice, and then you will be able to poop without any problem at all!" I would not guarantee that Jamie becomes the first *nganga* of Yuma, Arizona. Few things in life are so predictable. False starts are the routine. My friend Alan Brill, for example, was sure he was fated to be a professional baseball player until the terrible afternoon when he didn't make the seventh grade team. Instead he ultimately became a union organizer, a virtuoso union organizer. As

Leonard Cohen sings, "Bless the continuous stutter of the word as it turns into flesh." Jamie may not become a nganga, but there is always hope for the future of intelligent life in America when a shave can even slide past the banality of Disney to enliven the imagination. The shave is about the word becoming flesh, nothing less. Spirit wants to move. It wants to move in and through the community. The gift wants to be passed on. Spike Lee's remarkable film, *He Got Game* can be read as a praise song to the spirit of the gift and as a morality tale about how one carries the gift in a culture maddened by money. "Basketball is poetry in motion," says the teenage protagonist Jesus Shuttlesworth. This poetry, this shave that needs to be enacted was Jesus's inheritance from his not-so heavenly father Jake, who on one hand nourished and fiercely challenged his son's talents throughout his childhood and on the other inadvertently killed Jesus's mother in his son's presence. Within these circumstances Lee frames a drama that is part Christ's temptation in the wilderness and part Bantu initiation ritual. As is commonly the case in West African stories, Jake is tricked into ritual circumstance -- in this case into helping initiate the son who despises him. The governor arranges that Jake be let out of prison briefly with the promise of early parole if he can convince his son to play for the governor's favorite team. Jesus has a couple of days to decide what he is going to do with his gift, with his life. High school is over, professional teams are offering him vast amounts of money, college teams ply white women on him. Friends and relatives and hordes of strangers, attracted to the aura of celebrity, all want a piece of him. *He Got Game* is, among other things, a relentless study of American demonology, and true to Lee's wild democratic vision, demons of every race, class and gender tempt Jesus in the wilderness of initiation. This is the bush of ghosts beyond the edge of the village, beyond the range of what was once familiar. Those who have been initiated know this wilderness well, and it is nothing less than merciless. Jesus is at the crossroads, and in the chaotic swirl of choice, he has to ask what it is that he serves with his life. He turns to what in Africa would be called an ancestors' altar -- photographs and old letters from his mother. Her voice is clear, translucent amid so

many conflicting voices: Get an education. The gift requires a life that can carry it; without that life the gift will destroy you. Jake's reappearance deepens and thickens his son's chaos, and the ethical burden lies on his (Jake's) shoulders. His mojo rests in the gospel of forgiveness. In prison he accepted Christ and yielded to being forgiven for the violence he had done. His temptation is no less fierce than Jesus's. He cannot coerce his son even if it means spending several more years behind bars. If Jake is not impeccable, if he doesn't carry the role of the elder, his son's soul might well be lost in the bush of ghosts. Between his mother on the other side and his father, who is all too alive, Jesus must choose his fate. It would be unkind to reveal the end of the story, but it's worth mentioning that Lee embeds another and essential Bantu detail in his film. In Bantu culture the blessing of the father is extremely powerful. To leave home, to make a life for oneself without being blessed by the father or, worse yet, to be followed by the father's curse is a terrible thing and often leads towards all manner of mishap and catastrophe. Here one can see the full complexity of Jesus's shave initiation for he cannot give himself over to the spirit of the gift without being aligned with his mother's wisdom and blessed by his father's good wishes. The final confrontation leaves father and son at the crossroads, on the basketball court where Jesus defeats his father with fury and Jake plays the initiator, who is also the trickster. As he's escorted away from his son back to prison, he levels with the final words of a man who knows what it is to be undone by rage. "You look out for yourself. You look out for your sister. You ain't got to worry about me no more, but you get that hatred out of your heart, boy, or you're going to end up just another nigger like your father. It's your ball." Jesus received the shave spirit through his father, and his father, defeated, leaves with his son the holy riddle of the trickster. It is up to Jesus whether these words be a blessing or a curse. When being initiated, the spirits come forth illuminating the terrain of an inspired life and asking the questions that cut to the heart of what it means to live such a life. *He Got Game* says quite a lot about the spirit of the gift that resonates with a nganga's work with shave spirits. The gift carries heat. It generates its own fire. To burn with the gift is

extraordinary, as if one becomes, momentarily, the burning bush that astonished Moses. But in African medicine the subtle work of initiation requires the tempering of fire so that it is carried deeply and one is not undone by the volatility of the spirit. Throughout West and Central Africa, one calls on the female spirits to cool the fire. In Lee's movie Jesus's mother carried that coolness while his father fanned the flames. Working with shave requires both. Within what life will you shelter the gift? So asks the mother. The uninitiated may not know that the gift needs to be sheltered. The deliberate and painstaking work of building a house for the spirit, making one's life a hospitable place for spirit to inhabit, is a labor that for many people does not come easy. The spirit seeks and needs its sacred niche and requires its sacred instruments. The basketball court is such a niche, the basketball such an instrument. Someone with a writing shave could say the same about pen and paper. Without the niche and without the required instrument, the fire of the shave cannot flare forth nor can it be skillfully contained. With niche and instrument, one is ritually prepared to call forth the spirit. The shave needs a village. This is very important, and in a world that is more interested in commodities than gifts, it is routinely the source of great confusion and, not rarely, self destruction. A village is not an audience. The ego may want an audience to applaud its magnificence, but ego gets in the way of the spirit coming through. The tightrope between ego and shave is the same as between greed and generosity. One presumes that at his lucid best, Jesus knows that he is offering the village the poetry in motion that is basketball. When he is faithful to the poetry, the shave will come through generously. If the same poetry becomes a praise song to his ego, then he dishonors spirit and dishonors the village. Moreover, he has sold his soul before even having a chance to know its dimensions. Lee's movie engaged the critical question, the one question that clarifies one's relationship to the gift and in so doing brings one's life into order: What is the gift for? Mandaza and I once tried to initiate a man whose situation was virtually the Shona version of Jesus Shuttleworth's. I will call him Josiah. Like Jesus, Josiah's gift was recognized when he was a boy, the gift playing mbira, the thumb

piano that calls forth the spirits but which among Bantu people is also enjoyed for its mere beauty. By the time Josiah was thirteen, he was dressed like a girl so he could sneak past soldiers and into the bush to play mbira for the guerillas. When Josiah came to be healed by Mandaza and myself, he was in his late twenties, and mbira was simultaneously all he lived for and the source of bitter affliction. From the time he was a child, he had been pressured to become a trance medium, a position that carried enormous responsibilities that he wanted nothing to do with. He knew that those who wanted him to walk that path had their own ambitions, most notably prestige and money. A modest fame had given him a ticket to America and a possibility of escaping the poverty of the township. It also brought him money, the envy and enmity of kin, two white girlfriends, a death threat, a confused incapacity to tell truth from lying, and a hex from his older sister that delivered Josiah to the ranks of the walking dead. Even still, when he played mbira, grown men, or at least Mandaza and I, would weep. Although his shave was quintessentially Shona, Josiah had come to despise traditional Bantu culture and had embraced the pure land Buddhism of one of his American girlfriends. Whatever medicine Mandaza and I did on his behalf had to be strictly minimalistic. Mandaza worked with herbs and immersion in water, and I worked with the cards and the Japanese chant *nam myo renge kyo*. Josiah was as lost in the bush of ghosts as anyone I have ever met, and so we invoked the spirit of mbira as a presence that could help him find his way through the wilderness. Only one question was relevant, and I had him play out that question on the mbira itself: to whom do I play? As he played, I drew a card on his behalf without turning it over, and when he finished, I asked him who he saw. "The Rainmaker is who I play to," he said with a glow on his face that surprised me. He never knew who he was playing for. He thought it was for the audiences. I turned over the card: the Emperor, Zeus, father of the gods who bears the Word that brings order to a disordered world; in one hand the earth, in the other a fistful of lightning and on his shoulder a bird that Josiah recognized from his childhood -- Chapungu, the black eagle. Josiah wept a little and even laughed.

"Is it? I play mbira for God?" "Exactly." And so the father's blessings were imparted on Josiah, perhaps prematurely for he is not out of the woods yet. Armed with only his mbira and nam myo rengo kyo, he was taught to call on Spirit when he is overwhelmed with confusion. Without question, crossing the river will be bitter for Josiah, and we pray that he survives the passage. Calling forth the spirits -- the spirit of the gift, the ancestors -- is a political act; one might say in a disinspired world, it is the essential political act. At one point Josiah, much to his surprise, was in a trance possessed by an old mbira player that Mandaza recognized immediately as pre-colonial, that is to say, from before the whites defeated the Shona and the Ndebele in the 1890's. Such spirits are rare, but we're watching them rise up with more frequency, perhaps attracted to the spectacle of a white and black man practicing medicine together. "It's just as our Grandmother Nehanda said when the whites hung her by her neck: 'My bones will rise.' This is what is happening," says Mandaza. Earlier I said that in Bantu medicine healing is about removing the obstacles so that Spirit can move through a broken world -- this body, this family, this community -- and make it whole. Strictly speaking, this is about the resurrection of the dead. Call and response -- the Bible cries out, "Son of Man, can these bones live?" And Ambuya Nehanda responds, "My bones will rise." Calling forth Spirit. Gathering in Spirit. Letting God breathe on dry bones. Letting the little child lead us to the Promised Land. On this note I will leave the reader with Mandaza's final words on living in an inspired world: "Remember we've got earth spirits, we've got water spirits, we've got air spirits, we've got spirits of fire. They come in different forms. "Earth spirits can come in the form of black people. Earth spirits are actually the spirits put on earth by God. They own the riches beneath the earth; they own the power to heal. They have the full balance. Lions, Rhino, Elephant, Buffalo, the Chapungu -- these are earth spirits. They say, 'Respect the earth because it is a home for the Creator.' "Fire spirits are the warriors. For them red is not an evil color. They bring fire to burn out the rubbish. And when the rubbish is burned, it turns into water. "I work with everything, not only water, because my spirits need balance. We must

be balanced. I find balance with honoring water and earth below, the Universe above. If one side of the triangle is not there, things are unbalanced. "What we do here is not about changing culture; it is about bringing people to the world of the spirits, about making the connection between people and the natural world. People are always eager to change culture, to improve it, but look now at the chaos and confusion and misery. Now that the old world is almost finished with, are we happy? Yes, people can change a culture into an evil thing by their greed and desires; so we must find our way to the real culture -- the earth culture, the water culture, the culture of the Universe. The way of the spirits is in the balance of that sacred triangle. "The spirits come in our dreams and tell us how to walk this path. When I look at these dreams you read me of black Americans, they are exactly the same as my people. The differences are only created by those who interpret the dreams to fit their own situation. If you interpret dreams that way, you will get lost. The dreams will only confuse you. But if we ask the spirits to interpret the dreams for us, then we can fully understand the similarities between the spirit world of black Americans and black Africans. "The original spirit that lives in the earth and the water and the Universe remain with all of us of African descent. You ask me how this can be, but you already know the answer to that question, *mapatya*. The African spirits came to America with the slaves. Even after hundreds of years, the spirits have kept faith with their children."



## *Blood, Earth and the Day I'm Not Going to Die*

Dear Dad —

On December 28 I'm not going to die. Sure, sure, I could get struck by a car or lightning or murdered by a stranger, but I doubt it. Hell, I could slip in the shower and drown or even commit suicide because the world is so unbearably desperate.

(Bad art. To kill oneself in an apocalyptic time?)

There are so many ways to die – the possibilities are without number – but I'm not going to do it.

On December 28, I'll be 18,904 days old.

I've anticipated December 28 for over 30 years now.

You see dad, you died when you were 18,904 days old. A few months after my mother separated from you and took my 11-year-old self and my three brothers to New Mexico you had your first heart attack and then submitted to the yogic discipline of slow-motion suicide.

Alcohol and cigarettes. Bloated with congestive heart failure you drew your last breath nine years later in a hospital in Glendale.

Perhaps every man, but certainly every eldest son has to understand how he is like his father and how he is different. How he is in fact his father and how he most certainly isn't.

I've often said that I bear your melancholy. But it's also true that I laugh a lot.

A lot.

I certainly picked up your wild mind and wild uneducated scholarship. Your quasi Buddhist mysticism, love of books, and love of meditation. You carried a profound wound in relationship to women. Your last conversation with your mother ended "you will never understand me will you?" I insist awkwardly, skillfully, hopelessly not to live out a translation of that wound. The only shard of that portion of my childhood that was Catholic, is an absurd faith in the sacrament of marriage.

I love my baby.

In your forties, your body sheltered the disease that took you to your grave, and in my forties, I cultivated hospitality for the "incurable" Guest, multiple sclerosis.

Listening, listening to its incessant wisdom

And addiction?

In the mountains north of my grandfather's ranch the penitentes used to flagellate themselves and crucify a member every Easter. That old-time religion was good enough for me but I merely flagellated my nervous system with psychedelics for a few years until it bled its ecstasy into the earth.

I tried hard to be an alcoholic, made a few gallons of sake' those months I was a hermit after nursing school. I'd meditate all day and drink into the night, communing with your spirit. But ultimately I didn't have the will. Why would a self-respecting hippie choose to be addicted to a drug that would numb my soul?

Psychedelics were my game and with them, I courted madness and vision.

I remember well when we ate LSD together a year before you died.

You looking in my eyes, I into your, beneath the gaze of the icon of Kwan Yin you won in a poker game in Korea during the war and you said, “We are the same person aren’t we?” and I said “Yes,” as it was the mutual evidence of our senses.

“Not one, not two,” says Suzuki Roshi.

Sunyata.

Alan Watts says of his experiences with psychedelics, “when you get the message, hang up the phone,” I was most stubborn or most dense. Eventually, I conceded to the message that the gods had offered with such generosity.

The truth is I would have been most disappointed if I didn’t acquire some kind of addiction. Although I first imagined that my addiction was somewhat superior to another’s, the company of fellow addicts showed me the utter banality of it. The same tawdry distortions of building a life around using, the same driven willingness to make loved ones suffer for your appetites.

My great good fortune is that I bottomed out as a homeless teenage druggie and then began the “slow cook” that has been my life.

But now, in retrospect, the bird's eye view.

You, father Daedalus and, I, your son, Icarus – after tasting 100 micrograms of LSD you tell me I’m not to get too close to the sun? Know you nothing of aspiration? When the wax wings melt you speak of the tragedy of a young man’s longing. But the aspiration and the fall to earth are the stories we’re in.

(This I write, inveterate smart-ass, three decades after your death, and you remind me you were doing a spiritual exercise taking all the love of the universe into your heart when you had your first coronary. I see Icarus fell through your death into my body and reconfigured through my addiction to fall finally to earth.)

Every addict and every moth knows that the flame is more compelling than mere survival.

And in the full ideogram of fate, the fall to earth is equally blessed though many don’t live to taste the blessings.

Such is the sweet and desperate intimacy played across generations and every one of these 18,904 days.

The old man in the boy always knew this: the rise, the fall, and the healing of the full cycle is the fistful of flowers I offer you on the day that I will not die.

The boy's choice of addiction that vanquishes the fiction of choice I offer you on the day that I will not die.

The tears. saliva. blood and breath of all the drunken ancestors forever grieving that we lost the confederacy, I offer to fire the day that I will not die.

And that other disease, multiple sclerosis, the years of piss and shit, going blind and then not, losing my legs and regaining them, losing my mind and recovering a portion of it, wondering if it was mine to be paralyzed – the gamut of this brief spasm in a still brief life -- I offer over this day that I will not die.

I have a lovely wooden coffin, once a container for ARMIDA POIZIN: THE WINE TO DIE FOR. RIP in which I will leave this letter and all I cannot name that is to be burned on the day I will not die.

And after that?

After 18,904 days?

Well – one day at a time from then on.

May we all rest in peace, Dad ---

Michael

## *Can I Speak Ill of the Dead Yet?*

I was in Nicaragua when Ronald Reagan was crucifying that little country.

And I was in San Diego when Ronald Reagan was being buried to much acclaim.

A doctor's appointment. The television on. The doctor's secretary was praising Reagan and I held my council, did not speak of the blood of that time.

When I was in Esteli the Sandinistas were very popular. A hundred miles to the north on the Honduran border the United States was doing war games. Also warships off the Atlantic and Pacific Coast. Everybody was hungry because of the sanctions against basic foodstuffs. Esteli had lost a third of their population in the war against the American supported dictatorship of Somoza and all were expecting the US to invade. Outside of Esteli the Contras, who Reagan called freedom fighters, had tortured and killed a teenage boy in a cornfield at the edge of town. All of the city accompanied the family to his burial. And we Sandinistas norteamericanos were honored to join.

As the coffin was being lowered into the earth the boy's mother had to be restrained by her two adult daughters from throwing herself into the grave. I hear her wail every time America makes war.

After the funeral, I went to drink rum with a few fellow Americans. Out of our minds with the grief of it we speculated on how to greet the anticipated American soldiers should the invasion actually happen.

At about 9 PM I staggered to the house of Dr. Borges, the pediatrician with whose family I was living. I was ashamed to greet them drunk, did little to yoga, and limbered up. In Nicaragua, people go to sleep very early and so I tried to scale the stone fence.

Straddling the fence I could hear mumbling in Spanish on the other side. I soon realized I had to declare myself. I did so and was invited down by a visibly shaken Dr. Borges.

We sat together for perhaps an hour. He had a gun in his hand and, trembling, put it down on the coffee table between us. "Do you know that you almost went home in a body bag? And do you know who your president Reagan is? He is waiting in for any excuse to invade this country and your death would have been sufficient."

He was protecting his wife and children from contra as I would do if I were in the same situation.

Can I speak now ill of the dead? That particular dead white man?

Can I?

I am now an employee of Ronald Reagan Medical Center And truthfully I just as soon have it named after that other great communicator, Joseph Goebbels.

I write this as that not so great communicator, John McCain, is feted as a war hero at the Republican National Convention. Having been celebrated for bombing civilians in Vietnam and being shot down for it he is eager to assume the mantle of war president from George W. Bush.

It is obligatory for all of whatever political stripe to praise McCain heroism in a most unheroic war and to unreflectively laud his service to America without asking what the support of a bloody dictatorship in South Vietnam ever had anything to do with the welfare of America.

Three million Vietnamese dead. Eighty percent civilian.

Now one million Iraqi dead.

Afghanistan?

And Nicaragua? El Salvador? Panama? Granada? Cambodia?

When will we ever learn?

When?

## *The Village of the Grandfathers*

I am thinking about the grandfathers as if they comprise a village of their own, forever holding council, as my African friends say, conspiring and collaborating around the possibility of wisdom. In particular, I think about my own grandfather, Frank Ortiz: abuelo, hombre amable y formidable. Pancho. And more specifically, two meetings with him; one when he was alive, the other after he passed.

My childhood had been violently cut in two by divorce, which for a boy of eleven meant trying, and in many ways failing, to shape shift from a white suburban kid from Southern California to a Mexican farm boy in the mountains north of Santa Fe. My grandfather then was a vigorous man in his late sixties who loved the land and lived to work it. He was also a harsh taskmaster who year after year faced bitterly that his way of life -- that of his ancestors -- died with him. Neither his sons nor his grandsons would till the soil. As for myself, I was taken by the siren song of the counterculture, and we parted in anger.

When I insisted on meeting him, it had been over twenty years. He was in his early nineties, hard of hearing. My mother would help him



up on the tractor because he still lived to work. I was on the cusp of going to Africa to be initiated in the tradition of the water spirits. I knew it was time to make peace with this man who had spent decades as guardian of the acequia (the irrigation ditch) in the traditional Mexican way. So I took him out to a meal.

"I hated you when I was a boy," I said. "I thought I could never be good enough. I see now that though my father taught me many things, he taught me nothing about survival. You taught me that, and I want to thank you for it."

Perhaps there are old Mexican men of his generation in whom emotion is visible, recognizable. Not Pancho. Yet I knew what I said was received. Granite or feldspar: not expressive; not, thank God, even a hint of the sentimental but something solid and true. "Follow me," he said, and we left our meal half-eaten and drove to the ranch.

Driving past the fallow fields and crossing the Rio Pacheco, we paused to have some water at the spring -- in Spanish called "Ojito" or "little eye" from the old European belief that such were inlets to the underground world of the ancestors. After slaking our thirst, he took two shovels from the back of the truck, used them almost as crutches to amble his way up the slate of a hillside. Then he did the most remarkable thing. As if I were again a boy of eleven, he handed me a shovel and told me to clear the acequia. We looked in each other's eyes, the symbolic gesture utterly transparent. I did as I was told, clearing stone and underbrush so that a field long-abandoned might have water should anyone take again to corn or alfalfa. When I finished, he underscored what we both knew. "It makes no difference, hombre. We only grow weeds on this land now."

My recent meeting with Pancho was ten years later, long after his ashes mixed white with the red soil of the ranch. A meeting -- in Spanish "encuentro," encounter. In the African tradition that I serve, one does not say, "There is reality, but then there are dreams which are unreal"; rather, there are two realities, and they run parallel, and when one meets a sekiru, a grandfather spirit, one best pay close attention.

In both worlds it was springtime, May. The land was green, and the

river full from snowmelt. Sweet water and wild raspberries -- the time of year the boys and men gather to clear the acequia. Pancho was again vital, radiant really; not the man broken by age as in our last encounter. "I didn't know you were coming," he said. "You will need a shovel." I quickly assured him I would get one, but he beat me: He wanted to hand it to me. As he gave me the shovel, I began crying. "I was so young and so arrogant," I said, "young and arrogant but mostly just young."

The whole of the dream was in my tears and his eloquent silence; yet just as his gesture of handing the shovel had been transparent when he lived, so was it now. Forgiveness was never the point, rather, the benevolent recognition of the inevitable, as if to say, "Yes. You were arrogant as was I when I was young. We are until it falls away, and then we tend to the acequia." Simple and without melodrama.

There is a certain quality to this encounter that reminds me of a story Mandaza Kademwa told me the last time I was in Africa. For three years, he was initiated by a healer of the so-called enemy tribe, the Ndebele: the ancient rituals of clearing the path to the world of the ancestors. After his initiation, he could not imagine what it would mean for he himself to practice as a healer. So he waited for months until the spirits came to tell him how to proceed.

One night he found himself far away in the mountain where he met a sekiru with wings. "We are not learning to be healers," said the spirit. "We are already healers." As Mandaza described this sekiru, I saw my grandfather's face, the two twinned: They that dwell now within and alongside us, self-complete, wise and without aggression.

When I hear what my friend Lone Eagle respectfully calls the red hot stones of the sweat lodge, "The grandfathers," I think. "Without these old ones, how could we possibly find the words to pray?" The way of the healer is difficult beyond telling, sometimes unbearable but beautiful, sweet, the very stuff of grace. For even in aloneness, we are never for a moment alone.

## *In the Ashes of Lament, An Easter Meditation*

September 11th drove a nail through Christ's right hand. The fires that engulf the residential neighborhoods of Baghdad at this moment drive a nail through the left.

And who will drive the nail through the feet? Al Qaeda or the Christian rightwing that now controls the Republican party? In this Passion Play who gets to be the Roman soldier? A Christian or a Muslim?

Does it make one bit of difference?

Either way, God is crucified. Either way on CNN or Al Jazeera with horror or glee or indifference or with the righteous self-certainty that is the masque of murder we will watch the anguish of God.

Who will wail, who weep, who tear at their hair, who rend their clothes, who remember mercy? Who will hear the cry from Bagdad why hast thou forsaken me and who will kneel in the rubble and pray God forgive America though we cannot claim we know not what we do? And who if we cannot find the words to pray will at least bear witness to the rough beast slouching towards its next spasm of violence?

What now the rites of confession and mourning? One cannot con-

fess when an atrocity is being performed in one's name. Too early by far. One can be outraged and one can grieve for the dead, yes, but also for the soul of this once great nation that has succumbed to Empire and the impulse to kill for oil, has lied about it shamelessly, and stands now naked before an unconvinced world.

Let us pray now as we have never prayed before, stuttering, heart-broken and committed to the sacred necessity of peacemaking. To do less is to kiss this world goodbye even as our children are now inheriting it.

## *Mainlining Apocalypse*

*Dreaming the End of the World* was begun before the end of the cold war and finished a few months after the fall of the Berlin wall. The world has changed has it not? Apocalypse was not on everybody's lips but now it is. Many people with excitement or dread see this as the time when history and prophecy coincide: The final days. But the book is not about history really. Or rather it is about history as the ritual theater of a rite of initiation fierce and true as any culture might enact. Contemporary history is the place where myth crawls under the skin where that it might transform. The apocalyptic rite of initiation is about the awakening of compassion in a dark time.

In this initiation we meet the Messiah and the Beast, that which would save the world and that which would devour it. This old story/paradigm is at the foundation of Indo-European culture: Babylon was founded when Marduk slayed the chaos dragon, Tiamat. A late version, the Revelation of St. John, where Christ was pitted against Antichrist, was grafted into Christian scripture reluctantly in the fourth century. It seems that the heretic Montanus, rather like some contemporary Christians and Muslims, took it literally, whereas the Early Fathers

knew it to be allegory. Montanus was quite sure Christ would soon establish his kingdom in his native Smyrna.

But there is literalism and then there is literalism. On July 17, 1945 north of Alamogordo, New Mexico the Messiah and the Beast resolved into a singular, terrifying, ecstatic image: The mushroom cloud. What had been the legacy of apocalyptic myth became a technological possibility, became the nightmare of the daily news.

This, again, is not only history. It is myth. And because it is myth it is an invitation to initiation. Remember the Bomb was and continues to be our culture hero, our Messiah. It was going to defeat Hitler, after all, and who could argue with that? Many intelligent people, like Oppenheimer believed it could make war itself obsolete. Simultaneously it was and is the Beast, proliferating, hungry.

Not surprisingly the nuclearization of the myth of apocalypse found its way into the dream life of contemporary people. What did surprise was that the patterns of these dreams bear a ritual intelligence consistent with rites of initiation that are hundreds of thousands of years old. As the soul approaches the incomprehensible it is cut away from the community and "common" sense. Stripped bare it suffers the raw truth of the moment, its conundrums and heartbreak and witnesses the death and rebirth of the self/planet. The images are contemporary but my initiations as a tribal healer in Africa confirmed that the ritual grammar is ancient: Separation, vision, return. If history is a nightmare the apocalyptic initiation is about waking up from its self-destructive imperative.

The end of the Cold War presented the possibility that an epic hallucination might come to an end. What could possibly equal Stalin or Mao, the gulags and reeducation camps, the Khmer Rouge and Sendero Luminoso? What Beast might step forth to contend with the Messiah?

In 1987 an Arab translation of *The Late Great Planet Earth* by Hal Lindsey was published in Cairo. Lindsey's book, first issued in the early seventies, has sold twenty million copies and has had a pervasive influence on the End Times worldview of fundamentalist Christians in America and elsewhere.

Before its publication in Egypt the Muslim apocalyptic tradition had

been dormant for centuries. Not so now. Lindsey's book and the fertile atmosphere of the first Gulf War reawakened the apocalyptic imagination in the Arab world, informing, for example, Al Qaeda. David Cook, the principal scholar of Muslim apocalyptic literature writes, "The contemporary Muslim sees the present world turned upside down by Christian Millennialism. In defense, Muslims make heavy use of the Bible, or one might say the Bible as seen through the eyes of Hal Lindsey....The only difference is that the 'good guys' are Muslims, not Christians."

This postmodern cross-pollination of cultures has assured that the world keeps faith with the old story. The impulse towards destruction - the Beast - now hides in the bloody heart of a myth shared by enemies bent on destroying one another: Redemption through apocalypse. Messiah/Beast has transmuted into a Crusader/Jihadi complex. Two honorable and sometimes radiant traditions are led towards the abyss by their lunatic fringe: Each driven to conquer the world for God, each bearing the sword of unassailable righteousness.

The Crusader/Jihadi makes real its cosmos by drawing to itself final things: The afterlife, the end of the world, the full sanctification of the children of God. This sacred solipsism translated into a religious vernacular the Mutually Assured Destruction of the Cold War. Without detente.

Its self-convinced righteousness is of a piece with the unspoken, unspeakable, sociopathy that will destroy whatever it deems necessary. The other does not exist, is not quite human, until he or she converts. Cluster bombs dropped into a suburb of Baghdad will deliver the unbelievers to damnation but if the pilot is by chance downed not a small portion of his people are assured that he will rise to heaven. The Jihadi whispering "Allah Akbar" as the plane strikes the World Trade Center knows exactly where he's going on the other side of death and exactly where he delivers his not-quite-human victims. One commandment forever in stone whatever the bloodshed: Thou shalt not for a moment recognize any resemblance between thyself and thine enemy.

It's almost dawn, the sky lightning to dark blue after a long night.

The stellar jays are mad with chatter and the snow is at last beginning to melt. I invite the reader to the wilderness, to the beginning of the apocalyptic rite of passage. My description of the way though is perhaps more relevant now than when I first wrote it down. That being said I offer this book with a single caveat: Beware the seduction of the image, mine and others, for the myth of apocalypse seeks to enthrall us into an epic fiction with very real consequences. Beware the fascination with what is larger than life, this vulgar Passion Play that would crucify the world.