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 Augustine 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 Augustine'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, Augustine 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 Augustine's analysis a key word, 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 contemporary 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 Augustine 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 Augustine and I initiate people into the ngoma of the water spirits, so do we initiate people into relationship with their shave. (Augustine also casts out shaves that are troublesome and destructive to the community.)

Augustine 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. Augustine 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 lightening 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 Pocahantas, 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 Allan 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 inspirited 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?

Augustine 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 Augustine 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 Augustine 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 Augustine and I did on his behalf had to be strictly minimalistic. Augustine 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 lightening 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 renge 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 disinspirited world, it is the essential political act. At one point Josiah, much to his surprise, was trance possessed by an old mbira player that Augustine recognized immediately as precolonial, 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 Augustine.

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 Augustine's final words on living in an inspirited 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."