

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

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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 current 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 "enemymaking" 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.

I 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 enemymaking.

Recovering from my time in the desert in a cheap hotel in Socorro I began scribbling notes on a second book about white peoples 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 fathers side we held Gullah slaves in Virginia and had kinfolk among the Klan.

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.”

So I say in the introduction of ‘Village.’

A few years later I met Mandaza Kandemwa in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe and as he initiated me into the tribal medicine of the Shona people we began to call each other *mapatya*: 'twin brother.' Like myself, *mapatya* was called by dreams to be initiated by an "enemy" -- a Ndebele Zulu shaman -- (the Ndebele being historic "enemies" of his tribe.)

The parallels of our life stories are explored in *Twin from Another Tribe: The Story of Two Shamanic Healers from Africa and North America*.

All foundational to *Village*.

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 we're 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 Deena Metzger 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 thin 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 knew I was free of MS. When a MRI confirmed this, 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 month 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 symptomology 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 *Mambokadzi* 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.

It is premature to post *The Craft of Compassion* on the site. On Amazon.com it is available for \$7.50 on Kindle:  
<http://tinyurl.com/4yxyjam>

Check out sample chapters at [www.michaelortizhill.com](http://www.michaelortizhill.com) and Dr Carol Francis video interview on the Craft. As you can see from this brief essay it is the fruit of decades of spiritual work.

Enjoy Village it is available at :

<http://www.amazon.com/Village-Water-Spirits-African-Americans/dp/0882145533>