Aging: learning to be an elder

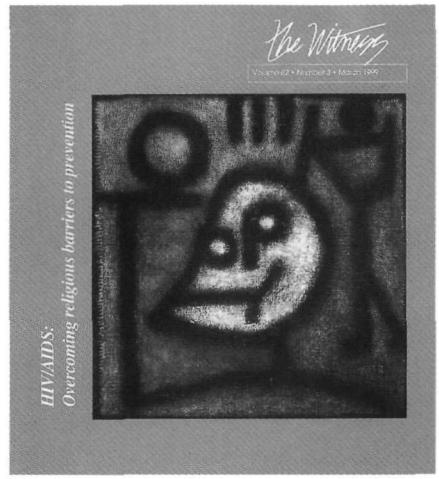
The Witness

Volume 82 • Number 5 • May 1999

Encouragement

READING EACH NEW VOLUME of *The Witness* from cover to cover, I often note letters from people who say how outraged they are by your magazine, and instruct you never to darken their mailboxes with it again.

Although I realize how important subscription income can be, I do hope none of you are at all discouraged by these requests. Indeed, you should be glad to receive them, because they tell the truth. *The Witness* is no bland, one-size-fits-all publication, but one that has the courage and vision to take stands, take sides, and pay the price. For those of us who already agree with you, or those who need some nudging or some valuable enlightening, you are an inspiration and a beacon. Never doubt the value of the ministry you do.



And so I say, keep up the good work. Do it for the church, which is going through a very perilous time right now. Do it for those who need to hear your message, and for those who do not yet understand or believe it. Do it for the future of justice in our country. Do it for Jeanie, bless her brave heart.

Sallie E. Shippen
Ashland, OR

Community food security

I HAVE JUST READ the January/February issue. Maybe I am too slow of mind in my old age, but somehow I fail to comprehend what you want us to do about the plight of the farmers. I too am appalled by the mergers and buy-outs. But isn't that capitalism at its best? (That is why I am a socialist!) Everyone's doing it — auto companies, funeral homes, cemeteries, grocery store, drug stores, department stores ...

The most surprising thing to me in your last issue is that no one seems to question the waste of land in raising meat. We are vegetarians basically on the basis of morality, but health, economics and ecology would be sufficient reason.

Felix A. Lorenz, Jr.
Northville, MI

letters

Classifieds

Order of Jonathan Daniels

The Order of Jonathan Daniels is an ecumenical religious order in the Anglican tradition of Vowed and Oblate lay persons of both genders, single, committed or married, living and working in the world, who are engaged in justice ministries. Write: OJD, P.O. Box 8374, Richmond, VA 23226 or <OrdJonDanl@aol.com>.

Internet volunteers needed

Where the Son Shines, a website dedicated to connect Christians for outreach, is in need of chat room hosts/monitors to keep our chat rooms friendly, safe and topic focused. For details visit <http://www.wtss.com>.

Travel to Nicaragua

Travel to Nicaragua this summer and work on a village water or sanitation project. El Porvenir, a California nonprofit organization, offers a two-week work experience July 3-17 and August 7-21. Small groups of up to 10 persons live and work in a rural village participating in the construction of a well, latrine, or *lavandero* project. Many opportunities to meet and talk with Nicaraguans in all walks of life, see other parts of the country before and after work project. No construction experience or Spanish required. Cost $650 plus round trip airfare to Managua. For more information call (916) 736-3663 or write El Porvenir, 2508 42nd St., Sacramento, CA 95817 or e-mail at <epeeuu@igc.org> or visit <www.elporvenir.org>.

Episcopal Peace Fellowship

"Will you strive for justice and peace and respect the dignity of every human being?" Our Baptismal Covenant calls us to do just that. Since 1939 the Episcopal Peace Fellowship has provided community, support and fellowship to Episcopalians committed to answering this call. Won't you join us? Contact EPF, P.O. Box 28156, Washington, D.C. 20038; 202-783-3380; <epf@igc.apc.org>.

Episcopal Urban Interns

Work in social service, live in Christian community in Los Angeles. For adults 21-30. Apply now for the 1999-2000 year. Contact: The Rev. Gary Commins, 260 N. Locust St., Inglewood, CA 90301. 310-674-7700.

Stringfellow book available

A Keeper of the Word, edited by Bill Wylie-Kellermann, gleans the most significant of William Stringfellow's work including never-before-published material. A Harlem street lawyer, social activist, writer and theologian, Stringfellow is enjoying new-found popularity with a new generation of Christians for his commitment to truth and justice in a corrupt and unjust world, and for teaching us how to "live humanly in the midst of death." $15 including shipping/handling. Checks/Visa/Mastercard to: *The Witness*, 7000 Michigan Ave., Detroit, MI 48210; 1-800-300-0702.

Inferior style and content

I AM NOT RENEWING because I find your articles generally inferior in literary style and content and theologically unstimulating.

Sally Llewellyn
Atlanta, GA

Prison-industrial complex

I ENJOYED YOUR CRIMINAL JUSTICE issue so much I gave it to a friend, who is director of a criminal justice ministry. She's going to subscribe also!

Jack Knipper
Tulsa, OK

YOUR ISSUE ON PRISONS was valuable in successfully stopping a fourth prison here.

Mary Brigid Clingman, OP
Lake Providence, LA

Barbara Harris

THANK YOU for your February anniversary interview with Barbara Harris.

I still think her consecration is the most important event in human history since the Incarnation.

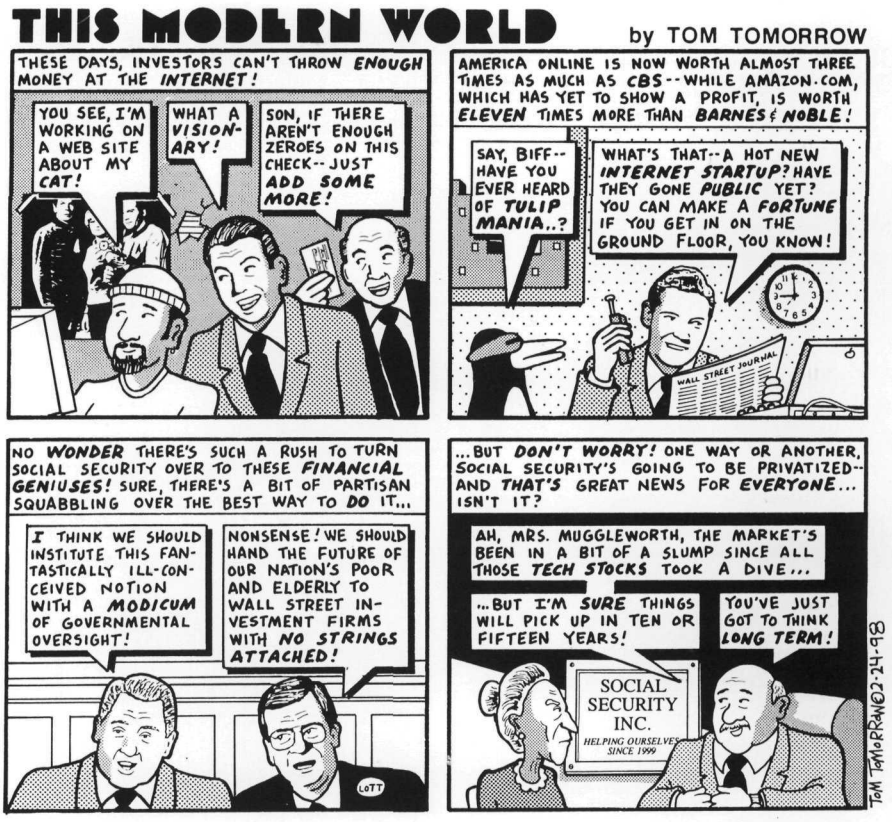
Robert H. Beveridge
Livingston, TX

Proposing a 'Creation Season'

MY WIFE AND I WERE among the non-voting members of the 25-person Episcopal Church delegation to the World Council of Churches' Assembly in Zimbabwe last December. One of the major concerns was economic justice, both nationally and internationally, which was also a theme in your magazine a couple of months earlier. Our world, as well as Christian vision and effort, clearly need a new major systematized philosophy and political structure for transforming our dangerously ill-balanced economic plights and pursuits into a healthy stewardship in relation to Nature, human nature and money matters.

Such concern, especially in regard to Nature, was part of your December issue's emphasis on ecology in Christian perspective. This very concern has been made a liturgical priority in the church at which I now serve (in retirement), Emmanuel Episcopal Church in downtown Baltimore, Md. Two lay leaders, Bob and Lucy Wood, initiated a plan by which the church emphasized a special "Creation Season," from St. Francis Day in early October until late November's Thanksgiving Day. I gave the kick-off sermon, emphasizing that such a season deserves to be incorporated in all churches' liturgical calendars as this would provide us for the first time with a season reflecting the first paragraph of the Creed. From Advent through Easter seasons the focus is around Jesus Christ (the Creed's second paragraph); and the long Pentecost season is oriented around the Holy Spirit (the Creed's third paragraph). God as Creator (the Creed's first paragraph) is the most basic of all, yet with no liturgical season emphasizing it. Hence we propose a Creation Season be adapted by all, especially in the face of industrial culture's insensitivity so often toward Earth, on which we all are dependent.

David W. Commack
Baltimore, MD



Witness praise

I TREASURE *The Witness*!!

Carol Berrigan
Syracuse, NY

YOU ALL DO WELL IN BEING APART from yet connected to the Church. Keep up the good work.

Dennis Serdahl
Mountain Home, AR

THANK YOU FOR YOUR EXCELLENT magazine. I look forward to it each month and am amazed at your creativity in developing such a variety of themes.

Marie Fehribach
Sterling Heights, MI

PLEASE let us know if your address has changed! Returned magazines cost us money — and you frustration!

The Witness

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The Witness offers a fresh and sometimes irreverent view of our world, illuminated by faith, Scripture and experience. Since 1917, *The Witness* has been advocating for those denied systemic power as well as celebrating those people who have found ways to "live humanly in the midst of death." We push boundaries, err on the side of inclusion and enjoy bringing our views into tension with orthodox Christianity. *The Witness'* roots are Episcopalian, but our readership is ecumenical. For simplicity, we place news specific to Episcopalians in our Vital Signs section. *The Witness* is committed to brevity for the sake of readers who find little time to read, but can enjoy an idea, a poem or a piece of art.

Manuscripts: We welcome multiple submissions. Given our small staff, writers and artists receive a response only when we are able to publish. Manuscripts will not be returned.

The editor whose editorial appears on page 5 crafted this issue.

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Teaching what you know to be true

by Jeanie Wylie-Kellermann

Ironically I was starting to prepare an issue on aging when I was felled by seizures last Labor Day. I had a couple of the articles in hand, so when I was able to return to the rotation for the May issue, I decided to complete the topic I had partially begun. It seems like a strange one for someone many doctors believe won't live to see it, but it's an important topic and besides, I'm hoping to prove them wrong.

A variety of books on aging are suddenly available in bookstores. I think there are two reasons. The first is that whenever the baby boomers experience something, they see it as if they were the first. The first to realize that adult society was corrupt and needed to be changed in the 1960s and now the first to have a creative idea of how to age, one that includes becoming whole, learning and teaching others — to garden, to care for the earth, to pray, to organize politically. The other reason is complex. The 1950s really did do a job on the generation that preceded us, diminishing their confidence in their own body-knowing (take, for example, the way hospitals encouraged women to give birth while totally unconscious). The generation that is currently retired may be at a loss for how to step up to being elders. (And, of course, they probably remember the grief baby boomers gave them when they tried to speak with authority a few decades ago.)

This issue is focussed on people who through aging, and often through catastrophic illness, have taken stock and decided to teach what they know to be true.

Elders usually must let go of their expectations to be power brokers, but they are also often positioned in a way that allows them greater freedom to act politically. Recently my partner Bill and I were at an Ash Wednesday vigil at the local manufacturer of cruise missile engines. Except for a few college students, we were probably the youngest people there — which isn't saying much since we are in our 40s. On one level, that gave us an opportunity to beat ourselves up for our demographics — Why is the peace movement so white, so middle class and now so elderly? But in thinking about it, where would we prefer that elders be? What better task could they adopt than to witness against fire power that can carry nuclear payload, but now is used in first-strike attacks against countries like Iraq or the former Yugoslavia? The conviction of these older ones is a gift to us. (I remember during a civil disobedience campaign against this same manufacturer in the early 1980s hearing a senior citizen say to a young mother who was agonizing about whether to do the action, "You take care of your babies. I'll do this in your name and, before long, you can do this in the name of another mother.")

Perhaps our elders can help us learn to relax, to take delight, to notice creation as well as to step up to challenges.

Some mysterious tension lies in the balance between the humility that elders learn as they relinquish power in the workplace and, perhaps, succumb to physical challenges or illnesses, and the breadth of perspective they gain as elders. They can teach us that some things won't be changed, that some things deserve to be protested even if they are unlikely to change, that life is short and that younger people generally take it too seriously, chasing their tails when they could be giving thanks. Perhaps our elders can help us learn to relax, to take delight, to notice creation as well as to step up to challenges as we see fit and feel called. Perhaps they will remind us that the One who set this whole thing, often quite messy, in motion is a loving God.

I find myself increasingly willing to listen. I hope that the elders in my life will be willing to speak and that my generation (You remember us? We're the ones who said, "Don't trust anyone over 30.") will step up to the need when our turn comes. I guess we'll have to believe that we've learned something and trust that it can be communicated. Of course, no one has ever complained that the baby boomers were reluctant to speak their minds or underconfident in their opinions. We'll manage.

One of my favorite elders is my godmother Grace Mulhauser who died some years ago. If anyone had a right to be bitter, she did. In the early 1940s she was married and raising her only son in Cleveland, Ohio where she and her husband worked with black writers, including Langston Hughes. When World War II arrived, her husband had to serve. When it ended, he refused to come home, staying in Japan. Alone, she raised their son. When the Vietnam War arrived, her son was taken, despite the fact that he had three children. He was killed. Finally, on the day of his funeral, when fellow soldiers were expected, she woke to discover several inches of snow on her beloved Virginia soil. She told me later that she stamped her foot and said, "God, I am

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Jeanie Wylie-Kellermann is co-editor/publisher of *The Witness*, <jeanie@thewitness.org>.

editor's note

Receiving golden grace

by Rosemary George

People always ask the same question: "Don't you get stung?"

Yes! I do! I do get stung. I try to avoid it and, as I get more experienced, it happens less and less often. But it's a small price to pay for a golden reward.

I'm a hobbyist beekeeper, living right outside Washington, D.C. in a quiet little suburb about 15 minutes away from the buildings and monuments — and power brokers — that make the city both famous and infamous. In my backyard are two hives of bees, sitting largely unnoticed between tulip poplar trees at least 130 feet high. These two hives supply, year after year, enough honey to satiate me, my family, my friends and their friends. Maybe even their friends' friends. Depends on how good the honey flow is.

Before I kept bees, I never knew there was such a thing as a honey flow. But there is: Spring after spring in my area the tulip poplar and black locust trees burst into bloom and for a short, mad season the universe is filled with rivers — no, oceans — of nectar. This is not simple abundance, this is provision on the most lavish of scales. The honey flow makes the biblical promise of "a land flowing with milk and honey" into something much more than quaint imagery.

Bees are so amazing. I could (and often do) go on and on about the fantastic things they do. But there are two spiritual lessons in particular that I have learned from beekeeping. The first is the nature of gift. I've already mentioned the honey flow — how every year, almost without fail, the humblest of trees produce more honey than any one person could possibly consume. I tend my bees. I supply a dry, sheltered area with early-morning sun and afternoon shade; I position the hives so that they face southeast — a direction bees prefer; I make sure they are near a water source. They repay me by bringing in and storing PURE GIFT in quantities that not only supply their needs but mine as well. I'm often asked if I sell my honey. How could I? It's gift and I delight in giving it away.

The second thing I've learned from bees underscores the great spiritual truth that God is in the business of bringing life out of death and light into darkness.

Bees don't hibernate. Instead, when it gets cold they cluster together. The bees on the outside of the cluster vibrate their wing muscles — they shiver, if you will — and in this way bring the temperature inside the hive to about 57 degrees Fahrenheit. This enables the bees to survive, and they exist this way, consuming relatively little of their stores, until the winter solstice.

But then, at the darkest, coldest time of the year, the queen begins to lay eggs again. And when she does, the bees must raise the temperature inside the hive to a level that will support new life. How warm must it be inside the hive then, during the darkest, coldest time of year?

Ninety-three degrees Fahrenheit. Isn't that amazing? From my perspective, in late December spring seems impossibly far away. Everything is brown, dead, frozen, and dreary. I struggle with depression. I note with sorrow the passing of another year. I dread the early darkness.

But outside, in my beehives, the queens are laying eggs and the bees are keeping the nurseries warm enough for them to survive. The bees must now consume more and more of their stores, but those eggs will turn into the worker bees that will enable the hives to become strong enough to take advantage of the honey flow — still months away. That's worth getting stung now and again. TW

Rosemary George is an Episcopalian living in Falls Church, Va.

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not Job!"

She taught me lots by example. She referred to herself happily as "an old lady in tennis shoes." She collected her women friends in her yellow Volkswagen bug and took them into her beloved mountains for picnics. (She spoke of the protests when the interstate was blasted through the mountains.) She taught literacy at the jail. She told me she had succeeded in getting a banjo admitted for one prisoner. She was proud of being Virginian and proud that her father always loaned money to African Americans and that he noted that he had always been repaid.

In terms of deliberate messages, she did tell me that she had signed up for a three-year Bible study course at her church and been surprised by the content. "Don't wait 'til you're my age to discover the Bible," she admonished. She also told me to choose a partner with full lips because kissing skinny lips could be so unsatisfying.

After her death she appeared in a dream. It was ferociously intense. She told me, "I used to think that I was supposed to teach you things, but now I know that I simply had to love you!" She hugged me.

I'd like to be old like she was (although I don't want to be Job either). She had a lovely humility and sense of humor, combined with a clear idea of what was just. She knew her foibles and her strengths. Days that were crystal clear, she celebrated and called "Adam's birthday." I do too. TW

The old woman teaches the young girl about her body

by Red Hawk

Grandmother, my breasts are so small,
she said as they sat in the hot spring.
The old woman said nothing at all
for a long time, just sat staring
at the trees through the rising steam.
The long quiet made it seem
she had not heard; she had of course.
Then she turned. These are not a source
of strength, she said with a touch
to the young girl's budding breast,
unless you heart is free
of desire, depends on no one. Such
a clear heart is a place of rest,
a source of strength, and loving harmony.
The heart of a free woman is the force
behind her beauty. Only remorse
will come to her who is in thrall
to fair face or full breast; she feels the sting
of time, old age is a gall.
But the free woman will sing
as old age beauties her and fills her heart;
her love will never fail her or depart,
not when death makes its claim on face and breast,
not when sun falls and Earth comes to its rest.

— from *Journey of the Medicine Man,* August House, Little Rock, AK, 1983.

Trading speed for perspective

by Jeanie Wylie-Kellermann

Maybe 10 years ago I was on a retreat and we were asked what we loved most or what gave us passion. I forget the exact question, but I remember my answer. It was, speed.

I loved launching into life, moving my soul and mind quickly. I loved taking on a project with an unreasonable deadline and completing it on time. I didn't mind pushing my body. I imagined that anyone who was not as speedy wished they could be.

So it was interesting visiting my partner Bill's Mom in Florida in March after my seizures in September, surgery in October to remove the brain tumor the doctors had located and after learning the diagnosis — a grade four cancerous tumor. My perspective has changed radically. I have a new understanding of slowness. For one thing, when you can't speed, you are primed to notice more things.

I've also had to struggle to regain a relationship with my body that I had always taken for granted. Sometimes now there is a lag between when I think, "Walk" and when my legs move. Sometimes, often, I needed help getting up. During treatment sessions I rode in wheel chairs, learning the etiquette of how to ask people who were helping me to move the chair in a way that I felt comfortable with. I had to learn patience with the fact that I had no control over how or where I went. The most I could do was ask. For some reason this came particularly clear to me when Christmas shopping with Bill. He parked me in an aisle he wanted to explore, but I was aware that one aisle over there was something that had caught my eye. I got there, but in the interim I waited.

I've learned to ask for help, to wait, even to assess whether the thoughts that cross my mind are really worth expressing. A lot of things strike me funny. And best of all, I've discovered that God is in the mix more than I had feared.

So sitting by the pool in Bradenton, Fla. I looked into the faces of senior citizens and noticed when physical tasks were challenges. I heard people talk about repeated surgeries and I knew the trauma of admitting yourself, signing the forms that suggest that death is an unlikely but possible result of treatment, allowing needles to be poked through your flesh, submitting to general anaesthetic, praying constantly. I felt complete solidarity.

And, to my surprise, I am not jealous of those who can attain light speed. Instead it seems somewhat narrow — take, for example, people who need to use their cell phones in grocery stores. At the same time, I've gained a stronger sense of compassion. These days I simply offer a smile and people seem to understand the solidarity.

I've had plenty of time to think about the nature of prayer. My oldest sister said, "I don't want to believe in a God who counts the numbers of prayers offered and decides, 'Okay, that person can live; she had more than 'x' number of prayers.'" Of course, I agree with her. Plus everything in scripture seems to indicate that God has a preference for the abandoned. I struggled with what kind of prayer I could voice without being presumptuous. Finally, I realized that I could say with wholehearted conviction, "I choose life!" This didn't presume that I would live, but I liked it because it was unambivalent.

I was intrigued to find that Reynolds Price, whose book *A Whole New Life* (Plume, 1995) has meant the world to me through all this, was also drawn to this scripture about choosing life. Price writes:

"Clear as the offered choice is, such a reach for life is another tall order, especially for a human in agonized straits. But even if you omit the last phrase from God's proposition (that you last to love him, even if you're a confirmed disbeliever), you're still confronted with another iron fact. The visible laws of physical nature are willing you to last as long as you can. Down at the core, you almost certainly want to survive.

"You're of course quite free to balk that wish, by killing yourself and ending your physical will to endure; but amazingly few pained people choose death by suicide."

Price, in his 50s, was diagnosed with a tumor inside his spinal cord running from the nape of his neck downward 10 inches. His intelligent, patient-oriented critique of the hospitals, medical staff and drugs delighted me and made me feel less crazed. I was profoundly struck by his conclusion that the 10 years (and now more since the writing) which he has spent in a wheel chair have actually been *better* than the 50 that preceded it:

"By very slow inches, as I've said, the decision to change my life forced

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Jeanie Wylie-Kellermann is co-editor/ publisher of *The Witness*, <jeanie@thewitness.org>. The mural was painted by the Break the Silence Mural Project, a group of Jewish women artists in solidarity with Palestinian desire for independence.

itself on me; and I moved ahead as if a path was actually there and would stretch on a while....I traveled toward the reinvention and reassembly of a life that bears some relations with the now-dead life but is radically altered, trimmed for a whole new wind and route. A different life and — till now at least, as again I've said — a markedly better way to live, for me and for my response to most of the people whom my life touches.

"I've tested that word better for the stench of sentimentality, narcissism, blind optimism or lunacy. What kind of twisted fool, what megalomaniac bucking for canonization, would give his strong legs and control of a body that gave him 51 years' good service with enormous amounts of sensory pleasure (a body that played a sizeable part in winning him steady love from others) and would then surrender normal control of a vigorous life in an ample house and far beyond it in exchange for what? — two legs that serve no purpose but ballast to a numb torso and the rest of a body that acts as a magnet to no one living, all soaked in corrosive constant pain?

"I know that this new life is better for me, and for most of my friends and students as well, in two measurable ways. First, paraplegia with its maddening limitations has forced a degree of patience and consequent watchfulness on me, though as a writer I'd always been watchful. Shortly after my own paralysis, I heard two of Franklin Roosevelt's sons say that the primary change in their father, after polio struck him in mid-life and grounded him firmly, was an increased patience and a willingness to listen. If you doubt that patience must follow paralysis, try imagining that you can't escape whoever manages to cross your doorsill.

Mural painted in occupied Palestine, 1989

"Forced to sit, denied the easy flight that legs provide, you either learn patience or you cut your throat, or you take up a bludgeon and silence whoever's in reach at the moment. As I survived the black frustration of so many new forms of powerlessness, I partly learned to sit and attend, to watch and taste whatever or whomever seemed likely or needy, far more closely than I had in five decades. The pool of human evidence that lies beneath my writing and teaching, if nothing more, has grown in the wake of that big change."

My condition is less clear. I can still walk and move freely most of the time. I seem to have my wits about me, although sometimes I'm not sure of that. I know that I am now predisposed to seizures, some of which leave me unconscious, by virtue of the scar tissue in my brain.

As I look toward the possibility of aging — and everything feels tentative — I'd like nothing better. I don't feel as afraid of witnessing the diminishment of my physical abilities, because I have already experienced an increasing freedom with limited disability. It's quite likely true that nothing short of physical limitations would allow me to surrender the grandiose belief that I'm called to fix everything or die trying. Knowing that there are things I can't do, I can appreciate that I am along for the ride. And I like the ride. I'm also prepared to trust that, in the end, all will be well. TW

Portraits of generosity

by Robert Raines

For years Tom Stoddard, a gay attorney in his 40s, headed the Lambda Legal Defense Educational Fund, a gay and lesbian legal rights group, working on behalf of the gay community, especially those suffering from AIDS. Then came the moment when he learned that he himself had AIDS, and found himself nursing the same wounds, taking the same medications, and haunted by the same fears as his clients. He wrote, "I became the client as well as the lawyer...My most effective antiviral drug is political commitment, because it gets me so worked up ... I'm very glad to be living this ... I feel as though I'm on a precipice. I worry that I might fall, but my perspective is now broader and deeper. I see an all-encompassing vista, one that connects the past to the future, one that ties me to all other people who have suffered." Tom Stoddard, his life foreshortened by AIDS, fueled by an early and urgent wisdom, devoted himself to mentoring gay and lesbian attorneys, seeking to make this country a more safe and just place for its homosexual citizens in the coming generations. An elder before his time, Stoddard died two years ago.

Some traumatic event — serious illness, the death of a loved one or a dream or a marriage, forced retirement — may wake us up to our limited and precious lifespan, refresh our compassion and turn us to generous investment in the next generation. "Generosity is the soul of eldering," writes Theodore Roszak in his book *America the Wise.*

In this essay I want to paint portraits of women and men whose generosity of spirit in the travails of aging has touched me and encouraged my own generosity of soul.

Maggie Kuhn was retired by the Presbyterian Church at age 65. She went out to found the Gray Panthers, an advocacy group of people 55 and older, who, by the thousands across the country, worked on justice issues for people of all ages. Maggie, a little woman with a white bun of hair on her head and a glint in her eye, engendered passionate social concern in others. She lived in Philadelphia until her death at 89. Two weeks before she died, she stood on a picket line with transit workers seeking a more just wage. When I remember Maggie I ask myself, "When was the last time you walked on a picket line, marched down a street or stood vigil for a just cause?" Maggie embodied the Kirkridge (Retreat and Study Center) motto "Picket and Pray." Perhaps her most generous gift to others came after she was required to retire.

Commitment for the long haul, fidelity to vocation, concern for coming generations. Such long-haul commitment happens in ordinary communities, embodied in extraordinary people.

While one may anticipate retirement as a time to major in personal pleasure and leisure, there may also grow in us a desire to give back, contribute to the common good, leave the campground a little cleaner than we found it. A Matthew 25 (verses 31ff) survey of one's community or city will turn up those who are in need: the poor, sick, imprisoned, stranger, etc. Who are the people, what are the institutions and causes one wants to nourish and support with time, energy and resources?

Douglas Steere was Professor of Philosophy at Haverford College, mentor of hundreds of students and colleagues, and an irenic generator of interfaith dialogue and friendship all over the world. He came into my life when I was a young minister in Philadelphia, generously welcoming me into his circle of colleagues, offering me opportunities of relationship and experience otherwise beyond my reach. Douglas quietly mentored me on my spiritual journey without laying any agenda upon me. In the years that followed my departure from Philadelphia, now and then a postcard would arrive, with Douglas' nearly illegible scribble, sending greeting and asking how things were going. I realized that Douglas was there for me and many others, and I was nourished, comforted and built up by his reaching out.

I always felt, secretly, that I wasn't quite worthy of this great human being's friendship, and yet all the time his friendship was conferring worth on me, and my own capacity for friendship was being enlarged by being the beneficiary of his. What a friend we had in Douglas, whose generosity of befriending made better friends of us. So who is it that I might send a postcard to today, or phone, or visit or pray for? Might I grow in my generosity of befriending?

Paul Mellon, who died recently at 91,

Robert Raines, 72, is a pastor in the United Church of Christ. After serving as director of the Kirkridge Retreat and Study Center in eastern Pennsylvania for 20 years, Raines now lectures and conducts workshops nationwide. His latest book is *A Time To Live: Seven Steps of Creative Aging,* (Plume, 1997).

was born into a wealthy family, went to Yale, and devoted himself to philanthropic pursuits throughout his life. Exceptionally modest, he was a true philanthropist, a lover of humankind. At Yale he endowed professorships and built many buildings, but steadfastly refused to have a building named for him. Instead of trying to make a name for himself he created space where others in coming generations could name themselves.

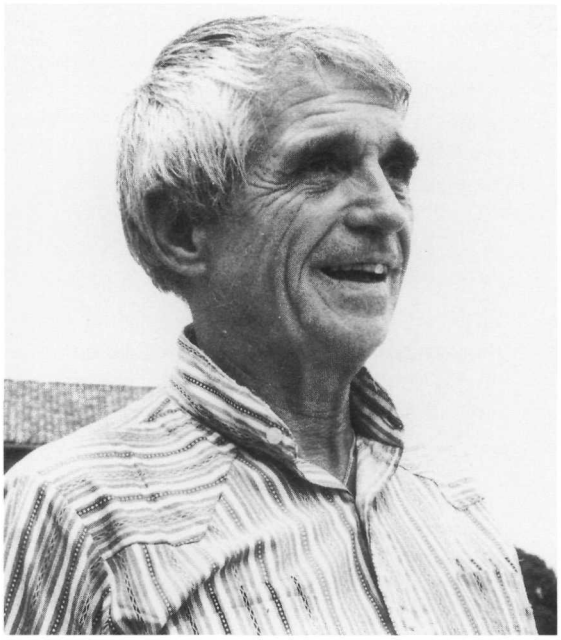
Parents, teachers, managers, social workers, coaches, journalists, clergy and politicians are among those who may try to create space where others can name themselves and develop their own destinies.

There is a philanthropist slumbering in the soul of each of us, wanting to give whatever are our treasures to those who come after us.

One such person is Oseola McCarty. She has lived in Hattiesburg, Miss., in the same house since 1947. She was reared in a house of women — her grandmother, mother and aunt. As they all fell sick over the years, she cared for them until they died. She dropped out of school when she was 8 and began work as a laundress. Never married, she lived very simply, and put a few dollars in the bank every week. In the summer of 1995, Oseola, then 87, asked her banker to give her life savings away — to fund scholarships for poor students at the University of Southern Mississippi in Hattiesburg. Her gift amounted to $150,000. It generated attention all across the country and additional gifts, and breathed a cleansing wind through many souls. Today her portrait hangs in the administration building of that university, the first portrait of a black person to be displayed there. Oseola McCarty, philanthropist, true lover of humankind, gave her "widow's mite," demonstrating that the acts of the apostles keep on happening in our midst.

What is my treasure?

How may I give it away? Some of us may not have accumulated much cash across the years, but perhaps our compassion has grown, and a little wisdom come our way, and a certain simplicity of soul. If we want to, we can find our own ways to become true philanthropists, to give ourselves away for love of humankind.



Daniel Berrigan Mev Puleo

Twenty-nine years after he went to prison in South Africa, and two years after he was elected president of his country, Nelson Mandela made a state visit to London, where he was the honored guest of the Queen, and feted as a king in a country where Margaret Thatcher once called him a "terrorist" and dismissed the possibility that he could one day govern South Africa as a pipe dream out of "cloud-cuckoo land." While there, he invited Lady Thatcher — who as Prime Minister in the 1980s refused to endorse international sanctions against the white supremacist government — to Buckingham Palace where they held a 20-minute chat. No details were released, but when earlier in the week he was asked about her stand, Mandela said, "Let bygones be bygones." She said nothing. Mandela of the generous heart, free of bitterness, magnanimous, willing to forgive, an elder among the nations. As was King Hussein, who made peace with his enemies, went to Israel when several Israeli children were killed by Jordanian-based terrorists and knelt before families asking their forgiveness, who pardoned his own would-be assassins, who, two months before his death, came to encourage the Wye agreement by his presence.

One thinks of Daniel and Philip Berrigan, Elizabeth McAlister, Anne Montgomery, Elmer Maas and so many others who have seeded two generations of peacemakers in this country by their resistance to nuclear and other weapons. Commitment for the long haul, fidelity to vocation, concern for coming generations. Such long-haul commitment happens in ordinary communities, embodied in extraordinary people. TW

Mary Daly targeted by right-wing law firm

A legal challenge to feminist author Mary Daly's 20-year policy of teaching men separately at Boston College has resulted in Daly cancelling her spring term classes and, she says, may force her into retirement. The *National Catholic Reporter* reports that the challenge comes from the Center for Individual Rights, a conservative, public-interest Washington law firm which is acting for a single male student at the college. Daly defends her policy as necessary for preserving a safe space for women to talk freely, and says she has found that women in mixed-gender classrooms direct part of their attention to the way men are reacting to class content. University administrators point to federal law prohibiting discrimination based on gender, and assert that "separation is inherently unequal."

Daly, who uses the same course material for male students, but in separate sessions, says that "one of the hallmarks of a great university is that it allows for diversity of methodology. ... The right wing is trying to make this an issue of discrimination when it is about refusing to dumb down education and about the right and obligation of faculty not to be forced to accept students in their classes who are not qualified and do not have the prerequisites."

The Center for Individual Rights, which has a history of challenging affirmative action policies, promised in a recent fundraising letter to devote increased resources to fighting radical feminism.

U.S. ranks low in human development

Using a new poverty index designed to measure deprivation in industrialized countries, the U.N. ranked the U.S. worst of the 17 industrialized countries rated in a recent study (*Dollars and Sense,* 3-4/99). The U.N.'s Human Development Report 1998 revealed that, despite having the highest Gross Domestic Product per capita, the U.S. has a significantly larger percentage of its population — 19 percent — living below the poverty line than any of the other nations. (The United Kingdom came in second last in this category, with 13.5 percent below the poverty line.) The U.S. also ranked worst in low life expectancy, and second worst in illiteracy.

Clinton a "liberal Republican"?

The fervor to impeach Clinton arose out of far-right resistance to his "liberal Republican" policies, Manning Marable believes.

"What Clinton has done is to preempt the public policy space that liberal Republicans used to occupy," Marable writes. "Take a look at Clinton's new budget proposal. ... The classical Reagan themes of military spending, law and order, tax cuts and privatization are all here. On defense, Clinton's budget would spend an extra $112 billion through 2005, giving the military the largest increase since the Reagan administration. The budget includes a $10.5 billion system to defend against long-range missiles — an irrational and unnecessary expenditure. On crime, Clinton wants another $1.3 billion to finish hiring an additional 100,000 police officers that were originally part of the 1994 federal crime law. To appeal to middle class and conservative voters, Clinton asked for $130 million for charter schools, which operate largely independently from public schools.

"But Clinton's budget has enough concessions to the Left to keep most Democrats and even progressives like feminists, labor union and civil rights groups backing the administration. For example, on the issue of environmentalism, Clinton's budget asks for $33.9 billion, the highest figure ever requested by any president. The budget pledges millions of dollars for Title I grants to schools in urban and poor areas. Another $1.4 billion would be used to hire 38,000 new teachers.

"The issue was never about whether progressives and liberals ought to defend Clinton, but how we can halt the authoritarian danger of the Far Right. Clinton's personal behavior was stupid and self-indulgent, but we must be very clear that a greater danger confronts us."

GM vs. Microsoft

At a computer expo (COMDEX), Bill Gates reportedly compared the computer industry with the auto industry and stated: "If GM had kept up with technology like the computer industry has, we would all be driving $25 dollar cars that got 1,000 miles to the gallon." In response to Gate's comments, this list [abbreviated for our purposes] began circulating on the Internet.

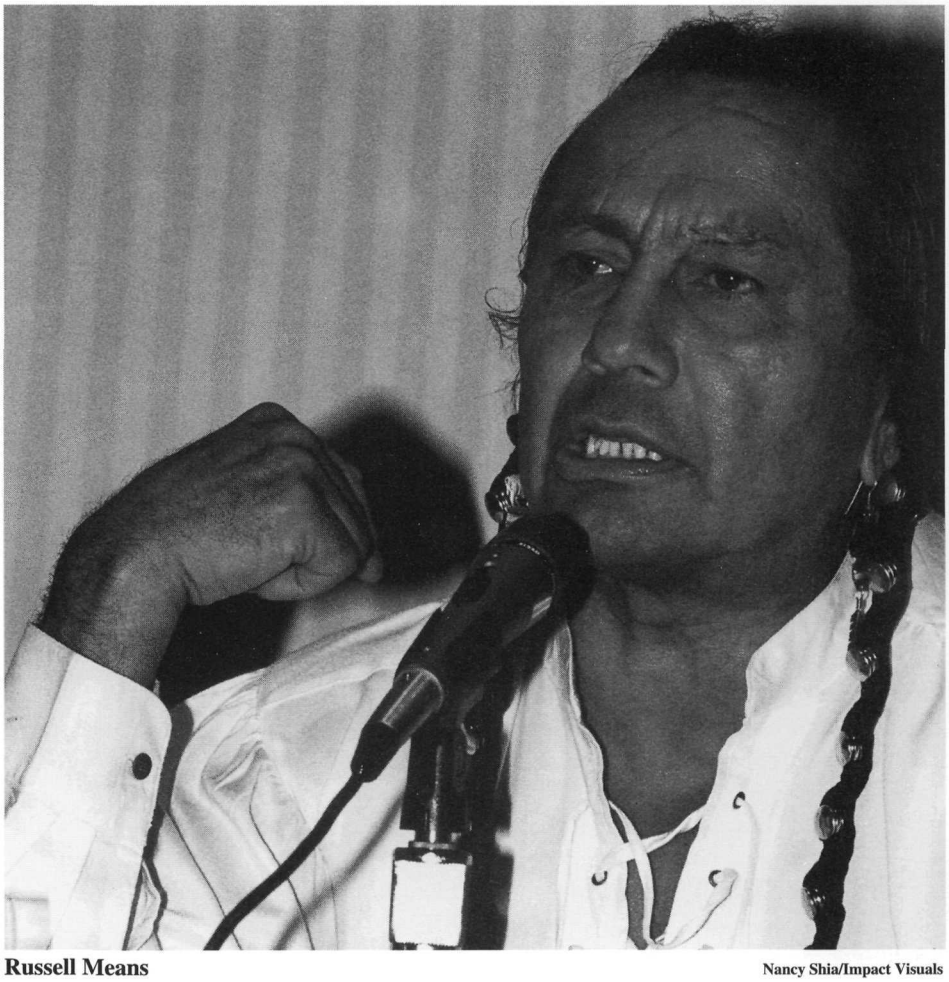
"If GM had developed technology like Microsoft, we would all be driving cars with the following characteristics:

1. For no reason whatsoever your car would crash twice a day.
2. Every time they repainted the lines on the road you would have to buy a new car.
3. Occasionally your car would die on the freeway for no reason, and you would just accept this, restart, and drive on.
4. Occasionally, executing a maneuver such as a left turn would cause your car to shut down and refuse to restart, in which case you would have to re-install the engine.
5. Occasionally for no reason whatsoever, your car would lock you out and refuse to let you in until you simultaneously lifted the door handle, turned the key, and grabbed hold of the radio antenna.
6. GM would require all car buyers to also purchase a deluxe set of Rand McNally road maps (now a GM subsidiary), even though they neither need them nor want them. Attempting to delete this option would immediately cause the car's performance to diminish by 50 percent or more."

Short takes

A militant activist seeks to become an elder

[Russell Means, the angry young man representing the American Indian Movement (AIM), made an unexpected appearance in the pages of Modern Maturity, *the magazine of the AARP. Although the interview covered lots of ground, the focus was on aging.]*



Russell Means Nancy Shia/Impact Visuals

Russell Means explained that in his tribe, four names are selected for each child at birth. These names are conferred at times of passage. In his case, he explained, "I was given a name when I was born, *Wanbli Ohitika,* which means Brave Eagle. So, of course, I was always running around taking dares, getting in lots of mischief. Being a pain, sometimes, I bet. I really took the name to heart.

"My second name was *Cio* (pronounced SHE-oh), a bird from the prairies, the plains, that does a beautiful dance during mating season. The white man calls *cio* 'prairie chicken.' A lot of imagination there, you know. But we call it *cio* and the word describes the dance and gives you a picture. Indigenous languages always give you pictures. When I was a young man I was given the right to dance and became a champion fancy dancer at some of our traditional Indian dances.

"I was given my third name in 1972 at a July 4th celebration at Porcupine, South Dakota, on the Pine Ridge Reservation three years after I joined AIM. *Oyate Wacinyapi.* Works for the People."

The fourth name selected for Means is one he said that he hoped to earn by becoming an elder. He said it is the name of a very respected leader from the past, a person of great patience and wisdom.

Means says that his desire to become an elder prompted him to seek counseling. "To become patient and wise you can't be an angry person, and I was quite an angry person. My marriage was falling apart, and I didn't want to lose my wife or children."

Means, who said he had very few friendships with white people, was surprised by his experiences in therapy. "I found myself with all these prosperous, rich, powerful white people." Like him, they were in pain. "I thought about the curious thing that makes us all human beings. It's not our pigmentation, not race. It's not our cultures. It's our feelings. We all hurt. We all feel joy. We are all vulnerable. If we recognize that within one another, then race and pigmentation would not separate us the way they do." TW

The entire interview, which includes Means' views on women and on racism, is posted at <www.thewitness.org> or call The Witness *office to request a copy.*

One hand clapping

by Sy Safransky

In 1971, I was hitchhiking around the U.S., searching for answers. I'd just switched my religious affiliation from devout agnostic to confused seeker. Instead of deriding the spiritual life, I was struggling to make sense of it, trying to separate the real from the bogus, the flower from the thorn.

One summer day, I visited a commune somewhere in California. I no longer recall the name of the commune, or what town it was near. I remember walking down a long dirt road to get there. I remember orange groves, avocado trees. I remember a modest clapboard house.

That's where I discovered *Be Here Now.* On a windowsill. Beneath a pair of lacy white curtains. Next to a shiny white commode.

Being an inveterate bathroom reader, I picked it up and started reading. It wasn't great literature, but, from the first page, the book drew me as powerfully as anything I'd ever read. As soon as I could, I bought a copy of my own. Though more than a quarter-century has passed since then, in some ways I've never put it down.

Psychedelic enlightenment

Here was the story of Richard Alpert, a bright Jewish intellectual who, by the age of 30, had climbed to the top of the academic ladder. Though he was a professor of psychology at Harvard and a highly regarded therapist, he felt that something was missing from his life, and that psychology didn't really have a grasp on the human condition. He ate too much, drank too much, and got terrible diarrhea every time he had to lecture. After five years of psychoanalysis, his own therapist had told him, "You are too sick to leave analysis."

In 1961, Alpert was introduced to consciousness-expanding drugs by a new colleague at Harvard, Timothy Leary. On his first trip with psilocybin, Alpert underwent a profound shift in awareness.

Images of his different identities — professor, lover, son — appeared and faded before his eyes. Then his body started to fade away. He panicked, feeling more and more distraught; then, all at once, he was engulfed by a sense of calm. For the first time, he wrote, he sensed his inner self — the universal essence within each person that is "independent of social and physical identity ... beyond life and death." It was the most exhilarating, deeply religious experience of his life.

I studied Ram Dass' spiritual odyssey as if it were a map to some mysterious continent whose existence I'd only recently discovered.

Eventually fired from Harvard because of his experiments with drugs, Alpert spent several years exploring inner realms of consciousness with psychedelics. There were parallels, he believed, between his LSD trips and the enlightenment experiences described in certain Hindu and Buddhist texts. There was also a big difference: No matter how high Alpert went, no matter how ecstatic and transforming his visions, he eventually came down. It was, he wrote, "as if you came into the kingdom of heaven ... and then you got cast out again."

Finding a guru

After six years, and more than three hundred psychedelic trips, Alpert went on a pilgrimage to India, hoping to find someone who could give him more enduring answers. He traveled for several months before encountering Neem Karoli, an old man said to possess extraordinary powers.

Neem Karoli asked Alpert to come closer. He then described what Alpert had been doing the previous evening. He whispered that Alpert had been thinking of his mother, who had died a year earlier. This was true. Then Neem Karoli leaned back, closed his eyes, and said that she had died of an illness of the spleen, something Alpert had discussed with no one in India.

Alpert's mind raced, searching for an explanation, but he couldn't come up with one. When his mother had died the year before, Alpert hadn't even cried, believing that, as a result of his experience with psychedelics, he'd come to terms with death. Now Alpert felt a wrenching in his chest. He bent down, put his head in Neem Karoli's lap, and started to weep. "And I cried and cried and cried," he wrote. "And I wasn't happy and I wasn't sad. It wasn't that kind of crying. The only thing I could say is that it felt like I was home, like the journey was over."

Alpert spent the next six months with Neem Karoli, practicing meditation and yoga, following a strict vegetarian diet, and taking in what he could of the guru's wisdom. Neem Karoli — called by his devotees Maharajji, a common title of respect in India — lived simply, showed no interest in worldly possessions, and gave no lectures. But, for Alpert, just being in this

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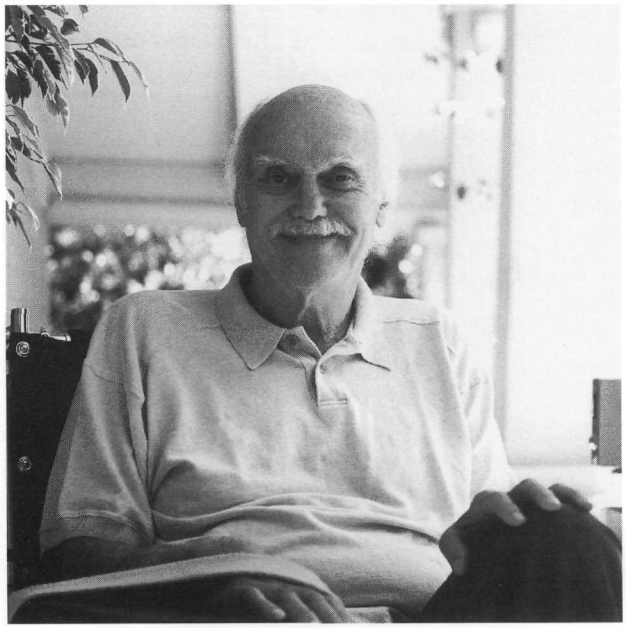
Sy Safransky is editor of *The Sun,* in which a longer version of this essay originally appeared. Ram Dass, who over the years has given away nearly all his money to charitable causes, continues to require expensive round-the-clock care. Donations or requests for his books or tapes may be sent to the Hanuman Foundation, R.D. Medical Fund, 524 San Anselmo Ave., #203, San Anselmo, Calif., 94960 or call (415) 499-8586. Updates on his health are available at <www.ramdasstapes.org>.

man's presence was profoundly moving. It wasn't Neem Karoli's display of paranormal powers that impressed Alpert so much as the intensity of his compassion. The guru seemed to know Alpert's every thought yet embraced him anyway. Never before had Alpert experienced such unconditional love.

'Where's the medicine?'

One night, Alpert came across the LSD he had carried in his shoulder bag to India. He wondered if Neem Karoli could tell him whether psychedelics offered a genuine mystical experience. The next day, before Alpert could say anything, Neem Karoli started teasing him. "Where's the medicine?" he asked. Then Neem Karoli extended his hand. Would the "medicine," he inquired mischievously, give him any special powers? Alpert handed Neem Karoli 900 micrograms of pure LSD, an unusually large dose, and watched as the guru put the pills in his mouth and swallowed. Alpert waited anxiously to see what would happen next. This was the strongest hallucinogen known to humankind. This was a drug that exploded in your brain like the most beautiful, the most dangerous, bomb in the world; sirens should have been wailing.



Ram Dass George Rosenfeld

But Neem Karoli just sat outside all morning, chatting with visitors, drinking tea, and occasionally glancing at Alpert with a twinkle in his eye. That was his answer. Whatever states of awareness LSD made accessible, Neem Karoli lived in without drugs. "Everywhere I had gone with LSD," Alpert wrote, "my guru already was."

Neem Karoli encouraged his followers to "love everybody" and "serve everybody," saying, "The best form in which to worship God is every form." Before Alpert left India, Neem Karoli gave him the name Ram Dass, which, in Sanskrit, means "Servant of God."

Beyond LSD

I studied Ram Dass' spiritual odyssey as if it were a map to some mysterious continent whose existence I'd only recently discovered. A year earlier, I'd taken LSD for the first time; I, too, had experienced a radical shift in consciousness as I'd glimpsed my true self, and tasted the glory at the heart of creation. At the age of 25, I'd begun to believe again — not in the storybook God of my childhood, nor in the existential angst I'd worshiped as an adolescent, but in an infinitely loving intelligence that permeated everything.

LSD was my sacrament. Under the right circumstances, it allowed me to part the curtain of everyday awareness. But, each time, I would come down. The white light would fade, a world shining with the joy of existence would give way to neon signs and honking horns. As Neem Karoli told Ram Dass, drugs may strengthen one's faith in higher states of awareness, but they couldn't be a path to enlightenment. "It's better to become Christ than to visit him," Neem Karoli said, "and your medicine won't do that for you."

I, too, wanted to experience transcendent states without drugs. I, too, wanted more enduring answers. In Ram Dass, I discovered someone who spoke to me in a way that few spiritual teachers could, translating esoteric ideas into an accessible, appealing language as he discussed yogic powers and the great spiritual traditions of the East one moment, and sex, comic books, or American politics the next. I was moved by the core of earnest seeking I felt in him, and impressed by his lucidity. The facile uses to which the phrase "Be here now" has since been put belie the depth and beauty of his message: that the universe is a seamless whole; that behind our seemingly separate bodies and personalities we share one consciousness; that, if we can learn to quiet the chatter of our rational minds and the seductive crooning of our egos, we can begin to connect with the deepest truths about ourselves.

I was fascinated, too, by Ram Dass' transformation from a respected Harvard professor — a man who played the cello, collected antiques, hosted dinner parties, and owned a Mercedes, an MG sports car, a motorcycle, a sailboat, and a Cessna airplane — into a bearded renunciate in a white robe and beads; in his own words, "nobody special."

In the pages of *Be Here Now,* I'd found my first spiritual teacher.

Truth waits for us

The divine mystery is mysteriously purposeful, Ram Dass wrote, even if that purpose is often hard to understand. The next message is always waiting for us; we'll hear it when we're ready to hear it. Timing is everything — and the universe's timing is, well, impeccable. On a summer day in 1971, in a commune somewhere in California, I was reminded that, even as we

search high and low for truth, truth sometimes waits for us, quietly and inauspiciously, until our pants are down around our ankles.

A human hero

Two years later, in North Carolina, I interviewed Ram Dass for the first time.

I was nervous about meeting one of my heroes, worried about the kind of impression I'd make. But Ram Dass greeted me as if we were old friends. He was taller and lankier than I expected, with a bushy beard and clear, intelligent eyes. We sat outside and talked about ego and nonattachment, drugs and meditation, romantic love and divine love. Though Ram Dass knew that the magazine I was interviewing him for didn't even exist yet, he was generous with his time and his answers. He laughed easily, especially at himself. He was wise without affecting a professorial air. Here was a man who communicated something important without acting important.

Finally, I relaxed enough to tell him a little about myself. He listened carefully, neither encouraging nor discouraging my confessions. When I mentioned my experiences with LSD, and complained about the lows that inevitably followed even the most exalted highs, he smiled. "After you've gone through that a few hundred times," he said, "you start to meditate." He hugged me before I left, a big hug from a big man.

I've interviewed him on several other occasions, read all his books, listened to dozens of his tapes. More than any other spiritual teacher I can think of, Ram Dass has been willing to discuss his hang-ups and self-deceptions, to share even the most embarrassing personal stories, no matter how disillusioning they might be. Ram Dass has never claimed to be enlightened — far from it. He's talked frankly about the difficulty of living like an ascetic when he first got back from India, of changing from holy robes to jeans before slipping out for pizza and a beer, of his embarrassment at being recognized as he stood in line to see a porno movie. More genuinely himself in front of an audience than many of us are with our closest friends, he once said, "Ram Dass wants nothing but the joy of being in your presence. Meanwhile, Dick Alpert is saying, 'You want to come up and see my holy pictures?'" If his candor has made him less of a demigod in my eyes, it has at the same time made him more believable, someone who not only speaks the same language I do, but stutters over many of the same phrases.

When Ram Dass became sexually involved 20 years ago with a flamboyant spiritual teacher from Brooklyn — a married woman who claimed to have extraordinary psychic powers — many of his followers were disappointed. They felt that, in making exaggerated claims for her, Ram Dass had deceived and manipulated them. He later insisted this teacher had deceived and manipulated him. After 15 months, he disavowed her teachings and said of the experience, "I was totally seduced by the whole melodrama, like a tourist, open-mouthed, watching a fakir do the Indian rope trick ... Finally, I had to admit that I had conned myself."

Ram Dass once said, "The highest compliment people pay me is, 'Thank you for being so human.' Isn't that an extraordinary compliment?"

In the wake of the controversy, the *New York Times Magazine* attacked Ram Dass as a liar and a charlatan, and a former Harvard colleague accused him of being no less power-hungry and sexually obsessed now than he had been in his days in Cambridge.

Honest about lies

Ram Dass wrote an apology, published in *Yoga Journal*, called "Egg on My Beard." In it, he wrote "Of more significance than my embarrassment is the issue of truth. Maharajji insisted that I tell the truth no matter how embarrassing. For he said, and I believe, that truth will make you free."

But lies come in all sizes; big lies that ruin everything; little lies we carry around like loose change, not really enough to buy anything. Interviewing Ram Dass a decade after his involvement with the controversial teacher, I asked whether he was always completely honest.

He thought for a moment, then said no; he was too enamored of a good story, and was sometimes willing to trim edges to make a story more beautiful. "I'm truthful about the big things," he said, "but not about the little things."

I was disappointed. But I knew how tempting it was to stretch the truth, just a hair's-breadth, for the sake of a story; it was a siren call I had to resist nearly every time I sat down to write.

"But when you're asked a direct question," I pressed, "do you ever find yourself not being truthful then?"

"I won't say a direct lie," he replied, "but I will infer something that could be a lie, make it appear a certain way by the way I use words, take the edge off, take the pain away from myself. I'm working to get straighter and straighter. Sometimes I just don't feel safe enough to be that truthful."

Here was a man who had studied under one of India's great teachers; a man who had chanted and meditated and endured the most rigorous monastic schedules; a man who had studied the Bhagavad-Gita and the Tibetan Book of the Great Liberation, the I Ching and the Tao Te Ching, the Old Testament and the New Testament. And I still couldn't expect total honesty from him?

His honest answer: No.

I knew Ram Dass was human. I just

didn't want him to be that human. Though not old enough to be my father, Ram Dass was still something of a father figure to me. I wanted him to be fearless, though he never claimed to be. I wanted him to be perfectly truthful, but he insisted on being perfectly himself.

Ram Dass once said, "The highest compliment people pay me is, 'Thank you for being so human.' Isn't that an extraordinary compliment? I mean, if I put something on my tombstone, it would be 'He was human.' Isn't that bizarre? After all these years of trying to be holy?"

Perhaps a spiritual teacher didn't need to be a saint to turn on a light for me. Perhaps he just needed to know where the switch was — and to believe less than I did in darkness.

Talk radio

In January of last year, Ram Dass wrote to me saying that, at 65, he was hoping to travel less and start a national call-in talk show on AM radio.

Talk radio! It didn't fit the image I had of one of America's countercultural icons, but the more I thought about it, the more sense it made. Gone were the beard, ponytail and beads; these days, Ram Dass was a casually dressed, clean-shaven man (only the mustache remained), whose audiences were more conventional-looking, too. Most of them had never taken psychedelics or studied Eastern mysticism. ("You can get to God standing on one finger and eating a steak," Ram Dass insisted. "There is no route to God that is the way.") Some radio listeners would likely find his relationship with his guru distasteful, but I knew Ram Dass could handle tough questions.

Ram Dass was still writing and lecturing and, true to his guru's injunction, devoting a great deal of time to serving others. He started the Hanuman Foundation, which has supported spiritual work with prisoners and with the dying. He helped form the Seva Foundation, which has worked to eliminate blindness in Nepal and to aid poor villagers in Guatemala. And he had extended a helping hand to many other, smaller organizations.

Christ, Buddha, Bob Dole

For Ram Dass, individual change and social change have never been mutually exclusive; he's insisted that the spiritual and the political can't be separated. "Suffering hones our relationship with the mystery of the universe," he has said. "If we try to close our hearts to it, we cut ourselves off from the boundless spiritual energy that surrounds us." (During the most recent presidential election, Ram Dass had images of his guru and Christ and Buddha — and Republican candidate Bob Dole — on his meditation altar at home. He said he'd feel his heart open as he greeted the first three, then tighten when he came to Dole. It showed him where his "spiritual homework" was.)

An old sage

National Palace Museum, Taipei, Taiwan, Republic of China

Just as surprising to me as the idea of a radio show was Ram Dass' desire to travel less, to slow down. He's only 65, I thought. Now that I was in my early 50s, 65 no longer seemed that old to me. Maybe Ram Dass had just been weary the day he wrote me; even his handwriting looked less confident than usual. He'd always struck me as a healthy, energetic man, someone likely to keep up a busy schedule for years to come. Naturally, I'd imagined the same about myself: that by dint of right thinking and right effort and the right combination of vitamins and minerals, I'd keep going right up to the finish line, right through my vigorous 60s and 70s and — yes, honey — my vigorous 80s. No, old age wouldn't be a muddy rest stop on a forgotten road. Old age would be a joyous culmination of a life's work, a triumphant final chorus.

A paralyzing stroke

A month after receiving Ram Dass' letter, I was putting the finishing touches on the 256th issue of *The Sun* when the phone rang. It was my friend Van. Ram Dass had suffered a major stroke, he said. It didn't look good. The stroke had left Ram Dass virtually without speech and paralyzed along the right side of his body. It was too soon to say whether he'd recover, or how complete his recovery might be.

I started asking Van questions I knew he couldn't answer — one way to keep bad news from sinking in. I didn't know much about strokes, only that someone could be healthy one day, cheerful and vigorous and full of life, and the next day be reeling as if from an ax blow. I knew that, even if a stroke didn't kill you, you might wish it had — rather than spend the rest of your life unable to go to the bathroom by yourself, unable to finish a sentence, unable to keep your muscles from trembling or spittle from running down your chin, unable to do anything about the pained look in a loved one's eyes.

During the past year, Allen Ginsburg and Timothy Leary — two of Ram Dass' oldest friends — had died. Now Ram Dass had been crippled by a stroke. I knew that none of us would be here forever. Still, the truth of impermanence was like a banner headline I ignored until someone picked up the newspaper and whacked me in the head: Wake up! Maybe I was dreaming I could protect myself against life's uncertainties by eating less, by exercising more. Beautiful dreams.

Eloquent with silence

I called the Hanuman Foundation. I found out that the stroke hadn't affected Ram Dass' memory or his ability to understand what was said to him. He was, however, suffering from "expressive aphasia," an inability to put his thoughts into words.

When the stroke occurred, Ram Dass had been at home in San Anselmo, California, with his portable computer on his lap, rewriting a chapter for an upcoming book on "conscious aging."

For decades, there had rarely been a topic on which Ram Dass had been reluctant to speak. Now he'd been silenced not by a government censor, not by an angry ayatollah, but by a blood clot in the left hemisphere of his brain.

"The paradox," Ram Dass once said, "is that it's all perfect and it all stinks. A conscious being lives simultaneously with both of these."

Ram Dass spent two weeks in the hospital and another two months at a rehabilitation center before being sent home in a wheelchair. "We have no idea what his recovery will ultimately look like," said Marlene Roeder of the Hanuman Foundation.

Three months after the stroke, Ram Dass was interviewed by Don Lattin, a reporter for the *San Francisco Chronicle*. "Reporters often smooth the rough edges of their subjects' quotes," Lattin wrote, "and that's especially the case in this story. But it's also important to understand the degree to which Ram Dass must struggle to convey an idea. For example, when explaining how he must now be eloquent with silence, rather than with words, Ram Dass takes a minute and actually says, 'If you ...if you...like a friend of me, of mine, said...you've been so eloquent...um...aren't you eloquent with words, uh, with silence...eloquent with silence.'"

The stroke and the death of his friends, Ram Dass told the reporter, had helped him understand why so many old people seem to live in the past: Getting older has nothing to offer them.

"Before my stroke," Ram Dass said, "I was looking forward to the things I wanted to do."

"Are you still?" Lattin asked.

"No," Ram Dass replied. "But I'm still committed to being here now."

Spiritual homework

I want to see Ram Dass as he is here and now: not the barefoot pilgrim, not the psychedelic outlaw, not the consummate storyteller sitting cross-legged on stage in front of a thousand admiring faces. It's hard for me to accept that half his body has left town, no forwarding address. But that's *my* spiritual homework. Didn't Neem Karoli say the best form in which to worship God is every form? God isn't in heaven, stroking his beard like some grand chess master. God is right here, right now. God is the luminous mystery at the heart of creation and God is here in the joys and sorrows of the world.

As I write this, Ram Dass is still confined to a wheelchair, though he's learning to walk with a special cane. He can read or write only with great difficulty because his vision was also impaired by the stroke. His speech has improved dramatically and the effects of the aphasia are still apparent.

Everything in life can teach us something, Ram Dass suggested, if we see our lives in spiritual terms. In a sense, Ram Dass has been preparing all his life for this challenge. I'm sure he wishes things were different, but I suspect he's able to observe those wishes for what they are — wishes.

At least he hasn't lost his sense of humor. When a friend jokingly suggested that he go on the lecture circuit with Stephen Hawking, the paralyzed physicist, to help pay his medical expenses, Ram Dass laughed. Then, waving his functional arm in the air, he said, "Finally, the sound of one hand clapping."

Facing heaven and hell

Perhaps it's no surprise that, in the wake of Ram Dass' stroke, I've become more devoted to my own spiritual path. On LSD, I used to race up and down the halls of my psyche trying every single door, and sometimes I'd discover heaven, and sometimes I'd stumble into hell. These days, instead of tearing around the house, I sit in the corner every morning with my eyes closed: Heaven and hell are there; every truth, every falsehood. I've meditated sporadically for years. The difference is now I do it every morning — no matter how I'm feeling, no matter how late I've been up the night before. When the alarm goes off, I don't pretend it's a mistake. The alarm is rude — like birth, like death — but never a mistake.

Ram Dass taught me not to be prejudiced against the invisible. Coax it, he said. Be patient. Everything will reveal itself.

Ram Dass taught me to think in ways I'd never thought before. My thoughts became bigger than my life, and my life changed.

If Ram Dass couldn't always give me what I longed for, that's as it should be. As someone once said, the goal of spiritual practice is to love the pitcher less and the water more. I love the water. And the man who filled my cup, the man whose body is broken now — I love him, too. TW

Youth and age: A view from the Bible

by Carole R. Fontaine

The world from which the biblical witness emerged was not like ours: We are separated from it by time, custom, culture and belief, no matter how seamlessly we may try to live out a biblically inspired faith. To understand how different was the value of youth and old age, we must shed our world with its valorization and commodification of youth, turning our backs on our bottles of Rogaine and tubes of Alpha-hydroxy wrinkle creams. The ancients would have laughed at the way we have reversed the "natural" order of their world for the fleeting tokens of a youthful appearance. As the Book of Proverbs puts it,

A gray head is a crown of glory;
It is gained in a righteous life!

Not exactly what the advertising industries would have us believe!

The valuing of youth and age in the Bible grows directly out of the social development of the societies that give birth to these stories. Small-scale agricultural communities are obsessed with survival — as well they should be, for the continuation of life in such circumstances is not a "given" upon which a group can count, but a blessing to be received and nurtured. In early Iron Age Israel, for example (the time when Israel was settling in Canaan and forming its foundational beliefs), life expectancies were about half as long as those we experience under modern conditions. In order for a family to raise two children to adulthood, at least four must be born; in order for a group to survive, all members were required to be fertile. No wonder such honor was conferred upon parenthood, to mothers and fathers alike: A male did not become an adult until he had married and fathered a child; a woman had little status as an "individual" until she successfully gave birth. Prolonging the time before starting a family would have been considered an aberration of the most primal kind: The individual parents, the extended family, the clan and the tribe all required an ongoing supply of new persons added into their number to ensure viability in relation to working the land. Like all agrarian societies, but exacerbated by the problems of food production in an arid region, Israel needed people if it was to prevail over the disasters of drought, famine, pestilence and war.

Beyond the need for successful reproduction to properly meet the demands of food production so critical to the small village economy, Israel needed more. Like all such peoples in largely other-than-literate societies, Israel required a way of nurturing its children into adulthood, so that the new generation could replicate the technologies appropriate to that group's geographical micro-environment. Growing food in the tribal region of Benjamin was different from what was required in the Galilee. One could not pull up the most recent satellite photos of weather systems off of the Internet in order to respond to nature's ceaseless changes; there was no commodities market well supplied with crop forecasts, global information or local variations. Knowledge — one of the biggest keys to survival in traditional societies — came in a human package, in the form of the elderly. If babies were, for the reasons above, the blessed signs of an auspicious portion from the Lord in Israel's world, then the aged were the key to those children's hope of a future. The wealth of knowledge represented by someone who had survived through mid-life and on into old age was a living testament to God's care for the people. Note how male and female slaves change in value as they progress from infancy to old age in Lev. 27:1-7: While those in the time of their greatest fertility and strength are given the highest valuation, the elderly are clearly a better "investment" than children, with aged women losing less of their value than men of the same category. The jaded saying of our own culture, "Been there, done that," betokening our ennui with repeated experience and our consumerized drive for the new and unusual (which someone just happens to have available to us for only $99.95!), would have had meaning to the biblical world, but not the negative one we assign to it. "Been there? Ah, yes, there is a place to find water for the flock beyond that dried-up river — when I was young, I remember that we sometimes found a seasonal stream beyond that rock. ..." "Done that? Indeed! This is how we have dug our cisterns and repaired our growing terraces ever since our parents came into this land. ..."

We see the ongoing relevance of the aged to the life of the community in both its male and female variations. What village could survive without the elders at the city gate who reviewed legal precedents from their oral traditions in order to sort out the day-to-day squabbles of land tenure or civil rights for the widow? What family could do without the midwives

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whose technical knowledge was passed from mother to daughter, generation after generation? Those fortunate enough to live long could count on the respect of their communities, even when their strength failed and their value as laborers was limited, because they represented public resources of knowledge vital for their people's increase. The old were as necessary to survival as the young, and sometimes more so, for the young are notoriously inexperienced, and, hence, in danger where there was no wisdom to guard them from hazardous follies. The deference due one's parents, one's teachers, the city elders, and the accomplished craftsperson were no idle commands: It was those very people who ensured the prosperity of the young. They had earned their place of honor, and continued to live in the midst of the extended household, sharing their experience, teaching and love with their successors, bound together by a common covenant of interdependence. Take all the old folks away and keep them ghettoized together with no loving grandchildren to be minded and told their family stories, no household family pet to purr beneath their trembling hands, no adult child to tell them how the harvest was going?! Unthinkable!

That is an exile in which the biblical world never participated; to have done so would have been to beggar the future of one of its most essential assets: the witness of human experience. Again and again, we see the Bible bind the generations together: "Grandchildren are the crown of the aged, and the glory of sons is their fathers" (Prov. 17:6); "Young men and maidens together, old men and children! Let them praise the name of the Lord ....!" (Ps. 148:12-13a).

If we wonder why the societies of the Bible do not seem to offer much help for the struggles that beset our families—day care, common shared time, adequate health care, domestic abuse, elder care—

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that is because they had already coped with such issues through their social organization of the multi-generational family. Our families proceed about their business differently, not because women, the ones who traditionally tended the welfare of the household, have deserted their divinely ordained domestic tasks to seek selfish fulfillment in the workplace, however. The problem is with modern economics that have forced people into work outside the home, even when they might choose otherwise; we no longer exist in the self-sufficient family and village units that undergirded the Bible's social world. One paycheck no longer provides adequately for most families, so most family women must work, whether they wish to or not. Further, with the sense of the "good life" so linked to a consumer worldview where "whoever dies with the most toys, wins," no wonder families are always running and striving after wind! The problems with modern families will not be solved through graceful submission of wives and mothers, but by a metanoia concerning what is truly of worth to us, an economic system which is more just to its workers, and health care which is more flexible and based on humanistic values rather than the "bottom line."

Now clearly, the portrait of biblical society set out above reflects the ideal, and the reality may well have been a bit different — or why so very many warnings about honoring the aged and respecting the parents (Exod. 20:12; Deut. 5:16; Prov. 23:22, etc.), were there not some tendency to do otherwise? If "Wisdom is with the aged, and understanding in length of days" as we hear in Job 12:12, no wonder young hot-heads like Elihu chafe under the social customs that require them to defer to those less physically able, but more seasoned in experience (cf. Job 32:6-9). The Bible is clear that the relationship between old and young is not always so rosy, especially where the aged hold the power and social position that youth covets. Young, fertile co-wives scorn the older, barren ones (Gen. 16); the youthful heir yearns for his father's throne and all the power it

confers (2 Sam. 15); sexual abuse of all sorts appears in the Bible's pages, much of it with a familial twist that reminds us there is not much new under the sun where human sin is concerned.

Further, old age, like childhood, in the world of the Bible was viewed as no picnic, no "golden years" of responsibility-free existence because every worker, young or old, was needed.

Moreover, the flesh inevitably breaks down, at worst canceling out all possibilities of pleasure, or at best, severely limiting one's abilities to enjoy one's blessings (Ecc. 12:1-7; cf. 2 Sam. 19:35).

By Ecclesiastes' time in the Persian or Hellenistic age, family responsibilities were viewed by that sage as so onerous that they could make a man (and he does mean men!) forget to celebrate the good things in life (6:3). This biblical voice is well noted for its annoyance that not only can you not take it with you when you go, you may have to leave it to a wastrel idiot who never worked for it! Here the Bible is in clear agreement with the Egyptian Vizier Ptah-hotep who had mourned over a millennium or two earlier, "What old age does to men is evil in all respects!!"

Old age, like poverty in Tevye's saying in *Fiddler on the Roof*, may not be a disgrace, but it's no great honor either!

Throughout the Bible, we hear the plea of the aged, begging God not to forsake them, as family, strength, and health are all too apt to do (Ps. 71; 90), and God's reply in Isaiah 46:3-4 responds to the defencelessness of both the very young and the very old:

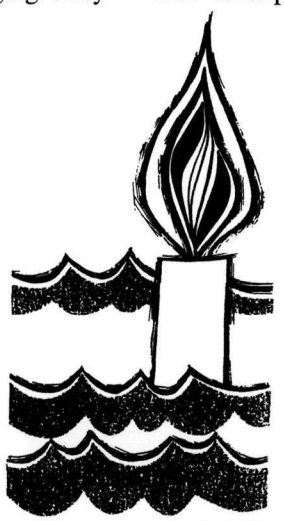
"Hearken to me, O house of Jacob, all the remnant of the house of Israel, who have been borne by me from your birth, carried from the womb; even to your old age I am He, and to gray hairs I will carry you. I have made, and I will bear; I will carry and will save."

That God's oracle should speak so precisely to the human condition, with all its vicissitudes and fears of change, is an indication that here is indeed a threshold of experience to which the modern-day heirs to the Bible must attend. The church may not pass by on the other side, nor consign its old and young to the care of a Providence which sometimes seems to have gone off-duty in the current century. If, as a Job's elderly friend Eliphaz the Temanite tells him, "You shall come to your grave in a ripe old age, as a shock of grain comes up to the threshing floor in its season" (5:26), such a fitting end will not happen by accident. It must be as intentional as the planting, as much tended as the field that grows, as joyfully claimed as the harvest that informs this metaphor of human life. From cradle to grave, the church must ally itself with those who have no other helper but God. A childhood free from want or violence, and a good death free from burden and humiliation: These are biblical birthrights for which we must continue to struggle.

Life is short, and therefore, precious; death is certain, and therefore, pointless to fear—and we are accompanied along the way by the One who brought us from the womb and who receives us at the end. Old and young, we walk the same path together. TW

Celebrating America's elderly as a *resource*

After he and his wife survived life-threatening illnesses, Theodore Roszak began to think hard about aging. They joined a cardiac rehabilitation program and discovered that the participants were all united in their joy to be alive. "This mixture of risk, awe, and gratitude started me thinking about the dramatic changes in life expectancy that have occurred in my time," Roszak writes in *America the Wise: The Longevity Revolution and the True Wealth of Nations* (Houghton Mifflin, 1998).



Marion Honors, CSJ

"Those thoughts grew more searching," he adds, "when, as of the mid-1990s, the media began issuing warnings about the disasters that longevity was threatening to visit upon our society in the years ahead. Social Security ... Medicare ... how could we possibly afford these fiscal horrors? The 'horrors' these pundits seemed to have in view included my survival and my wife's. I winced to hear so many people, many of whom I knew to be smart and well-read, repeating the same words of doom. Up ahead in the 21st century, they saw all these old people devouring our national wealth."

Roszak sees aging Americans as a resource. Each is an individual "who no longer has to worry about raising a family, pleasing a boss, or earning more money." Instead, these people may have the freedom to "think deep thoughts, create beauty, study nature, teach the young, worship what they hold sacred, and care for one another." —*J. W-K.*

Three million 'invisible' seniors begin to organize

by Virginia Ramey Mollenkott

One lesbian senior commented that at the time of the Stonewall Rebellion (1969), "When somebody died, it was like a library burning to the ground." The lack of available history was emphasized at a conference on aging in the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered (LGBT) communities that drew 600 participants in May 1998.Filmmaker Lucy Wines said that "when stories aren't passed on, it is like group suicide."

Delighted surprise erupted in a packed housing workshop when a presenter praised the American Baptist Homes of the West for hiring sensitivity trainers for all their senior residences. I was impressed that during this secular conference there was a great deal of appreciation of any Christian support for the well-being of people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgendered.

The Baptist initiative carried the force of perhaps 50 sermons, falling on that workshop like a rushing mighty wind.

Sponsored by Senior Action in a Gay Environment (SAGE) and Fordham University's Ravazzin Center for Social Work Research in Aging, the conference attracted a diverse cross-section of professionals — social workers, gerontologists, researchers, mental health and other health care workers, LGBT seniors, and lesbian and gay activists concerned about the senior members of the community.

In these heady days of Gay Pride, it is easy to forget that, in almost half of the U.S., LGBT people are still, legally speaking, unapprehended felons. But old LGBTs tend to retain awareness of that fact.

What became painfully obvious is that LGBT seniors are the most under-served aging population in the U.S. It took 35 years for lesbian activists Phyllis Lyon and Del Martin even to get sexual orientation on the agenda of the White House Conference on Aging, partly because of the difficulty of advocating for an invisible and unnamed constituency. Most LGBT people in their 60s, 70s, 80s and 90s — more than three million in the U.S. alone — are deeply closeted for two major reasons: because of the pressures of a society that assumes heterosexuality, and because a great deal of social and psychological gay-bashing goes on at agencies serving the needs of elderly people. In these heady days of Gay Pride, it is easy to forget that, in almost half of the U.S., LGBT people are still, legally speaking, unapprehended felons. But old LGBTs tend to retain awareness of that fact.

The conference featured not only plenaries but also symposia, workshops and strategical planning circles, some of which became the basis for ongoing working committees.

Isolation, a problem for seniors generally, is vastly exacerbated for LGBT seniors, 66 percent of whom live alone after age 65 — twice the number in the general senior population.

A recent survey found that 20 percent of LGBT seniors have no one to care for them should they become ill, as opposed to only 2 percent of heterosexuals. One strategic planning circle emphasized that many LGBT seniors will not go to main-

Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, born in 1932, is a member of both SAGE (Senior Action in a Gay Environment) and OLOC (Old Lesbians Organized for Change). SAGE is actively seeking volunteers to gather LGBT written and oral histories, and is sponsoring a Heritage Portrait Exhibit to put a face on the fromerly invisible elderly in the LGBT community. (SAGE — Senior Action in Gay Environment: Terry Kaelber, Executive Director, 305 7th Avenue, N.Y., N.Y. 10001.) Artist **Michael Bergt** lives in Santa Fe, N.M.

Books:

Long Time Passing: Lives of Older Lesbians edited by M. Adelman. Boston: Alyson, 1986.

Gay and Gray: The Older Homosexual Man, R. Berger. N.Y.: Haworth, 1995 (second edition).

The Oldest Gay Couple in America: A 70 Year Journey Through Same Sex America by G. Harwood. Secaucus, N.J.: Carol Publishing, 1997.

Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Identities Over the Lifespan: Psychological Perspectives by A.R. D'Augelli. NY: Oxford University Press, 1995.

Lumbda Gray: A Practical, Emotional, and Spiritual Guide for Gays and Lesbians Who Are Growing Older by K.W. Reyes, M. Thompson and J. Adelman. Van Nuys, CA: Newcastle, 1993.

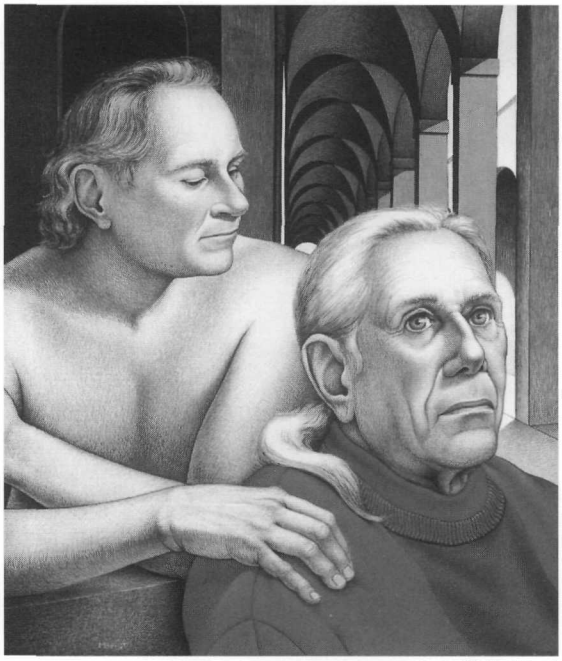
Old Lesbians Organized for Change: P.O. Box 980422, Houston, TX 77098

stream senior centers, or if they do, will not identify themselves as sexual minorities, because many agencies are not supportive and many social workers need sensitivity training.

Many LGBT seniors also will not seek out the assistance of mental health professionals, because mental health licenses still require pathologizing people with a medical (or pseudo-medical) diagnosis. Because of the isolation of LGBTs who grew up in the 1930s, 1940s, or 1950s when their orientation was defined as either sin or sickness, group therapy seems to work best, providing more affirmation and mutual support than individual therapy. (Terry Kaelber, Executive Director of SAGE, points out that SAGE buses and marchers draw great outpourings of love from the sidelines at the annual NYC Gay Pride Parade — and that for many seniors, that response is the first affirmation they have ever received for their sexual identity.)

Housing is a major concern for LGBT seniors, many of whom would like to live in a gay-owned or at least gay-friendly care facility when they can no longer stay in their own homes. In this regard Lisa Hamburger, San Francisco's Senior Housing Consultant, remarked that "Sexual preference deserves the same respect accorded to other accepted differences. A resident should equally and easily be able to request and receive Kosher food, fish on Fridays, or a rainbow flag to hang on Freedom Day." Major housing needs were identified: to interest investment bankers in building LGBT-owned retirement and care facilities; to educate the LGBT community concerning how long it takes to develop a new market, and how to go about doing that; and to provide sensitivity training for staff members at existing facilities, so they would no longer assume and act as if every resident were heterosexual.

Overriding objectives emerging from the conference had to do with breaking down isolation not only of individuals but also of LGBT organizations, so that each group would not be forced to reinvent ways of overcoming obstacles. A web site is being established. A national directory of agencies is being prepared as a resource not only for professionals but for LGBT seniors traveling or moving to unfamiliar towns or cities. Transgender elders are using the Internet to discuss their issues and are forming a national group to set their agenda for further action.



Michael Bergt

Researchers on LGBT aging are networking with the goal of translating their findings into language understandable to non-specialists, language that in turn can be translated into effective social change. church leaders seeking speakers or other assistance for outreach to LGBT seniors are welcome to contact SAGE at its New York headquarters.

Interest in religion and spirituality ran high at the conference. Every registrant's packet contained a list of gay-friendly religious services, something I was glad to see. But at the same time I couldn't help imagining a conference on, say, non-white aging, where it would certainly not be necessary to distribute a list of religious services where non-white people could hope to find a friendly welcome. Not even churches or synagogues on the Religious Right are overtly proud of being racist, but some still flaunt their heterosexism and homophobia!

The workshop on Spirituality and Aging, so crowded that not even standing room remained, had major input from a rabbi, an African-American pastor, a professor of religion, and myself. I was astonished when the room erupted into laughter and applause at the mention of humankind's living within the womb of God the Mother Almighty (Acts 17:28). Somehow I could not have predicted such excited interest from a group of LGBT seniors, gerontologists, and others who serve the non-heterosexual aging population.

People were interested in spirited aging, in identifying with a Self that is larger than the body-identified ego and in getting or staying involved with healing the disease of the U.S. and, indeed, the world. TW

***The following back issues of* The Witness *contain articles which relate to* Learning to be an elder:**

- *Who is mentoring today's young adults? (9/98)*
- *The welfare of children (4/99)*
- *Christians and Buddhist wisdom (6/98)*

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Tibet: a dilemma for Christians in the West

by Dennett C. Slemp

Since China invaded Tibet in 1950, some 1.2 million Tibetans have died by direct force, the consequences of China's imposed agricultural policy (unsuited to the Tibetan climate), imprisonments and other abuses. Tibetans receive long prison terms for any independence activities, even for singing independence songs or putting up posters. Torture in prison occurs all too frequently. There are programs of forced abortions and sterilizations. Large-scale environmental abuses occur. The greatest current threats to the survival of Tibetan civilization are the extensive infusion of ethnic Chinese into Tibet and the investment of vast amounts of money which marginalizes the Tibetan population.

Such activities have been reported for years by Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch/Asia and similar responsible human rights organizations. They have been reported also in the annual U.S. State Department Country Reports on China.

Essentially, cultural genocide is occurring. Tibet is being made Chinese. The government of the People's Republic of China (PRC) apparently hopes that by dominating and assimilating Tibet it will insure its own political stability — in a country with growing unemployment and many ethnic groups, some of which are already restive, an independent Tibet poses a distinct threat.

Buddhism: the heart of Tibetan identity

The heart of Tibetan identity lies in its Buddhist religion. During the Cultural Revolution, the Chinese destroyed all but about 12 of Tibet's 6,000 monasteries and temples. Although many now have been restored, China has placed surveillance committees in monasteries and convents to prevent disapproved political activities. It has imposed a "reeducation" program on the monks and nuns. It has forced them to villify the Dalai Lama and to disavow any allegiance to him. It has removed pictures of the Dalai Lama from the monasteries and convents.

Essentially, cultural genocide is occurring. Tibet is being made Chinese.

During his visit to China in early summer of 1998, U.S. President Bill Clinton spoke boldly and publicly on national television about Tibet. President Jiang Zemin's response gave hope to Tibetans that the PRC would enter into direct dialogue with the Dalai Lama regarding the situation in Tibet and Tibetan autonomy. However, just the opposite has happened. Suppression in Tibet began to increase during late 1998, as did the propaganda attacks on the Dalai Lama. The U.S. State Department stated: "Toward the end of 1998, the Government renewed its campaign to discredit the Dalai Lama and limit the power of religious persons and secular leaders sympathetic to him. Beginning in late fall, Tibet's official newspaper renewed its harsh propaganda against the Dalai Lama with articles condemning his 'separatist activities.' The 'patriotic education' of monks and nuns continued to be an important part of the campaign, and was extended into monasteries throughout Tibet. ... There were reports of imprisonment and abuse or torture of monks and nuns accused of political activism, the death of prisoners, and the closure of several monasteries."

Western church silence

Western churches are cautious about advocating for Tibet, largely, it would seem, out of concern for repercussions on Christians in China by the PRC.

In the 19th century, Western nations grossly abused and humiliated China in the Opium and other wars (and in their settlements) and then in suppressing the Boxer Uprising in 1900. With some justification, the missionary activities of Western churches became identified in the Chinese mind with these experiences. During the Communist takeover, Western Christianity remained suspect. This transferred to the Chinese Christian church. The Maoist government devastated that church, its people and buildings during the Cultural Revolution. Fortunately, since that time the church has established some credibility with the government that Christians can also be loyal Chinese.

However, the Chinese church today has to live within strict governmental guidelines, organizational structures, and policies. A basic guideline is the "Three-Self" program: self administration, self support and self propagation, designed at least in part to prevent foreign influence. Structurally, all Protestant denominations are forcibly merged into one Protestant Church. The only other denomination allowed to exist is the Catholic Church. Both of these denominations are required to be registered with the state. This allows visibility and control. They may not advocate for policies contrary to government policy. As long as these two

Dennett Slemp is a priest in Richmond, Va., <73523.704@compuserve.com>. He became personally involved in the Tibetan issue in 1995, while traveling with a Christian spiritual journey group in Asia which visited the Tibetan Government in Exile Center in Dharamsala, in far northern India.

Vital Signs

"registered" churches live within the government parameters, they are permitted considerable freedom, including the freedom to carry out significant charitable programs.

The national administrative body for the Registered Protestant Church in China is the China Christian Council (CCC). The CCC also serves in a liaison capacity between that church and the Chinese government. The mainline Western Protestant and Anglican churches relate primarily to the Registered Protestant Church through the CCC.

However, not all Chinese Christians are willing to live and minister within either of these Registered churches. They worship and work within illegal "unregistered" churches. Among Protestants at least, these tend to be fundamentalist in orientation. These churches are subject to confiscation of church property and arrest of church leaders and members. Torture and deaths have been reported. Because of governmental control of information, it is difficult to get an accurate assessment of the pain of Christians in the unregistered churches, but there are sufficient reports to warrant attention and concern. Both the registered and the unregistered churches are growing rapidly, which increases the government's apprehension and watchfulness.

Breaking the silence

The Jewish community, and to some degree the Catholic church and the Presbyterian Church USA have begun speaking out about Chinese suppression of Tibet's government and people. The Episcopal Church has also begun to respond. Resolutions have been passed by nine diocesan conventions, one province (representing all the dioceses in the mid-Atlantic states) and, in 1997, by the denomination's General Convention.

The General Convention resolution affirmed the importance of Tibetan culture and religion that teaches nonviolence and peacemaking as a way of life and expressed concern for the safety and future of Tibet's people. It sent greetings of affection to the Dalai Lama and encouraged the Episcopal Church to engage in dialogue with Buddhists through the Presiding Bishops's Committee on Interfaith Relations or other venues. It sent warm greetings of affection to the CCC and expressed a desire for further dialogue with the CCC to develop deeper ties and to seek a better understanding of the situation in China and Tibet. It encouraged the Archbishop of Canterbury to insure representation from the CCC to the 1998 Lambeth Conference. It expressed "a hope for the development of direct dialogue between representatives of the People's Republic of China and the Dalai Lama and/or representatives of the Dalai Lama, leading to an increased understanding and respect between the Tibetan and Chinese people."

Western churches are cautious about advocating for Tibet, largely, it would seem, out of concern for repercussions on Christians in China by the People's Republic of China.

Prior to the passage of the General Convention resolution, a much stronger resolution had been proposed. That resolution called on the PRC to cease immediately human rights abuses, population transfers of Chinese into Tibet, interference in Tibetan religion and to demilitarize Tibet. It called on the PRC to recognize Tibet's autonomy, cooperate with the establishment of Tibet as a Zone of Peace (as proposed by the Dalai Lama), and to provide full access to United Nations' observers. It called on the U. N. to monitor the above actions and the U.S. government actively to support them. It requested the Presiding Bishop to meet with the Dalai Lama, together with leaders of other U. S. religious bodies, to discuss what further support might be provided. Finally, it requested the Anglican Consultative Council, the Lambeth Conference, and the member churches of the Anglican Communion and their dioceses to pass similar resolutions and take similar actions.

CCC/Three-Self response

Informed of this resolution, the China Christian Council, together with the National Three-Self Committee, issued a very strong "Statement on Tibet" which warned churches in the West not to pass such resolutions lest it severely damage the relationship between the Chinese church and Western churches. It condemned "biased groups" which "view the current world situation through cold war eyes." The statement continued: "Unfortunately, some churches and church groups overseas have been influenced by such views and have felt the need to echo them, churning out opinions and wishing to pass some sort of resolution on the Tibetan question and to make accusations against new China. The 'facts' on which these accusations are based are anti-China propaganda and a complete distortion of reality. They slander the peaceful liberation of Tibet as a 'Chinese invasion' which 'led to the deaths of 1.2 million Tibetans.' They further claim that 'in an effort to uproot Tibet's own cultural and religious traditions a great number of Han Chinese immigrants were brought in who now outnumber the native Tibetans.'

"We sincerely hope that insightful persons in churches and church groups overseas, relying on their God-given wisdom and sense of justice, will oppose this detrimental current of opinion among international Christian circles, offering no support to the Dalai clique's plot to split the Chinese nation, and that God's justice may truly prevail. If this dark trend wins out, it will greatly offend the sensibilities of Chinese Christians and do great damage to relations between the Chinese Church and churches and church groups overseas."

The CCC clearly was worried. Through a trip arranged by the national office of Peace and Justice Ministries of the Episcopal Church, I was enabled to travel

to Nanjing to talk with Han Wenzao, the new President of the CCC, about the Tibetan concern. Although he was personally most gracious and hospitable, I found that his position on Tibet was congruent with the CCC/Three-Self statement and, more importantly, consistent with a Chinese government statement on Tibet that I had downloaded from the Internet before leaving for China. He warned that a strong resolution by the General Convention would create problems for the Protestant Church in China.

Han's concerns strongly influenced the shaping of the General Convention resolution ultimately passed. The strength of this resolution, however, was that, while expressing concern for the Tibetan people, it reached out in relationship to both the Dalai Lama and the CCC and affirmed the importance of dialogue and being well-informed. It also said more than it seemed to say. By calling for direct dialogue between the Dalai Lama and the PRC Government "leading to increased understanding and respect between the Tibetan and Chinese people," it gave support to the Tibetan effort for direct dialogue around the issue of "autonomy," without actually using that incendiary word.

Episcopal Church response

Following up on this resolution on Tibet and on one other resolution (that called for dialogue with the Church in China), four representatives from the national Episcopal Church met in Nanjing in early summer, 1998 with the leadership of the CCC. They discussed issues of human rights and policies of U.S. companies doing business in China.

In the spring of 1998, 11 Episcopal bishops sponsored a resolution on Tibet to the international Lambeth Conference of Anglican Bishops. The conference, however, never formally acted upon it. Another resolution will be presented to the next meeting of the Anglican Consultative Council.

Tough dilemma

I believe the churches are called to face into the Tibetan dilemma and wrestle with it openly and deeply, because it truly is their dilemma as well. The parable of the Good Samaritan validates the cry for help not by kinship, proximity, security, convenience or creed but by the need and pain of the most vulnerable person/community that is crying out. If we interpret this parable only individualistically and not also corporately as whole church bodies relating to other whole communities in distress, we miss much of its point for today.

The churches will have to wrestle with the tough dilemma of whether they will risk creating problems for the vigorous and growing Christian churches in China in order to help save the rapidly perishing Buddhist civilization in Tibet.

There is a Buddhist story about a monk who was walking beside a stream. He looked in the water and saw a scorpion stranded on a leaf floating by and about to drown. The monk climbed on the limb of a tree out over the water, reached down, grabbed the scorpion, and put it on the dry land. In the process, the scorpion stung him. A companion walking with him said, "Don't you know it is the nature of a scorpion to sting?" He answered, "Yes, but it is my nature to save." If the churches do not find some way to try to save, or at least to comfort, they, too, will deny their very nature, while reducing the substance of their interfaith dialogues and relations. I pray that many denominations and churches will look closely at the Tibetan situation and find a way to respond in compassion.

Easily accessible sources on the Tibetan situation are: International Campaign for Tibet — ask for the new video of Archbishop Tutu and other Nobel Prize winners speaking on the issue of the Panchen Lama and Tibet, 202-785-1515, <www.savetibet.org>; Amnesty International, 212-633-4200; Human Rights Watch/Asia, 212-972-8400; Time-Life's video on Tibet ("Lost Civilizations" series), 800-621-7026.

Urban Caucus meets in Jackson

The 19th annual assembly of the Episcopal Urban Caucus held in Jackson, Miss., this past February offered participants a strong sampling of local ecumenical efforts in the areas of economic and racial justice. Welcomed by the Episcopal Bishop of Mississippi, Chip Marble, along with the state's Roman Catholic and United Methodist bishops, who regularly work together to advocate for the victims of "welfare reform," the group dined at the Stewpot, Jackson's daily food service ministry to poor people, and toured the sites of John Perkins' "Voice of Calvary Ministries." Perkins, the author of *With Justice for All* (1982), is the inspiration of a movement for Christian community development throughout the U.S. His three point program — relocation, reconciliation, and redistribution — unites social and racial justice concerns with economic justice issues and a radical focus on neighborhood.

Assembly participants were briefed on the recently formed Amos Network, a community organizing effort of Jackson's local religious community affiliated with the Industrial Areas Foundation, and on the Algebra Project, a ministry with school children pioneered by Robert Moses, whose activism in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) during the Civil Rights period is well-known. Moses' work is based on the premise that anyone who can count can learn algebra. He further argues that the Algebra Project is a tool for community organizing: As children realize their capacity to learn, they also increase their capacity to demand better schools, qualified teachers, and enriched opportunities for themselves and their peers.

EUC participants also heard from Bennie Thompson, U. S. Representative from the Delta District, who had been chased by police dogs from the State Capitol as a student at Tugaloo College. Now, in Congress, he advocates for African-American farmers and workers' rights in the "global marketplace."

The center of the EUC's attention in Jackson was anti-racist ministry, a topic which has been the group's leading focus for the past eight years. The work of the EUC's Ed Rodman, Charlie Virga and Sandra Peters, along with the "King Day Dialogues" (originally sponsored by EUC and occasionally supported by the national church), has now been incorporated as The National Institute for Dialogues on Multi-Culturalism & Anti-Racism.

As usual, the Episcopal Peace Fellowship held its annual luncheon in the context of the EUC assembly, and this year, for the second time, the Episcopal Network for Economic Justice (ENEJ) met in conjunction with the Caucus. The networking among Episcopalian activists that such joint meetings makes possible is an essential element in the growth of a progressive movement within the church.

— Emmett Jarrett, TSSF (A priest serving in Georgia, Jarrett is a member of The Witness' *Vital Signs advisory group.)*

Doss resigns as bishop of New Jersey

After years of confrontation and polarization with his diocese, Joe Morris Doss resigned as Bishop of New Jersey on March 12.

The resignation takes effect in the fall of 2001 but Doss will take a "sabbatical leave of absence" beginning no later than June 30 or as soon as an interim bishop is appointed.

Doss said that he wasn't resigning because of the lack of support, or because of a continuing investigation of his financial stewardship, but because he couldn't provide leadership for "the battered and beleaguered diocese." He said that he had come to the conclusion that he was "in the way" of a process of healing and reconciliation.

Challenges to his leadership have plagued Doss almost from the time of his election in 1994. Despite the use of an outside consultant and a diocesan wellness committee, the confrontation escalated into calls for the bishop's resignation from the Diocesan Council and Standing Committee.

A recent attempt by Presiding Bishop Frank T. Griswold to mediate a plan calling on Doss and diocesan leaders to "exert every reasonable effort to maintain a professional and collegial relationship with each other" in return for the early retirement of the bishop in 2002 was not accepted by the diocesan representatives. They demanded that the bishop leave as soon as possible, promising a generous separation package.

The package includes full salary and benefits until retirement and additional payments to his pension, $200,000 for the educational costs of his two children, $150,000 for the mortgage on his home, $30,000 moving expenses, $20,000 to replace his automobile, and a payment of $100,000 "payable at any time within the next three years at the bishop's request." Diocesan officials admitted that they were not sure how they could implement the package since financial support for the diocese has been eroding. Revenues for 1998 were $1.5 million, according to the treasurer, Peter Hausman. The diocese has paid only a fraction of the $500,000 it usually sends to the national church in the last few years.

"I'm aligned with the group that wanted him to leave, but I don't think we can celebrate," said Alan French, head of the Standing Committee, in an interview with the Newark *Star-Ledger*. "It's been a horrible ordeal. ... I think it's a tragedy, but it's a tragedy that he brought on himself. Lots of other people were harmed over these years. Careers were destroyed."

A Doss supporter said that it was "a combination of exhaustion, pressure and a careful assessment of what is possible for him to do and what is not possible" that led to the resignation.

—James Solheim, Office of News and Information for the Episcopal Church

Alabama murder of gay man

Episcopalians in Alabama joined public outrage over the February 19 murder of a "quietly gay man" in Sylacauga, a small town about an hour's drive from Birmingham.

Henry Parsley, Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Alabama, called the murder a "tragedy," adding that "this sad event in our state reminds us all of the terrible consequences of prejudice and hate in our life together." He added, "Let us pray that it will spur us to deeper tolerance and understanding in our human differences."

A pair of local construction workers confessed to the crime, admitting that they killed Gaither because he was a homosexual, according to the sheriff's office. Charles Butler and Steven Mullins were charged with murder. They admitted that they lured him from a local bar, beat him with an ax handle, put him in the trunk of his car, drove to a secluded spot on the banks of Peckerwood Creek, beat him again and then set his body on fire in a pile of discarded tires.

Many people compared the crime with the murder of Wyoming college student Matthew Shepard. Alabama's hate crime legislation does not cover sexual orientation, only racial and religious persecution, but a legislator has announced his intention to introduce an amendment.

The Alabama Integrity chapter, an Episcopal Church gay/lesbian advocacy group, deplored the failure of a Hate Crimes Resolution at the diocesan convention only a week earlier. The resolution didn't even make it out of committee, said Ron Gatlin, convener of the chapter.

In a letter to deputies and alternates to the Episcopal Church's General Convention, Pamela P. Chinnis, president of the House of Deputies, said that "as people of conscience we must take action against murderous prejudice wherever it appears in our churches and communities."

Enclosed with her letter was a new "Stop Hate" brochure produced by the Episcopal Church's Peace and Justice Office. The brochure will be sent to all parishes.

—James Solheim, Office of News and Information for the Episcopal Church

Alternative service for drafted dollars

by Marian Franz

[As this issue of The Witness *goes to the printer, NATO forces are bombing Yugoslavia, prompting protests (both categorical and hesitant) from denominational leaders and faith-based organizations and councils. Perhaps, in addition to prayer, there is more that Christians and other persons of faith can do to register their deepest convictions.]*

Do you find praying for peace while paying for war a contradiction? If so, you're not alone. We at the National Campaign for a Peace Tax Fund often receive copies of letters sent to Members of Congress such as this one:

"To continue freely participating with my tax dollars in the suicidal armaments race is clearly for me a sin on at least four counts. First, the sin of premeditated murder against my brothers and sisters; second, the sin of suicide against my own person; third, the sin of injustice against over 25 percent of earth's people who are homeless, ragged, hungry and sick through no fault of their own; and lastly, the sin of idolatry for trusting in armaments rather than in Jesus Christ. God said, 'Thou shalt have no strange Gods before Me.' Let it be clearly understood, I must never voluntarily pay these war taxes, war interest and war penalties!!!"

We have witnessed a dramatic increase of citizen support for the peace tax fund, one that goes far beyond the historic peace churches.

Refusing to pay taxes is a true act of courage. Citizens risk fines and jail sentences to follow their beliefs and withhold taxes that support war. Many impoverish themselves and their families rather than be legally bound to pay such taxes. Despite these hardships, a small but growing number of people are refusing to pay that portion — roughly 50 percent — of their income taxes that supports war.

Tax protestors are acting out of their commitment to one of America's highest ideals: religious freedom. Indeed, my own family immigrated to the U.S. in search of this freedom. But religious freedom was to prove illusory. A relative of mine was one of hundreds of conscientious objectors (COs) who went to prison rather than fight during World War I. COs then were not only imprisoned but were often mistreated. If they refused to wear an army uniform, for example, they were severely punished. My relative was one of 16 COs who died in prison. His body was sent home for burial *in uniform*. The family buried their son in his own clothes and moved to Canada.

Today, COs in our country are not sent to war. Yet how can the conscience be still? U.S. military spending is now $8,271 per second; $725,274,725 per day; $5,076,923,076 per week. And still, we're told that's not enough. This year, $9 billion was added to the military budget, with another $12 billion next year and $110 billion in the next six years.

At the National Campaign for a Peace Tax Fund, we are promoting a way that will permit sincere COs to pay their full tax obligation without violating deeply held religious or ethical beliefs. The Religious Freedom Peace Tax Fund Bill in the U.S. Congress seeks to restore freedom of religion to taxpayers whose convictions forbid participation in war, whether that participation is physical or financial. Just as World War II provided alternative service for drafted soldiers, the peace tax fund provides "alternative service for drafted dollars."

We have witnessed a dramatic increase of citizen support for the peace tax fund, one that goes far beyond the historic peace churches to include mainline denominations and conservative religious bodies. Many supporters are by no means pacifist, but are appalled at the infraction of religious freedom. Around the world, 18 nations now have similar peace tax campaigns. These campaigns will meet together in Washington, D.C. in July 2000.

The moral witness must be made. As Supreme Court justice Harlan Fiske Stone said: "It may well be questioned whether the state which preserves its life by a settled policy of violation of the conscience of the individual will not in fact ultimately lose it by that process." TW

Keeping Watch

Marian Franz is director of the National Campaign for a Peace Tax Fund. This article first appeared in NETWORK Connection, a publication of NETWORK, A National Catholic Social Justice Lobby in Washington, D.C. New members can join NETWORK for $35. Contact NETWORK at 801 Pennsylvania Ave., SE, Suite 460, Washington, D.C. 20003; 202-547-5556; <network@networklobby.org>; <www.networklobby.org>.

Living for change

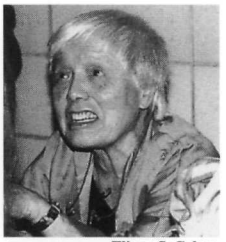
by Nkenge Zola

***Living for Change* by Grace Boggs, University of Minnesota Press, 1998.**

It was quite a jumble of experience to have my re-reading of Detroit activist Grace Lee Boggs' autobiography *Living for Change* interposed with the voice or sight of Grace herself. Here I am, just getting going on the passages that describe Grace as a girl child subject to the predilictions of her Chinese heritage. ("When I cried, the waiters used to say, 'Leave her on the hillside to die. She's only a girl ...' Later they told me this as a kind of joke ... it was no laughing matter.") Next thing the phone rings. It's Grace, exuberantly sharing an observation or an offer of her chicken soup.

Decades after first meeting Grace, I remain dazzled by the quality of her energy and commitment to politics as excellence. Perhaps her most indispensable quality, present throughout the book, is her ability to pose questions. Her simple query can require a respondent to back up before answering.

In writing, as in living, Grace expresses herself clearly — *sans* superfluous word or confused emotion. Reflection and recollection co-mingle. It seems impossible but in nine chapters we learn a whole heap of a lot about this woman and the times she has inhabited; what living in the household of her restauranteur father was like; what was required of her, being one of three people of color on the Barnard College campus in 1934; how she identified with her father rather than her mother; her discovery that to have a philosophy was as serious as your life, but that to develop oneself as a philosopher could be among the most exhilarating of challenges; what qualities black people contributed to the humanity of the U.S. Even as a youth Grace Boggs lived as though ideas, passion, focus and clean common sense were the equivalents of bread, rice, water and good health.



Elinor S. Cohen

Grace Boggs

Through *Living for Change* we become fellow travellers through significant social events, told through the vision of a woman who recognizes the value of a life of learning. She's maintained friendships over three, four, five and six decades and is open to making new ones every day. Her longer friendships weave throughout the book in Freddie Payne, Carol Ferry, Louis Tsen.

The Great Depression, world wars, radical responses to each and all — these are told with the same clarity as the events that have made her adoptive home of Detroit both democracy's arsenal and the crucible for new ways of exercising community into the next century.

Political activism and personal relationships with individuals such as the brilliant West Indian thinker and activist C.L.R.James, and her Alabama-born partner and husband of some 40 years James Boggs, are not spared her piercing analysis. Her realization after James' death that she was on her own meant that she could and would continue with what she loves — the politics of transformation.

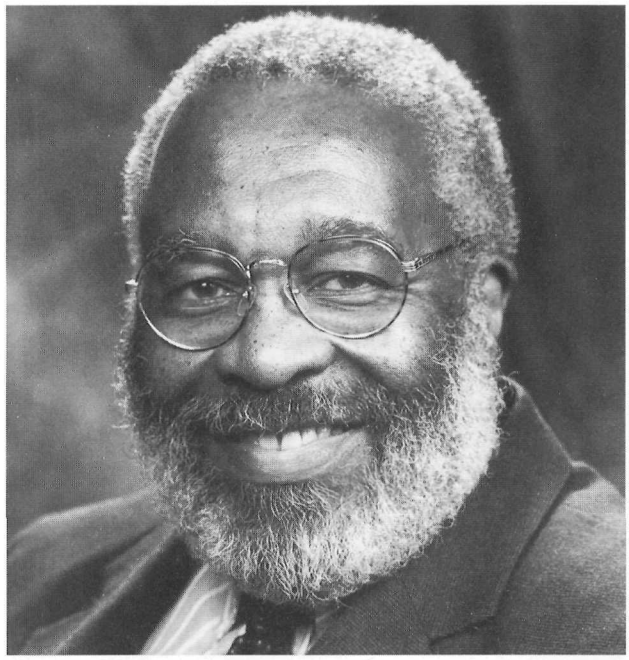
Yet, it is in the very beginning of the book that Grace reveals a most essential means by which her lively spirit is preserved. And it is in these words that any questing human can also find a most necessary admonition against the seductive malaise of self pity and victimhood: "My father ... never saw himself as a victim. Life to him was an adventure through which you are constantly learning and growing from your failures as well as your successes." It is this passage in *Living for Change* that I find most liberating. Because of the general dissolution of community and family life in the U.S., ironically following the social activism culminating in the 1960s, it is so easy for today's young people, and, indeed those who were young at the time of the great movement, to shine personal hardships into a badge that blinds one from their own experience.

Since Boggs is founder of Detroit Summer, a program for youth dedicated to the re-spiriting and rebuilding of Detroit, it is not surprising that listening to the reflections of older — okay I'll say it — ELDERS — is key to the daily practice of the young people who in July come from all over the nation to make murals, urban gardens and metamorphose vacant, littered lots from eyesores to neighborhood parks.

Living for Change is definitely the story of a political life, yet readers without the least interest in politics will find in this 84-year-old's account 20th-century enrichment to carry them into the 21st. TW

review

Nkenge Zola is news anchor and reporter for WDET, Detroit's public radio.



Vincent Harding

"We are greatly imperiled when we put sitting in front of a screen higher than sitting with each other."

Accepting the mantle of mentor

by Rose Marie Berger

There is no more delightful place to be than in a room with Vincent and Rosemarie Harding. Their spirits are full, engaging and expansive. They insist on calling you by your whole given name so that they may speak with the essence of who you are, not your superficialities. For the 40 years of their marriage they have been witnesses to continuing in the struggle, both as a couple and as freedom fighters for justice.

As an elder, Vincent Harding is right where he needs to be, at the connecting place where old and young meet. As a professor of religion and social transformation at Iliff School of Theology he has the opportunity to

teach and listen to younger folks. He hears from them a deep hunger for mentors and elders.

"They are looking for connectedness to their history," Harding says, "Whether racial history or the history of those who have been involved in the struggle. The younger ones want to know where they fit in that history.

"They also want a sense of purpose beyond their most narrow individualistic career. They have an urging in them to know that they are for something beyond ordinariness. They want someone to help lift up that desire and help them see it more clearly. And they really want to hear the stories that the elders can tell."

As both an elder and an historian, Harding has lots of stories to tell, both his own and others. He considers it a privilege to reflect on those who mentored him.

"The first person who comes to mind as a mentor is my mother, Mabel Broome Harding. She was a mentor without any education or training. She went to school through the eighth grade in Barbados and always had a very high regard for education. She encouraged me in the area of schooling and churching without being officious about it.

"One of my high school biology teachers, a Jewish woman named Irene Berger, was also clearly a mentor. She never allowed the fact that I was a child of a single mother on welfare to stand in the way of my possibilities. She helped me get my first after-school and summer jobs. I could always talk to her. She had the gift of availability.

"Another very important person was my pastor, Philip J. Bailey of the Victory Tabernacle Seventh Day Christian Church in Harlem. Pastor Bailey originally came from Jamaica and was a self-taught preacher man. He was grooming me to come after him in the ministry. It was a sad time when, after college and the army, I decided to go another way with my life rather than fill his shoes. He was a model in education and in ministry.

"The last person to mention as a mentor is Howard Thurman. When I was working on the founding of the Martin Luther King Memorial Center, Mrs. King introduced me to Howard Thurman. He became my adopted father, my pastor, and my spiritual guide. He helped me through some very tough times when I

Witnesses, the quick and the dead

Rose Marie Berger is an assistant editor for *Sojourners* magazine, <rberger@sojourners.com>.

was really struggling as a result of my own foolishness. He always told me that I was loved and respected and that he expected great things from me even in the midst of struggle."

To really enter into an eldering or mentoring relationship requires a willingness to reflect deeply on one's own experience and draw out what is most helpful. It also requires willingness to accept the fact that the world around us needs elders and accept the calling of one's own age and experience. When Harding passed 60 people came up to him unabashedly and asked if he would mentor them, even people he didn't know. It has pressed him to reflect deeply on the place of elders and mentors in our society today.

"The most natural place for the elder," Harding believes, "is that place where he or she can be in the teaching role. Not teaching with any sense of arrogance, but teaching out of gratitude for the opportunity."

There are numerous challenges that threaten eldering and mentoring relationships in the U.S. One, says Harding, is the increasing dispersion of our lives, especially in the African-American community. Where the black church was once a pillar of the community and strongly inter-generational, he now sees a trend toward divisions by both class and generation.

"One way of dealing with this dispersion," Harding says, "is addressing its root causes and creating substitutes for the dispersed family and community. I start all my classes by asking students to say where they spent their childhood. Most tell of being in families with no geographic stability. How many of our societal institutions — military, business, or the church — encourage dispersion, as if stability were not an important value?

"Another great challenge facing the nurturing of these relationships is the entertainment industry. When we embrace the values of an entertainment culture, we disrupt the rituals of family and community. We are greatly imperiled when we put sitting in front of a screen or machine higher than sitting with each other."

"The major role of the mentor is to encourage, to let people know that they are magnificent and that they have magnificent possibilities."

In 1997, Rosemarie and Vincent Harding and their daughter Rachel Harding began working with others to form the Gandhi-Hamer-King Center for the Study of Religion and Democratic Renewal at the Iliff School of Theology in Denver, Colo. An essential part of the Center ís work is videotaping public interviews with veterans of various struggles for freedom and equality in the U.S. as well as pro-democracy movements from around the world. The Center is a mentoring organization.

"We bring the elders to a public place where they can be met, touched, and encountered by younger people. We are also developing retreats where we bring the generations together to meet, eat together, and tell stories. A few months ago we had Sonia Sanchez at the Center and both my daughter Rachel and myself interviewed her, so we had two different generations interviewing her from our own perspectives. This was really quite amazing."

During a taping with Civil Rights activist C.T. Vivian, a young man from an African country in the midst of great strife stood up. He told about his many years as a pastor in his country until he lost all hope that there could ever be positive change in his homeland. With this loss of faith he left the struggle and came to the U.S.. As he listened to C.T. Vivian his belief began to be restored. He said, "I now know that I have to return to the struggle to bring peace to my country, but I also know that it will cost me my life."

These are some of the results of mentoring. The Hardings are feeling an increased responsibility to be elders beyond their immediate relationships. They are searching for ways to share their experiences with an extended community who hungers to know its place in history. Harding concludes, "The major role of the mentor is to encourage, to let people know that they are magnificent and that they have magnificent possibilities." TW

We're grateful for your support

This month subscribers will be receiving a letter from John Zinn, treasurer of The Episcopal Church Publishing Company, asking for financial support for *The Witness*. As Zinn notes in his letter, this is our one-time annual request for gifts and donations in support of our efforts to raise consciousness about — and stimulate faithful, effective response to — the social, economic and environmental issues of these times. This year's fundraising appeal occurs as we are completing our selection of a full-time Development/Marketing Director to help expand *The Witness'* reach. We're hopeful about the future and grateful for our subscribers' aid and companionship on the journey.

— *J. W-K. and J.W.* (Requests for ECPC financial reports may be directed to Zinn c/o *The Witness'* Detroit office.)

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