"THE REVOLUTION BEGINS IN THE HEART"
EXPLORING THE SPIRITUAL LIVES OF WOMEN
ACTIVISTS FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

by

ANNA J. TREADWAY
B.A., Carleton College, 1996

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Abstract

In recent years, scholars in the field of education have begun to discuss the relevance of spirituality to teaching and learning. Yet the topic of spiritual activism is still largely uncharted in the literature—and the studies that do explore it tend to overlook the lived experiences of everyday activists in the contemporary setting. Similarly, while scholars document the misuse of “spirituality” by the Religious Right, very few specify how progressives actually conceptualize, articulate and integrate spiritual concepts into their work and lives more broadly.

As such, this project investigates the motivations and life experiences that inspire the social justice activism of five women from Seattle, Washington. Focusing specifically on the relationship between spirituality and social justice, my primary research questions are:

1. What motivates, inspires and sustains women’s activism for social justice?
2. To what extent do participants frame activism as a spiritual calling? What do their spiritual lives add to their activism, and vice versa?
3. Do they experience tensions between their spiritual paths and their political work? If so, what are these challenges and how do they navigate them?

I employ a critical feminist framework that recognizes personal experience as the foundation of theory, and honors those parts of us that have been silenced in many academic circles, including spiritual inspirations and traditions. Using narrative inquiry, I completed in-depth interviews with five women from diverse activist and spiritual traditions, and share their stories through my written text. I also use autobiographical techniques such as personal narrative and reflection to write my own memoir as a spiritual activist.

In short, this research uncovers stories of spiritual practice as forms of renewal, creativity, knowledge, agency and “sacred interconnectedness” in the lives of its participants. It also finds that despite occasional tensions between spiritual and political paths, these women experience an overall seamlessness between the two. As such, I argue that spirituality is not an escape from politics; rather, it is a kind of activism, as to engage with “spirit” offers the inspiration, hope and power needed to envision and enact liberating alternatives to political and social problems.
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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

A few weeks ago, my parents and I were heading back to Seattle from the Olympic Peninsula, after a short holiday together. My mom drove, I sat next to her in the passenger seat, and Dad was in the back with his maps spread across his lap. As the Washington coastline swirled past through my windows, I noticed this trip felt quite different than many the three of us had taken before—mostly because I’d been feeling quite grateful for my parents as of late, and this energetic shift made our time together much richer and more fun. Glancing over at my mom as she drove, I realized this gratitude stemmed largely from the deep reflecting I’d done in recent months about spiritual activism—the topic of my thesis research—and the many ways my parents had shaped this interest and passion in me.

Our drive seemed like a perfect opportunity to learn more about those who fostered similar commitments in my mom and dad—so I asked them to share some stories about their parents. Though I’d certainly heard about my grandparents’ activism before, I was inspired to learn more of the details. How my grandma and grandpa Treadway, for instance, met while working as teachers at an all-Black high school in Virginia—the only white teachers there—in the late 1920s, and found romance through a shared commitment to racial justice in a time and place where this was a very unpopular stance to take. How my grandpa Wilbur, who, with my grandma, ran a Quaker relocation hostel for interned Japanese-Americans during the War, and was thrown off his neighbors’ porches by men shouting, “You better not bring any of those damn Japs in my neighborhood!” How I had great-great-great grandparents who, as Quakers, freed their slaves in North Carolina and moved to Illinois in the 1840s because they refused to support slavery. And Dad even slipped in an anecdote about his refusal to sign a loyalty oath promising he was not a Communist on his passport.
application in the late 1950s—and nearly lost his chance to study abroad in France as a result.

As my folks and I continued driving towards Seattle, they went on to share other tales of courageous action by their parents, as well as stories about other members of our extended family. Listening, I felt proud to call these relatives my own, realizing they committed to racial and social justice despite often significant personal consequence. From what I could gather, their passion for “right” action seemed stronger than the desire to fit in, to be liked, to travel abroad, or even for their families to be safe. It seemed they somehow knew the risks they were willing to take would one day be worth it, their discomforts and fears small sacrifices to make in a process towards collective evolution and healing. It was as if there was a still, small voice guiding and directing their actions—a voice louder than angry neighbors or political propaganda, one my elders could return to when name-calling heated up or violence escalated, or when they felt overwhelmed by the backlash.

I recount this story of our drive back to Seattle not because I wish to paint a heroic picture of my family; rather, my intention here is to begin to uncover the passion, hope and vision that inspire those on a journey towards social justice. In the midst of the darkness—the unspeakable injustices of slavery or the internment, for instance—there were, and are, those who feel no choice but to object; to take significant risk; and to find their solace in an open heart, compassionate action, and incremental changes. Though these individuals may never see the direct result of their actions, to do otherwise simply makes no sense. As Solnit (2004) articulates:

Causes and effects assume history marches forward, but history is not an army. It is a crab scuttling sideways, and a drip of soft water wearing away stone, an earthquake breaking centuries of tension. Sometimes one person inspires a movement, or her words do decades later; sometimes a few passionate people change the world;
sometimes they start a mass movement and millions do; sometimes those millions are
stirred by the same outrage or the same ideal and change comes upon us like a change
of weather. All that these transformations have in common is that they begin in the
imagination, in hope. To hope is to gamble. It’s a bet on the future, on your desires,
on the possibility that an open heart and uncertainty is better than gloom and safety.
To hope is dangerous, and yet it is the opposite of fear, for to live is to risk (4).

For those called to act against injustice, there is hope and faith amidst the uncertainty, there is
comfort and beauty amidst the struggle. And if the stories of my forbearers are any
indication, there is a voice that reminds activists of their power to make a difference—no
matter how small, or how slowly.

Yet, pausing for a moment, how is such conviction really possible? At present, the
social, political and environmental crises we face as humans are quite serious. The economic
gap between the world’s rich and poor, for instance, is currently more extreme than ever
(Global Policy Forum, 2005); at least one in four women is abused by an intimate partner in
her lifetime (Sorenson & Wiebe, 2004); more African-American men are now in jail than in
college (Pearson Education, 2005); and overpopulation, environmental pollution, and
weapons of mass destruction threaten the survival not only of human beings but of all life on
the planet (Cohen, 2001b). To continue, within the last year, a tsunami devastated miles and
miles of South Asia; hundreds more people were killed in the Middle East; and terrorists
bombed the London subway. Closer to home, families still grieve the tragic events of 9/11,
and not coincidentally, the right-wing American militarist regime increases its stronghold
overseas as well as in our own backyards. And only weeks ago, Hurricane Katrina struck the
Gulf coast, displacing and killing thousands of people in Louisiana and Mississippi—a
tragedy that revealed the Bush administration’s preference for protecting the property of the
wealthy rather than the lives of the poor. Truth be told, the picture is not pretty.
Witnessing each of these events, I have felt seriously shaken. With eyes and heart open, I have sometimes wondered how we, collectively, continue to persevere without turning into walking expressions of grief and fear, or complete automatons. In the face of such realities, I for one have often felt overwhelmed and helpless, even embedded in a sense of futility. Is it really possible to make a difference when the situation seems so out of control? Yet this is precisely the moment—as Solnit points out—when we, when I, must keep sight of concurrent realities of imagination and hope. Yes, patriarchal, capitalist and militarist forces are ever present—but so is resistance offered by feminist, antiracist, indigenous, ecological and spiritual movements for nonviolence, peace and social justice. Alongside much adversity and setback are equally tangible truths of mobilization, solidarity, love between people, and activism towards planetary transformation. Change can and does happen; and a better world is possible. In fact, grounding ourselves in the hopes and visions that fuel movements for social justice—remembering why we do this work, and to what ends—may be just the medicine we need in these challenging times.

Purpose of this Study

Discovering this hope, this vision—some kind of heart, soul and spirit in the midst of social and political strife—is the subject of my thesis research. Specifically, this study investigates the motivations and life experiences that inspire the social justice activism of five women from Seattle, Washington. Through exploration of activists’ “inner lives”—what goes on inside their minds, bodies, hearts and souls—this study inquires into that which offers motivation and sustenance for their work. Interviewing women who consider their spiritual

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1 I use the term *inner life* to describe the internal, affective domains—the feelings, beliefs, memories and formative experiences—that make each of us who we are. While I often employ this term interchangeably with
paths to be intimately connected to their activism, I focus specifically on the relationship between spirituality and hope and vision for social justice. As such, my primary research questions are as follows:

1. What motivates, inspires and sustains women’s activism for social justice?

2. To what extent do the participants in my study frame activism as a spiritual calling and/or responsibility? What do their spiritual lives add to their activism, and their activism to their spiritual lives?

3. Do they experience tensions between their spiritual paths and their political work? If so, what are these challenges and how do they navigate them? If not, why/how is this the case?

In essence, this research honors women who demonstrate the ability to create positive, progressive social change. It explores the stories of activists who have established inspiring, meaningful and fruitful practices, and who recognize the part their spirituality plays in relation. My purpose is not to argue that spirituality can enrich activism, or that activists would benefit by including spirituality in their practices. Rather, I see this thesis as a means to honor the “spirit” that already surrounds and infuses political work, as well as to pay tribute to religious traditions that view social justice as central to any kind of spiritual development. Using narrative inquiry, I respectfully receive the wisdom of my participants, and intend to celebrate the substance and meaning in their lives and work. I do not seek to spell out definitive answers to my research questions; rather, I wish to perform, with my narrators, some of the contradictions, contractions and challenges of becoming human in the world (Leggo, 2004b).

My research explores how spiritual activists are able to maintain optimism and vision while remaining firmly rooted in the magnitude of the problems facing them, and our world.

spiritual life, the inner life is a broader term, involving “the intellectual, emotional and spiritual...qualit[ies] of selfhood” (Palmer, 1998; 4, emphasis mine).
As such, this study builds on my experiences as an academic (where I have learned that structural disparities are likely too great to ever change); as a spiritual seeker (where I have learned that all changes are possible through compassion and love); and as an activist (where I have learned that neither of the above may be entirely true or false). In the merging of these three identities, I have experienced a struggle between my “cynical intellectual,” who analyzes the world “realistically”—and my “hopeful idealist,” who believes that (spiritual) practices like forgiveness and prayer can transform the world. I imagine other spiritual activists have faced similar dilemmas, and my research, in part, is an attempt to investigate if and how this is true.

Further, my research challenges the misuse of religion and spirituality by the Religious Right, contesting the assumption that to believe in God means to support a politically regressive agenda. At present, conservatives in the United States use religious texts as justification for increased military spending, the eradication of anti-poverty programs, hatred towards gays and lesbians, the abolition of women’s rights, and other forms of dehumanization and oppression. Yet connecting religion with politics is not the domain of the right wing; progressives also find solace and inspiration in spiritual teachings and practices, and this project is intended as a reminder of such visionary social movements.

**Important Conceptualizations**

Setting the stage for this research, it is important to offer brief conceptualizations of the key terms I will be using—*activism, spirituality, religion* and *spiritual activism*. To begin, I use *activism* to refer to the process of taking some kind of action to confront—and ultimately, to transform—existing social, cultural, personal or political conditions for ethical reasons. It is
to act for or against that which is felt to be deeply just or unjust in the world and, to me, explicitly includes conscious reflection on the actions undertaken. Activism involves tactics such as protest; legislative action; capacity-building; consciousness-raising; educating for social change; theorizing from counter-hegemonic spaces; and academic/community research to address unequal relations of power, to name a few examples. My research also views activism to include “actions” that do not mandate the body’s engagement (e.g. prayer, meditation, intention, directed energy) if such practices are geared towards impacting a social problem (i.e. activism must go beyond the self). Finally, it is important to note that for the purposes of this project, activism describes work towards social justice, not efforts towards more conservative causes (e.g. rallies against gay marriage, antiabortion activism, etc.).

To continue, my research uses spirituality as a broad term to refer to a consciousness or an awareness that recognizes a realm beyond the material, physical one with which humans are most familiar. To be “spiritual” means to believe in the transpersonal domain, and also to believe in some kind of sacred force, or presence, that connects individuals to each other, to all creatures, and to the Earth. Anzaldúa (2002) discusses this “metaphysics of interconnectedness,” positing a “constantly changing spirit or force that embodies itself in diverse material and nonmaterial forms.”2 Though this “force” has many names (e.g. God, Allah, the Goddess, Yahweh, the Buddha, a higher power, etc.), what is important here is that this “interconnectedness” elicits a responsibility to respect, care for and honor all humans and creatures, as well as the land. To use Rhanema’s (1995) words, spirituality involves a “...sensitivity, the art of listening to the world at large and within one, from the hegemony of a conditioned ‘me’ constantly interfering in the process; the ability to relate to others and to

2 Quoted in Keating, 2002; p. 521.
act, without any pre-defined plan or ulterior motives; and the perennial qualities of love, compassion and goodness which are under constant assault in economized societies” (130).

Importantly, spirituality is not synonymous with religion. While the latter is commonly associated with an “organized community of faith that has written codes of regulatory behavior” (Tisdell, 2000; 308), the former is not dependent on a collective, and can be entirely individual or subjective. I see spirituality as the essence of organized religion—the core that remains when the many religious traditions and practices, the various texts and their interpretations, have been boiled down. That said, I recognize that: (1) spirituality is never “pure,” as it cannot be extracted from the history and institutions that have shaped it; and (2) many spiritual beliefs/practices are explicitly formed by religion, so people are often “spiritual” within the context of religion. While these two concepts are separate, they are not oppositional.

Finally, I use the term spiritual activism to describe a set of theoretical and practical tools for social change. Informed by spiritual understandings, this kind of activism provides a lens through which social and environmental conditions can be analyzed and recognized as unethical, and indeed quite different from the Divine order of things. Spiritual activists value nonviolence, equity and social justice as an expression of sacred responsibility, as a manifestation of respect and love for all that lives, and as such, launch counter-hegemonic projects grounded in collectivity, compassion and practices of ritual, meditation, prayer and other forms of spiritual communion. Importantly, spiritual activism overlaps with humanism—the latter a philosophy naming people as inherently positive and good, “source[s] of infinite possibilities … developing towards a balance of physical, spiritual, moral and intellectual faculties” (The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms, 2004).
Yet unlike humanism—which focuses largely on material realms—spiritual activism honors our inherent worth as sacred/spiritual in nature.

My Story

To further contextualize this project, it is important to position myself—the researcher—in relation to my topic, and to explain how this research came about. To be clear, I consider myself a spiritual activist. Having worked for the past ten years as an elementary school teacher, queer community organizer, and advocate for survivors of domestic violence, I align myself with the goals of activism for social justice. I also consider myself a spiritual seeker, finding much healing, guidance and wonder in the teachings of Quakerism, Buddhism and Religious Science, as well as in my own practices of yoga, prayer and meditation. Because spiritual explorations have been so meaningful and inspirational to me, I am committed to bringing spirituality to my activism, and vice versa. This project is very personal to me.

My journey to the study of spiritual activism began long ago, perhaps even before I was verbal, or conscious of memory. I have always been concerned about the people and the world around me. I remember from a young age always fighting for the underdog—rescuing my sweet puppy when she was getting scolded for chewing the sofa, or standing between my parents when they exchanged cross words with one another. I was very tuned in to my family’s experiences and emotions, and remember frequently peering up from my kid-sized height at my mom and dad to make sure they were both okay, checking in with their hearts and wondering what I could do to make them feel better.
As a case in point, my mom recounts a curious pattern that emerged when I was in grade school: each day when I came home, she would ask me what happened at school, or what I learned in class. As she tells it, I would then inevitably list all the kids who cried or screamed or misbehaved that day, or would tell her about the students who were mean to each other. “Joey made fun of Jenny on the playground at recess; Tanya was picked last for soccer in P.E.; Mrs. Jackson yelled at Matt because he wouldn’t stop talking after the bell rang.” Science experiments? Handwriting lessons? History reports? Apparently not of concern to my six, eight or ten year-old selves.

Though my inclinations have long been towards the relational, other influences of course have shaped my passion for spiritual activism. Perhaps most obvious is that I was raised in a Quaker family, and come from a long line of social justice and peace activists—as mentioned previously. I have distinct childhood memories of listening to my parents talk politics at the dinner table, sharing their concerns about tax cuts for the wealthy or the impending threat of nuclear power gone wrong. The dinner table was also a place for story-telling about my Quaker relatives’ activism—where I first heard about the hostel my mom’s parents ran; my grandpa’s involvement with NAACP during the civil rights movement; my grandma’s passion for welcoming European refugees into her home after World War II; and even my British ancestors who courageously sailed across the Atlantic in search of religious freedom.

Story-telling at the dinner table was especially common during holidays, and I remember my grandpa Wilbur one Thanksgiving explaining his decision to conscientiously object during World War II on religious grounds. I think this was when I first learned Quakers were pacifists, and when I first figured that because I was a Quaker, I must be a
Sometimes dinner-table conversations followed us into the living room after supper, where my parents talked about their marches and protests against the Vietnam War, or my mom set up the slide projector to share photos of their time living in Turkey and Japan. It was during holidays that I also became acquainted with my parents' many Asian and South American foster siblings—as they would often join us for these occasions, or we would travel to their homes in Iowa, Minnesota, or on the east coast. Some of these foster siblings became lifelong members of our family, and continue to be aunts and uncles to me.

Yet as a child, my parents' commitments to social justice still felt rather removed from my own life, as I was much more focused on fitting in with my peers—most of whom came from the middle- and working-class, conservative Christian families of central Illinois. Surrounded by cornfields and bumper stickers supporting Ronald Reagan, I rejected many of my parents' values, prioritizing instead Jordache jeans, the cheerleading squad, and dating the captain of the basketball team. What I remember from my upbringing is less a sense of loyalty to my parents' activism and faith, and more a sense of contradiction between home and social lives. I hated feeling like the frumpy girl from the hippie family—so I responded by focusing on the mounting pressures to be thin, smart, pretty and popular at school. I was caught between two worlds, and as a result was pretty conflicted and unhappy. As a teenager, though I was well-liked by my peers and was class valedictorian, I was eating disordered, mistreated by my boyfriends and suffered frequent bouts of anxiety and depression. To complicate things, life at home was somewhat tumultuous, my parents

3 NAACP is an abbreviation for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.
4 To give a brief lesson on Quakerism and social justice: Quakers believe in the spiritual equality of all people, and consequently believe hierarchy and oppression are unethical. Historically, Quakerism was one of the first sects of Christianity to encourage women to worship in the same spaces as men, and also to marry same-sex couples. The silent, unstructured meetings in which Quakers practice—rather than under the guidance of a more knowledgeable pastor, rabbi or other intermediary—encourage subjective expressions of spirituality and
seemed to fight a lot, and I did not feel connected to them in the ways I really wanted and needed. Though they continued to model commitments to spirituality and activism, I often did not experience at home the open-heartedness, love and inner peace I now realize are foundational to efforts towards social change.

I tell the details of my emotional life and of my family’s dynamics because I think it was this unhappiness and sense of alienation that ultimately led me (back) to spirituality and politics. Out of inner conflict grew a need for spiritual connection and equanimity; out of my own pain (and awareness of others’) grew a call towards social action. Both have been sources of healing and reconciliation for me. Both satisfy my longing for warmth, open-heartedness and intimacy between people; both offer tools to enact a world in which all beings are respected and honored; and both lead me closer to my heart, to my spirit, and to living the way I am meant to live. Though I never felt particularly “spiritual” growing up, and don’t remember when exactly I began to name my spiritual path as primary in my life, I know this shift emerged alongside a commitment to social justice work.

By the time I was an undergraduate, I started attending Quaker meetings again, and at the university, was drawn to courses that explored racism and sexism, as well as to community projects that allowed me to do something about these social injustices. Here, I also discovered a passion for traveling, and by the time I had reached my early twenties, I had lived for a total of eight months in West Africa and Central America—studying, volunteering and doing research. My experiences in Cameroon at age twenty were especially transformative, and I spent most of my time there either by myself (overwhelmed by the massive poverty and hardship that surrounded me), or with local Cameroonians (especially teach that human differences are to be respected and nurtured. Acting on such beliefs, Quakers have been at the forefront of the abolitionist, suffrage, anti-nuclear, and peace movements.
the warm and loving traditional dancers with whom I studied and performed). Living in Cameroon gave me an embodied experience for the first time of the social and material comforts I take for granted, and how privileged I truly am. This was an important, albeit difficult, lesson.

Reflecting on the influences that have inspired my passions for spiritual activism, I find it impossible to name one as more significant than the others. My relational inclinations, my Quaker ancestors, my familial and spiritual upbringing, my travels, the longing I often felt (and feel) for a life of intimacy and meaning ... all have shaped who I am and to what I commit myself personally and politically. For me, it is difficult to discuss my outer work towards social justice without considering the inner dimensions that inform my practice—the subjective, affective, and spiritual encounters that have been the most moving and foundational. Positioning myself as one of the activists in this research, I hope to add insight to the study of spiritual activism through consideration of my own experiences as well.

**Structure of Thesis**

The following pages reflect a dialogue between the literature, my participants, my readers and myself. This dialogue spans ten chapters. In the present chapter, I have introduced my topic, identified my primary research questions, and situated myself in the context of this study. Chapter II reviews literature most relevant to the topic of spiritual activism, focusing on scholars who explore the “inner life” and its relationship to outer work for social justice. Here, I also present the theoretical concepts I later engage with to analyze my interviews. Chapter III details my methodological framework (narrative inquiry), and delineates my research procedures. This is where my narrators are first introduced.
Chapters IV through VIII comprise the heart of my inquiry into spiritual activism. Sharing my participants' most significant engagements with activism and spirituality, these chapters offer a narrative for each woman. In these chapters, I also reflect and ruminate on the interviews, contributing some of my own experiences as a researcher and a spiritual activist in relation to my narrators' stories. Chapter IX draws together the threads of this thesis project, exploring the primary themes that emerged in the interviews specifically within the context of the literature. Finally, Chapter X discusses implications of this study for practice, acknowledges some challenges of this inquiry, offers ideas for future projects, and shares closing reflections on how I have grown and changed through this process.
CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW & THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The most directly relevant literature to frame this project would be studies and/or narratives that explore the spiritual dimensions of women's activism for social justice—of which there have been some, but not many. First, however, I briefly present scholarship in the field of education that addresses the topic of spirituality, concentrating on the "inner life" and its connections to outward work for social justice. I then investigate a genre of literature I call "spiritual writers on social justice," who (generally) conceptualize activism as an extension of a spiritual or religious life. Finally, I review the primary scholars who merge concepts of spirituality, social justice, and activism—focusing especially on indigenous writers and feminists who use personal experience and narrative to do so.¹

Education and Spirituality

To begin, in recent years, increasing numbers of scholars in the field of education have begun to talk about spirituality (e.g. Austin 2004; Bennett, 2003; Dei, 2002; Dirkx, 1997; English & Gillen, 2000; Jablonski, 2001; Kazanjian & Laurence, 2002; Vella, 2000).² These texts, however, are generally still limited in scope. While it is hopeful that "spirituality" is making its way into scholarly discourse, the majority of this work offers only a general discussion of

¹ There are many directions this literature review could go. I could have chosen, for instance, to explore the broad range of scholarship addressing the motivations behind activism for social justice. Yet my focus is explicitly on spirituality and its role in motivating activism, so I concentrated here instead. For a review of the importance of emotions in inspiring social movements, see Ellis (2002) or Hall (1998). For an exploration of how identity motivates activism, see Staeheli (2004) or Guzik & Gorlier (2004).
² The topic of spirituality in education is not altogether new. The scholar perhaps most widely cited in this arena is Paulo Freire (1973). Focusing on education for social change, Freire was a profoundly spiritual man influenced by the liberation theology movement in Latin America. As such, he posited a radical subjectivity, stressing the importance of knowing oneself through conscious reflection and action—a result of both spiritual and political praxis. For Freire, it was through this deepening awareness of the self that effective teaching/action towards social justice was possible.
the role of spirituality in education—focusing on how it enhances the development and learning of students rather than how it informs teaching, or otherwise working for social justice. These texts also tend to adopt a more narrow definition of spirituality than my research posits, often focusing on *religion* rather than discussing the broad aspects of the spiritual life of the educator (or activist, for that matter).

There are, however, notable exceptions to this trend—scholars who incorporate a more holistic definition of spirituality, and/or theorize the inner landscapes of educators. Miller, Karsten, Denton, Orr and Colalillo Kates (2005), for instance, incorporate a broad-based perspective on spirituality, exploring topics such as meditation in the classroom, pedagogies of compassion, and “soul work,” and naming spiritual practice as foundational to the very nature and purpose of education. Similarly, Glazer’s anthology (1999) roots “education in the practices of openness, attentiveness to experience, and sensitivity to the world,” and examines how personal encounters with the sacred profoundly enrich learning and teaching. Both of these anthologies also incorporate narrative and personal experience as a methodology. Likewise, Denton and Ashton (2004) and Dalke and Dixson (2004) share excerpts from the inner and outer lives of teachers to reveal the spiritual dimensions of the educational experience.

Other scholars theorize the inner lives of educators, specifically relating them to outer work for social justice. Dillard (2000a & b), for example, addresses the cultural aspects of spirituality in education, contending that spiritual ways of knowing and being serve as a counter-hegemonic practice in adult education. She focuses on how educators’ identities as spiritual people inform their practices as emancipatory agents, and reminds the academy that to fail to embrace professors’ spiritual lives is to render parts of them invisible. Further,
Tisdell (2000 & 2003) explores spirituality as it affects the practices of educators for social change—both in the classroom and in the community—concentrating on how race, class, gender, and culture influence spiritual development. Investigating these themes as they relate to higher education classrooms, Tisdell finds that instructors often use their spiritual lives to form holistic identities in a contemporary social and cultural order that demands constantly changing and fragmented notions of self.

Yet perhaps most directly relevant to my study is the work of Palmer (1998 & 2000), who asserts that it is our “inner landscapes”—knowing ourselves and living in line with our values—that most affects and informs our practice as educators:

Teaching, like any truly human activity, emerges from one’s inwardness, for better or for worse. As I teach, I project the condition of my soul onto my students, my subject, and our way of being together ... Viewed from this angle, teaching holds a mirror to the soul. If I am willing to look in that mirror and not run from what I see, I have a chance to gain self-knowledge and knowing myself is as crucial to good teaching as knowing my students and my subject (1998; 2).

According to Palmer, teaching from the undivided self—an integral state of being that incorporates intellectual, emotional and spiritual paths—is what makes a competent and upstanding educator. Within this context, self-awareness and self-actualization are practical tools, as “the more familiar we are with... insight into what is happening inside of us ... the more surefooted our teaching—and living—becomes” (1998, 5). Here, Palmer argues that while it is crucial to investigate the outward challenges of our teaching practices (e.g. under-funded schools, racism and sexism in the classroom, etc.), it is perhaps more important to explore and nurture the heart, soul and spirit of the educator.

The literature I have reviewed in this section illuminates my study in that it begins to theorize inner motivations towards emancipatory work, specifically investigating spirituality and its relationship to social justice in the context of education. Recognizing the
interconnections between activism and education (i.e. there is activism in education and education in activism), we glean the importance of spiritual paths to activist projects. Yet these texts generally do not employ a critical, feminist framework on education and spirituality (save Dillard and perhaps Tisdell)—which is foundational to my study (as detailed subsequently). More importantly, this literature conceptualizes “education” almost exclusively as a classroom experience (be it primary, secondary, higher education or adult learning), rather than as a community (or life) experience. As a result, these scholars offer limited insight into what informs activism in diverse community settings, and specifically, how spirituality is connected to social and political action.

_Spiritual Writers on Social Justice and Spiritual Development_

Now I turn to an area of scholarship that addresses activism in a broader context. Here are writers whose primary orientation is spirituality or spiritual development, and who tend to view work towards social justice as an extension of spiritual or religious practice. These texts are geared towards the general, spiritually-inclined public rather than an academic audience. Of course, conceptualizing activism as a manifestation of spiritual beliefs/practices is a topic that has been discussed for some time in the context of Judeo-Christian theology, feminist spirituality, indigenous worldviews, New Thought teachings and Buddhist philosophy (to name a few arenas). To continue, recent examples include Matthew Fox (1990 & 2002), an ordained priest, who argues that it is only through the development of compassion that we can transform social conditions; Marianne Williamson (2000), who stresses the importance of infusing social activism with the spiritual principles of “love, atonement, peace, and reverence for life” (223), and argues that only “soul force” is strong
enough to alter social and political structures; and Claudia Horowitz (2002), who asserts that linking our inner spiritual path with our outer journeys towards social justice deepens both. Similarly, Brooke Shelby Biggs (2003) shares the moving life stories of dozens of faith-based activists, including Vandana Shiva, Dorothy Day, and Archbishop Oscar Romero, and ends each chapter with resources designed to inspire everyday spiritual activism among her readers.

In this genre of writing, it is important to consider not only the texts that theorize spiritual activism, but also the activists who demonstrate an inner/outer connection through their work, as they undoubtedly offer resources useful to the study of spiritual activism. Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., Thich Nat Hanh and Mother Theresa are a few well-known people. Indeed, notions of love, compassion and spirituality have fueled many social movements—including the American civil rights movement; liberation theology in Latin America; the Passive Resistance movement in India; Quaker efforts for peace and nonviolence; and indigenous struggles for land rights and sovereignty worldwide. To continue, Joan Halifax (1993), a Zen Buddhist and social activist, names her healing work with prisoners as a manifestation of Eastern traditions and tribal wisdom; Ma Jaya Sati Bhagavati (in Cohen, 2001a), a Hindu activist and teacher, says her path "is to attain spiritual fulfillment through selfless service in the world" (67); and John Dear (2001), a Jesuit priest and radical peace activist, writes: "The key to changing the world and pursuing justice and disarmament is to allow the God of peace to disarm our hearts ... and lead us together on the road to peace." Further, Vimala Thakar (2001), a Hindu teacher who has worked internationally in rural development, urges a seamless fusion of "spiritual awakening" and political work:
The individual and collective values and motives that give sanction to the injustice and exploitation of modern society must become the focus of change as much as the socioeconomic and political structures ... the inner life is not a private or personal thing; it's very much a social issue (108).

Arguing that social justice begins with action in individual life, Thakar asserts, “the force of love is the force of total revolution” (152).

Yet the “spiritual” writers most relevant to my study are those who simultaneously embody a commitment to spiritual activism and theorize it in their scholarship. Here, two individuals are particularly inspirational: Rabbi Michael Lerner (2000 & 2006) and Joanna Macy (1998 & 2000). In short, Lerner argues that an “emancipatory spirituality” is the only viable alternative to the “globalization of selfishness” that has created individual and collective suffering (2000; 13). Lerner’s “emancipatory spirituality” involves the ability to transcend ego enough to see oneself as connected to all beings, and to adopt a “bottom line” ethos of love and generosity rather than power and materialism (2000; 173):

We have to challenge the misuse of God and religion by the religious right and stop identifying them as the basis for war policies and eliminating programs for the poor... And we have to change the current line of thinking that being efficient, rational and productive means you maximize money and power. [Rather, we must] maximize love and caring and rediscover our capacity to respond to the universe with awe and wonder.7

Lerner argues that attending to one’s spiritual life allows social activists to stay in touch with transformative visions, to “develop practice[s] of compassion [that] prevent us from demeaning people in corporate structures ... and [to] see the humanity, decency and spiritual potential even in the people on the opposite side of the table” (2000; 159-60). Progressive movements that overlook this foundation miss the mark and will never see the fruits of long-lasting social change. Lerner also affirms the reciprocal nature of activism and spirituality,

7 Quoted on p. 23 of Condor (2005).
distrusting approaches to spiritual transformation that are ultimately self-serving and do not encourage *direct action* to alleviate the pain and suffering in the world (2000; 140).

Like Lerner, Macy insists activists must return to their source, to their spiritual roots, “so that our action will come from our nonaction” (1998; 1). In other words, we simply need to tap into our essential “being-ness” to be moved from apathy to transformative action for our planet. The goal of her step-by-step guide (1998) is to help us uncover and experience our innate connections with each other, and “with the systemic, self-healing powers in the web of life, so that [we] may be enlivened and motivated to play [our] part in creating a sustainable civilization” (58). Offering hope and vision, Macy affirms that the challenges we currently face are situated in the larger evolution of the Earth and its people, an epoch she calls *The Great Turning*:

> [I]t is germinating now, that sustainable society on which the future depends. Its seeds are spouting in countless actions in defense of life, and in fresh perceptions of our mutual belonging in the living body of Earth—bold new perceptions deriving from both science and spirituality. Although it doesn’t feature in the day’s headlines or evening news, a silent revolution is occurring, bringing unparalleled changes in the ways we see and think and relate... It is the... shift from a self-destructive industrial growth society to a life-sustaining society (1998; 6).

For Macy, *The Great Turning* is happening through social and political actions to slow the damage of Earth and its beings (including structural/historical analyses of our problems), coupled with a simultaneous, fundamental shift in worldviews and values. Macy reminds her readers that to engage in *The Great Turning* means to be consciously aware and thus to experience the pain and suffering both in our own hearts and in the world.

What I find most useful about Lerner and Macy is their focus on the spiritual lives of activists without ignoring the outer work that must be done to heal the planet. Both articulate a hopeful vision while simultaneously remaining firmly rooted in the trenches of social
justice work (Lerner as a community organizer and political worker in San Francisco, Macy as an international environmental and peace activist). Moreover, their writings use personal experience and narrative to ground their theories of spiritual and social change.

Taken together, the sources cited in this section posit activism as an extension of spiritual development and responsibility, stressing the relevance of psychological/spiritual consciousness to social change. They also offer a (much needed) visionary, hopeful quality to academic literature on social movements, affirming that transformation can and does happen, and illustrating how this is the case through their own lives and work. Yet, in so doing, these texts may underpoliticize social activism, overlooking the sociocultural contexts in which we live, as well as the historical and material conditions that constrain our action (with the exceptions of Macy and Lerner). While I by no means diminish the power of meditative and prayer work, I argue the simultaneous importance of working for structural change and remaining firmly grounded in the very real differences that do exist in people’s lives. While I may feel re-energized and committed to personal growth after reading these texts, they do not necessarily teach me to deal with the challenges and contradictions that limit my ability to change the world, nor do they offer a critical, feminist framework on activism.

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8 Williamson (2000), for instance, posits that if we “pray for and commit to...peace on a daily basis, holding the vision in sacred silence for at least two minutes, then a miracle will occur” (256). Thakar (2001) encourages us not to “dwell at the superficial layers of being,” as here “we’ll be overly conscious of the apparent differences in human beings on the physical...level, and of the superficial difference in cultures and behaviour” (153).

9 At least not directly (with the exception of Macy, and to a lesser extent, Lerner). I recognize, however, that this literature can inform a critical, feminist framework—which is precisely why I have chosen to incorporate it in my study.
Indigenous and Feminist Scholars on the Spiritual Dimensions of Activism

I now turn to a final group of writers who combine analytic categories of spirituality, social justice, and activism. Indigenous feminists are especially insightful here, as they tend to incorporate approaches to social change that are inherently more holistic and inclusive of ecological, cosmological and spiritual worldviews than Western empirical paradigms.\(^{10}\)

Many indigenous scholars explore relationships between gender, spirituality, cultural identity and social justice, arguing that for Aboriginal people (especially before Euro-colonization), the sacred was/is incorporated into every aspect of community and individual life (e.g. Anderson, 2000; Graveline, 1998; HeavyRunner, 1997; Jaimes-Guerrero, 2003; LaDuke, 2005; Mankiller, 2004; etc.). As a case in point, Haig-Brown (1997) credits the success of a Saskatchewan high school to its commitment to Aboriginal spirituality as a guiding principle for curriculum and student/faculty behavior.\(^{11}\) Further, Linda Smith (1999 & 2005) argues that the indigenous research (and activist) agenda is different from traditional Western paradigms in that it necessarily incorporates concepts such as "healing, decolonization, spiritual[ity]... [and] recovery" (1999; 117). In other words, central to First Nations social justice efforts is the mobilization and self-determination of indigenous peoples in part through connection to spiritual life. Finally, Young and Nadeau (2005) assert that indigenous philosophies do not separate the spiritual, physical and psychological dimensions of being, and explain that to be in touch with one's spiritual nature is to support individual and community transformation, to "affirm ... collective strength and sacredness in the face of

\(^{10}\) This is not to essentialize indigenous scholarship and worldviews, but rather to recognize that infusing "activism" with spiritual principles is not a new phenomenon. In First Nations (and other non-Western) communities, spirituality has been honored as foundational to social change in ways it has not been in Western communities.

\(^{11}\) In Haig-Brown (2003), this scholar identifies herself as a "non-Aboriginal White researcher working with Aboriginal people in a variety of educational contexts" (419). I include Haig-Brown's work here because,
oppression, and [to] create ... new forms of power and non-violent embodied ways of being in this world” (14).

Other feminist scholars explore the spiritual dimensions of activism, including Faver (2000), who documents the religious foundations of Christian women’s community service; and Pulido (1998), who asserts that social scientists concerned with structural inequalities must attend to the spiritual lives of their subjects, as the “mind is not the only or best path to political conversion” (722). Similarly, Ruether (1997 & 2002), a theologian and ecofeminist, contends that effective social and environmental change demands a spiritual revolution away from Western anthropocentrism and organized patriarchal religion towards a culture of communion with nature and a celebration of the Divine feminine.12 Finally, Keating (2002), Lorenz (2002), and Fernandez (2003) argue a theory of feminist activism that honors the spirituality that is already very much a part of women’s movements, and posit a new identity category that recognizes difference as well as rests on a foundation of interconnectedness.

Some feminist scholars explore spiritual activism specifically through the use of narrative to elucidate theory and practice. Tan (1997), for instance, shares her journey as an Asian American Buddhist and Catholic, using her own life to argue that culture and history inform both spiritual and political commitments. Offering a memoir of her involvement with the global justice movement, Pagan activist Starhawk (2002) also explores the connections between spirituality, gender, sexuality and political action. Similarly, Mankiller (2004) shares her own experiences as a way to introduce the narratives of other courageous indigenous women—all of their stories affirming the spiritual strength required to bear

although she is not herself an indigenous scholar, she explores and affirms First Nations approaches to social change.
witness to and to rise above the unspeakable injustices native people have endured. Further, Segrest (2002) uses personal experience as a filter for larger political and cultural issues, citing her travels to Africa and Asia as opportunities for spiritual growth as well as deepened commitments to struggles for equality. At the center of her inquiry is the question of the “soul, or spirit, and its relation to justice” (4). Through her writing, Segrest weaves her activism with her religious upbringing; her childhood in the segregated South with her spiritual journey; and her feminist commitments to her personal healing. As such, she is an integrated person—her experiences, feelings, spiritual beliefs, activism and academic work seamlessly connected through her stories.

Anzaldúa (2002) echoes Segrest’s emphasis on the personal and spiritual foundations of activism for social justice. Skeptical of disciplines that focus on the material dimensions of social change but view the spiritual as escapist, Anzaldúa argues that this narrow approach will soon fall out of favor:

I’ve seen many [scholars] convert and turn away from the traditional scientific paradigms of concrete reality. As they get older they [begin to] know the emotional and the spiritual life ... Some disciplines in the academy are invested in deconstruction, in postmodernist thought, ideas, and assumptions. But there is a loosening up and these disciplines will change.¹³

Particularly useful to my research is Anzaldúa’s discussion of conocimiento—an “overarching theory of consciousness ... that tries to encompass all the dimensions of life, both inner—mental, emotional, instinctive, imaginal, spiritual, bodily realms—and outer—social, political, lived experiences.”¹⁴ In essence, conocimiento claims that humans are collectively experiencing a shift away from “conventional knowledge’s ... categories,

¹² In addition to Ruether, there are other feminist theologians and ecofeminists who address the spiritual components of women’s activism. A few examples are: feminist theologian Jantzen (1998); ecofeminists Gebara (2002) and Kwok (2002); and ecowomanists Townes (1997) and Baker Fletcher (1998).
¹³ Here, Anzaldúa is quoted by Keating (2000), p. 283.
classifications and contents” that uphold hierarchies of power and oppression; and towards increasing exploration of inner meaning and purpose in our lives and work (2002; 541).

Connecting the mind and spirit to the outer world of action, conocimiento becomes a consciousness-raising tool that promotes self-awareness and self-reflexivity, and love and compassion rather than fear. “It encourages folks to empathize and sympathize with others, to walk in the others’ shoes ... to place oneself in a state of resonance with the other’s feelings and situations, and to give the other an opportunity to express their needs and their points of view.”

Yet the scholar perhaps most often cited in relation to the spiritual dimensions of activism is hooks (1990, 1993a & b, 1994, 2000). Her work is valuable to my study for several reasons. First, she is one of the first feminists to theorize (and live out) simultaneous commitments to radical politics and deep spirituality. For her, “spirituality” has never been in conflict with political concerns:

They are integrated for me, part of a whole ... spiritual life has much to do with self-realization, the coming into greater awareness not only of who we are but our relationship within community which is so profoundly political ... There is such perfect union between the spiritual quest for awareness, enlightenment, self-realization and the struggle of oppressed people, colonized people to change our circumstance, to resist—to move from object to subject (1990; 218-219).

To illustrate this connection, hooks uses examples of counter-cultural spiritual movements for social justice, including American Buddhists working to free Tibet; worldwide liberation theology activists struggling to end domination; and many, many inspiring American civil rights leaders from the Black church (2000). hooks also demonstrates the seamlessness of politics and spirituality in her own life, citing the “Virginia Baptist Church...of [her] youth”

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14 Here, Anzaldúa is quoted by Keating (2000), p. 177.
as the place she became politicized, as well as naming spiritual foundations for her commitment to various liberation struggles (1993a).

In addition, hooks offers new insight into the inner-outer connection by stressing the need for personal "healing" in order to holistically address the political problems that plague our communities.\(^{16}\)

We cannot fully create effective movements for social change if individuals struggling for that change are not also self-actualized or working towards that end. When wounded individuals come together ... our collective struggle is often undermined by all that has not been dealt with emotionally... Self-actualization [is] part of our political efforts to resist ... supremacy and ... oppression (1993b; 5).

In her view, self-awareness and actualization are necessary to activism because they allow us to transform our most painful experiences into sources of power—something to share with others so that they too may be comforted and motivated towards political action (1990). In this context, attending to the inner life becomes a kind of activism—as argued by other scholars such as Anzaldúa, Lerner, and Macy.

Finally, a review of feminist literature on spiritual activism would not be complete without mention of the tensions between religious and political paths. While Segrest, Anzaldúa and hooks (among others) document the "seamlessness" of the spiritual and political, they also do not deny the challenges that sometimes arise between these two commitments. And other scholars corroborate such tensions. Flinders (1998), for instance, cites the irony that "silence" is a bedrock for spiritual practice, yet feminists insist that women "speak their truths." Further, Zine (2004) points out that although fundamentalist orientations are only a small part of the religious spectrum, some liberals allow their

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\(^{16}\) When I say "healing," I am talking about the process of returning to a physical, psychological, emotional and/or spiritual state of "wholeness." This is not to imply that people are ever "broken," but rather that healing is a process that allows us to engage with the health and wholeness that already exists within each one of us. Healing is a set of practices, a pedagogy that rejuvenates and returns us to that which comforts and enlivens.
skepticism to delegitimate the whole arena of faith-based activism. Teish (2002) contends that for feminist activists, “because the male god and the institutionalized church have been so counter-revolutionary, there has been the temptation to say that there is nothing but the material world, and this is all we should deal with” (250). And Hunt’s study (1999) found that secular feminists view their faith-based counterparts as bound by patriarchal doctrine, whereas faith-based women view secular feminists as too reliant on dualistic modes of thought and not attentive enough to issues of racism and classism. So while feminist scholars affirm the interdependence of spiritual and activist lives, they also stress the challenges of making such simultaneous commitments a reality.

What is most helpful about the literature cited in this section is that it emphasizes the role of the inner/spiritual life to outward action, yet also regards social injustice and oppression as realities necessitating structural/material transformation. While these scholars affirm the importance of spirituality to activist projects, they do not ignore the rigorous restructuring of power that is foundational to any long-lasting social change. They also make note of possible tensions between religious and political lives. Further, some of these scholars are particularly inspirational to my work because they cite their own (and others’) experiences to ground their arguments.

Yet even this body of literature could be expanded. Although some of these texts draw explicit connections between feminism (and other critical theories) to spiritual practice, this area of scholarship is still largely uncharted. Beyond the literature presented here, what does it mean to practice activism in the context of spirituality, and vice versa? Do everyday spiritual activists experience contradictions and challenges in maintaining commitments to social justice and spirituality, as some of the literature implies? If so, how do they mediate
these tensions? If not, why and how is this the case? Moreover, what can the narratives of contemporary activists reveal about questions like these?

Given such inquiries, it is clear that additional scholarship could be useful. I see my research as an attempt to build upon the insights provided so far in the area of women’s spiritual activism—(1) the inner life of educators for social change (education and spirituality literature); (2) the visionary, hopeful quality of social movement theorizing (spiritual writers on social justice); and (3) the intersectional, holistic approach to women’s activism, which honors the spiritual basis of social action while incorporating critical analysis of power (indigenous and feminist scholars on the spiritual dimensions of activism).

While these bodies of literature are not complete in and of themselves, each offers foundation and inspiration for my work, and provides the conceptual tools necessary to structure my research. I view my study as an opportunity to use real-life, everyday stories to substantiate and deepen the academic works I have explored here.

Theoretical Framework

Critical Feminist Research

Many of the theoretical concepts that frame my research have been described already, including Freire’s praxis; Macy’s ideas on the “web of life”; Lerner’s emancipatory spirituality; Anzaldúa’s conocimiento; and hooks’ discussion of the seamlessness of politics and spirituality. To continue, and to be explicit, this thesis brings a critical, feminist framework to the study of women’s spiritual activism—intending, as feminist research does, to bring previously subjugated knowledge and experiences into epistemological and
academic dialogues (Collins, 1990). My goal, in part, is simply to continue bringing women’s voices into the social science canon. As Baker (1998) explains, this is the essence of feminist research:

Unlike much traditional research … which has systematically ignored or distorted the roles of women in social life, feminist research has attempted to recognize, faithfully document and respect women’s diverse experiences. Consequently, feminist research has been rooted in women’s experiences; and as women’s lives become known and visible through feminist research, women have become the subjects and creators of knowledge and theory (32).

Importantly, it is my intention to bring forth the “diverse experiences” of spiritual activists by honoring the stories of not only white, middle-class, heterosexual, Christian women, but also those of women who have been marginalized in mainstream feminist circles.

Moreover, as feminist research, my study also emphasizes the various aspects of women’s lives that traditionally have been unwelcome in the academy. Though scholars are beginning to affirm the significance of spirituality, this discussion has been, and continues to be, largely marginalized. As such, my thesis is concerned with giving voice to those parts of us—as scholars and activists—that have often been ignored and silenced, including our emotions, our bodies, our memories and personal experiences, and our spiritual inspirations and traditions. This project adopts a holistic framework that encompasses the many dimensions of oneself and others, the “mental, emotional, instinctive, imaginal, spiritual, bodily realms … [as well as] social, political, lived experiences” (Anzaldúa, 2000).19

17 The term feminist is somewhat difficult to define, as there are countless “feminisms.” For the purposes of this study, I argue that all feminist orientations have in common: (1) the use of gender as a tool for analysis and action; (2) an aim to disrupt patriarchy; and (3) a commitment to subverting social, cultural, economic, and political norms and practices that oppress girls and women. Feminism calls attention to the hegemonic structures that divide people along various arbitrary lines (gender, “race,” class, etc.), and imagines and executes subversive strategies of thinking and acting to counter and overcome these structures.

18 While I recognize that five women is hardly a diverse sample, and that four of my participants are white, I did interview a Jewish woman; two women who identify as queer/lesbian; one working-class woman; and four women who are not Christian.

19 This quote is taken from Keating, 2000, p. 177. Here, Keating is quoting Anzaldúa.
Letting the spiritual voice speak means engaging in counter-hegemonic practice—as we attend to the affective, non-rational domains as part of the ground from and through which epistemologies are constructed and enacted. In so doing, we continue to expand the rich and creative possibilities of academic work, and thereby re-vision what has traditionally constituted social science research and knowledge.

The Personal as Political

This thesis is also a feminist research project in that it honors personal experience as the foundation of theory as well as of liberatory social movements (e.g. Gluck & Patai, 1991; hooks, 1994; D. Smith, 1999; etc.). My work does not aim for universal, positivist “truths,” but instead affirms that lived experiences (rather than abstract theories or generalizations) reveal the nature of spiritual activism. Not only are women’s experiences inherently valuable and worth recording in of themselves, they also serve as a window to understand larger phenomena. In other words, this project recognizes participants’ lives as lives in context; it sees the study of individual stories as a move beyond the retelling of mundane lives, and as a practice useful to others (Chapman & Sork, 2001). As Evelyn (2004) argues: “Narrative … allows for the expression of individual, personal stories, as well as the knowledge that individual stories also represent shared elements of collective experience, which in turn interact with and modify our individual and collective knowledge” (102). Dean Ornish (1996), well-known physician, echoes these ideas:

Stories are not replicable because our lives are unique. Our uniqueness is what gives us value and meaning. Yet in the telling of stories we also learn what makes us similar, what connects us all, what helps us to transcend the isolation from each other and from ourselves. Stories are the language of community (xvii).

20 Dillard (2000a) makes a similar point in her study.
Using narrative inquiry, this project argues that the experiences and insights its participants can uncover what rests in the heart of spiritual activism.

**Agency and the Spiritual Life**

Finally, as critical feminist research, this thesis is concerned with one of the most pressing contemporary feminist theoretical debates. This debate involves agency—a term generally thought of as “the capacity for effective action and the free choice to act” (Mack, 2002; 156). In short, feminists have critiqued Enlightenment notions of the Western “self,” dismantling the “very concept of a free-choosing individual and putting into question such notions of identity, agency, reason and intentionality” (Weed, 1989; x). As such, the free agent is no longer assumed to be an independent (read male) individual: “atomistic, asocial, ahistorical, emotionally detached, thoroughly and transparently self-conscious, coherent, unified, rational, and universalistic in its reasonings” (Friedman, 1997; 42).

While feminist theorists generally agree on the need to critique the Western “self,” some do so because they call into question coherent subjects who can actually possess agency, insisting that language (not identity) shapes a sense of self (e.g. Hernandez, 1997; Orner, 1992; Scott, 1992). Yet more materially-oriented feminists argue that in critiquing the Western “self,” we cannot eliminate agency and subject because we need coherent notions of identity to create social change (e.g. Benhabib, 1997; Bourdieu, 2001; Weir, 1996). As Segrest (2002) cautions: “In questioning the notion of the isolated individual, many theorists seem to throw out the baby with the bath water when they declare the ‘death of the subject’ or discard notions of identity, agency, and intentionality that are crucial to transformative processes and movements” (3). hooks (1990) likewise asks, “Why do we see the struggle to assert agency, that is, the ability to act in one’s best interests, as a male thing?” (206). Other
theorists (poststructuralist and materialist alike) caution that feminist literature offers limited notions of agency in that it rarely considers action in terms of relationality and interdependence (e.g. Hernandez, 1997; Weir, 1996). In other words, even feminists continue to get stuck in Western notions of the rational, autonomous “man” who acts without regard to those around “him,” despite their rigorous interrogations of language, power and the patriarchy. As such, these theorists situate autonomy in a condition of social connectedness, affirming women’s ability to act in connection to other people, historical conditions, social movements, etc.

My research builds upon these discussions of agency in that it uses everyday narratives to substantiate and add to feminist theories that view women as capable countercultural agents; in other words, I argue that women can and do create social and political change in the midst of the constraints of discourse and material structure on ability to act. I also acknowledge the power grid that guides women’s varying capacities to affect change based on racial, ethnic, economic, age (etc.) differences, and therefore, like Segrest (2000), do not eliminate “notions of identity, agency, and intentionality that are crucial to transformative processes and movements” (3). I am also careful not to reinforce a heroic picture of spiritual activists as individual free-thinkers and actors, and as such, inquire how agency is in/formed by the self-in-relation (to other people, to social institutions, to non-human life, to the Earth, and so on). Further, I view agency (in part) through a spiritual lens, asking if (and how) spiritual awareness and practice informs women’s ability to create a better world. Like Segrest (2000), this research situates the self through a praxis which “engages us at the deepest spiritual level of meaning in our lives—how we constitute our humanity [through] … both political and spiritual practice” (5). Considering the impact of
spirituality on agency, I ask how activists’ experiences are generated and transformed not only by self-expression/free-will, but also by self-transcendence, personal surrender and/or religious life. In other words, how does “spirit” sustain and strengthen women towards collective action and outer work?

22 Mack (2003) explores similar questions in her study.
CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

There is no agony like an untold story inside you.23

Narrative Inquiry

This study utilizes narrative inquiry, a methodological technique that recognizes people as “storytelling organisms who, individually and socially, lead storied lives” (Clandinin & Connelly, 1990; 2). Put simply, narrative inquiry “is the study of the ways humans experience the world” (Clandinin & Connelly, 1990; 2). To understand our worlds narratively means we attend to how we are living, telling, reliving and retelling our lives within particular social and cultural plotlines (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). As such, stories become a way to share moments of life with others. As Chambers (2003) says:

Pilgrims return home with objects of pilgrimage, tokens that reconstruct the narrative of the journey, crucibles for the memory, textual accounts that interpret the experience of others ... Narratives of the journey undertaken are a kind of psychological, spiritual and intellectual mapping of the landscape covered (2).

In this context, narrative inquiry is both phenomenon and method, as it “names the structured quality of experience to be studied [as well as] ... the patterns of inquiry for its study” (Clandinin & Connelly, 1990; 2). In other words, narrative inquiry is a way of understanding experience, a collaboration between researcher and “researched,” set in specific social, cultural, political and historical contexts. “An inquirer enters this matrix in the midst and progresses in this same spirit, concluding the inquiry still in the midst of living and telling ... the stories of the experiences that make up people’s lives, both individual and social” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; 20). And as the inquirer and the participant share in this ongoing journey of discovery, the inquirer similarly enlists the reader to take part, to

23 Zora Neale Hurston (1996; 15).
theorize, to ask questions and to make connections alongside those more actively involved in the research process.24

The purpose of narrative inquiry, in my interpretation, is to provide space for stories to be told, and for lives to be shared and honored. It is to recognize the honor of receiving the wisdom offered by narrators, as Lopez (1990) describes:

The stories people tell have a way of taking care of them. If stories come to you, care for them. And learn to give them away where they are needed. Sometimes a person needs a story more than food to stay alive; that is why we put these stories in each other's memory (48).

"The narrative interpreter does not try to pin down truth," as Leggo (2004a) explains.

"Instead, the researcher engages in an ongoing process of questioning, and seeks to represent that questioning in research texts that invite productive readers to continue the questioning" (111). As such, narrative inquiry allows the researcher to record, reflect and wonder (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

The techniques of narrative inquiry are as varied as the research topics themselves. Because this method privileges an ongoing, untidy, emergent process, what constitutes "data" is diverse, including "field notes of the shared experience, journal records, interview transcripts, others' observations, story telling, letter writing, autobiographical writing ... and writing such as rules, principles, pictures, metaphors, and personal philosophies" (Clandinin & Connelly, 1990; 5). When the qualitative interview is used to gather data (as in my study), the narrative approach poses open-ended questions to evoke insights, recollections and story-telling, and pays attention to that which surfaces as most meaningful and relevant

24 While narrative inquiry is a conversation between researcher, participant and reader, this process of course tries to privilege the participant's story. As Clandinin & Connelly (1990) explain: "[T]he researcher [must] first listen to the practitioner's story...This does not mean the researcher is silenced in the process of narrative inquiry. It does mean that the practitioner, who has long been silenced in the research relationship, is given the
about the topic at hand. As such, narrative inquiry is (arguably) one of the best ways to learn from people, as it concentrates on what emerges *organically* for participants when invited into an unstructured space. It also allows the researcher to listen intently to the subjects’ words, and to ask probing questions in the moment; and it allows for spontaneity, creativity and insight rather than adhering to a fixed, repetitive interview schedule.

**Autobiography**

I chose narrative inquiry because this method gives permission to listen deeply to the lives of research participants, to share and to connect with them, and to respect spiritual and emotional experience as academic “data.” I was also drawn to this approach because autobiographical querying and writing are legitimated as scholarship. Here, the inquirer’s self-exploration and self-expression are valuable topics of study, as they too are integral to the dialogue between author and subject. As Johnson (2003) explains:

> Autobiography tickles forth memories from their hiding places and brings them into focus once again. Like rereading in adulthood a favorite book from youth, autobiography gives us a fresh, though seasoned, look at a familiar past (242).

Because I came to this research topic for personal reasons, it makes sense to explore my own experiences, reflections and commitments to spiritual activism in relation to those of my participants. I was (and continue to be) profoundly curious about how my life intersects with those of the activists I interviewed—and I trust that this research process has offered a glimpse into what has shaped me into the spiritual activist I am.

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Beyond personal curiosities, I think of myself as one of the narrators also as a way to position myself as researcher—to make transparent the lenses through which I interpret the stories I receive. Autobiography in this light is not self-indulgent or narcissistic. Rather, the autobiographical researcher is critical and reflexive, continually aware of the aspects of “self” that are the most significant filters through which one perceives the world, and more importantly, the topic being studied (Behar, 1996). As Chambers (2004) argues, the “I” should not be the subject of an autobiographical text:

If the writer fails to have a topic for writing other than the I, or if the writer has a topic but fails to consider ... ideas other than her own, she ... does not instill confidence in the insights she may gain from her inquiry ... And without a careful examination of the autobiographer’s own doings and actions, her character and spirit, as well as how those are historically shaped and socially situated, I believe it is unlikely the narrative is ethical (2).

In other words, the researcher’s life becomes one site of inquiry, rather than the topic of inquiry, and makes visible the intersections between the focus of study and the “writer’s gaze ... her ideas, values and beliefs, [and] the feelings she attaches to each of these” (Chambers, 2004; 2). Critical self-reflection validates what is already true: that any scholarly project is inherently an expression of elements of its researcher’s life. Acknowledging our place within the research space produces a study that (again) does not seek scientific truth or universality, but rather honors “situated knowledge” and “particular and specific embodiment” (Haraway, 1988), and contests the idea that research can ever be disinterested or neutral (Lather, 1994).

**Research of the Heart**

Finally, setting the methodological stage for this project, it is important to stress that my research begins, and ends, with the heart. As discussed previously, the journey to discover this topic of study was deeply personal for me, so it follows that my process of inquiry,
analysis and writing would be as well. Guiding this project has been a commitment to research that engages me, research that inspires self-discovery, and—to use the words of Chambers—research that "keeps me up at night" (2004; 7):

Research that matters shows up in obvious spots such as relationships with family and students and co-workers; ... in questions asked and questions left unasked; in declarations of love and independence and rebellion; in photo albums and mission statements; in moments of joy and those times when you are surprised or startled by tears and grief ... I have also found that what matters hides in improbable places such as dreams, just beneath the surface of a story or lie or memory; and what matters springs up in the middle of the contradiction between what I say and what I do (8).

Indeed, research on spiritual activism matters to me, and I engage with it not merely as an academic or professional project, but as a process to evoke my intellect, my body, my heart and my spirit. It is my deep intention to bring all parts of myself to the table, moving away from the detached stance I have too often taken in relation to academic work. My greatest passions and gifts, I believe, involve listening to and connecting with others, and I approach this study to unite participant, reader and self in shared concern and shared humanity. Engaging in a path with heart, I hope, also allows me to communicate more intimately with colleagues, fellow activists and other community members who may read my work.

One of the ways I aim to do this is to be open to my own vulnerabilities and emotions as part of the research process, as well as to those of my participants. My intention is to honor all aspects of the self, and I chose narrative inquiry because it incorporates emotive, somatic and affective epistemologies, as well as the rational (Chapman & Sork, 2001). As Ellis (2002) says:

[Engaging in the process of uncovering, going deeper inside ... through [narrative] writing, can stimulate the beginning of recovery. Expressing my feelings vulnerably on the page invites others to express how they feel, comparing their experiences to mine and to each other's. Good autoethnography [and narrative] works toward a communitas, where we might speak together of our experiences, find commonality of spirit, companionship ... and solace [in our togetherness] (401).
Narrative, autobiography and creative expression transgress empirical traditions, contesting (again) what signifies “data”—and diverging from what Sandstrom (1999) calls “the constructed nature of [academics’] often dry and dreary prose” (1236). Indeed, this project recognizes the liberatory capacities that personal reflection can offer academic study. As Hurtado (2003) explains:

[P]oetry, [personal story], and biography [are] ... sources of data—not just fiction...[A] hybridity of approaches [is] not advocated to produce a tower of Babel, resulting in everybody having their own journal, but rather... nonhybridized approaches slant reality in directions that silence the voice of those that do not fit their paradigms (217, emphasis mine).

Indeed, there is no one way to do research, and honoring the multiplicity of “legitimate” approaches validates the diverse cultures, epistemologies and life experiences brought to the research table.

**Methodological Procedures**

Narrative and autobiographical inquiry set the stage for the procedures I followed in my study. I completed in-depth qualitative interviews with five women activists for social justice, all residents of Seattle, Washington. I chose my participants in order to encourage as much variance as possible in type of activist work and spiritual tradition/s. Indeed, though all five women incorporate spirituality (and/or religion) into their activism, they fulfill a wide variety of vocational roles: therapist, school teacher, choir director, community organizer, fundraiser, artist, healer, public educator, front line protester, academic, university professor and political analyst. Similarly, they are Buddhist, Christian, Pagan, Jewish, and/or non-denominational spiritual seekers.
I found these women through personal and professional connections as a Seattle resident for over seven years. Here is a description of the procedure I used to select my narrators:

1. I developed a comprehensive list of potential participants, drawing on my connections as a former Seattle elementary school teacher, feminist antiviolence activist, and queer community organizer. I also drew upon my personal connections with the Seattle Quaker community, Buddhist meditation groups, and the Center for Spiritual Living (a church of Religious Science). Further, I asked friends and former co-workers for recommendations of women to interview. In total, this list included nearly 50 women.

2. From this list, I chose the ten women I felt would offer the most inspiring and informative stories on the topic of spiritual activism. I sought women I felt could be significant teachers and mentors for me, and for my readers—women who had engaged, for instance, in activist projects and spiritual traditions different than my own; who had firsthand experience with histories I did not live (e.g. apartheid, the segregated south, World War II); and/or who had acted on the “front lines” in some capacity (e.g. working directly with people in crisis, marching, protesting, bearing witness to depth of a tragedy or situation, etc.). If I did not already have their contact information, I obtained it from the public telephone book, and then sent my informational letter and a consent form to each of them (see Appendix A: Informational Letter, and Appendix B: Consent Form). I then waited to hear if these women were interested in participating.

3. When each woman contacted me (by phone or email), we arranged a short phone conversation to decide if working together would be a good fit. During this conversation, I asked them to tell me a little more about their social justice work, their spiritual practices and/or tradition/s, and how they felt their activism was connected to their spiritual lives.

4. At this point, the selection was largely intuitive—if I felt their stories would add something valuable and/or unique to my study, I asked them to participate. Significantly, I also sought a sample of women as diverse as possible, especially in relation to spiritual/religious tradition and activist background.

At the end of this process, I had selected the following women:

1. **Bettina** – a 48 year-old Jewish activist involved in the Palestinian/Israeli solidarity movement; a supplementary school teacher; an economic justice activist; and a volunteer for various nonprofits.

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26 Specifically, two of the women I already knew: one is the mentor of my therapist, and I attended a workshop she offered several years ago. The second belongs to the same spiritual community as my sister, and I have met her a few times socially. I found the other three participants through mutual friends.

27 An important criterion in determining this “fit” was if the participants had the time necessary to take part in my study, and if our schedules were compatible.

28 All of the participants’ names used in this study are pseudonyms. I have also changed all the names in my participants’ quotes—the friends and family members they refer to in their stories.
2. **Whitney**—a Christian minister; a choir director; a one-woman organizer to rebuild a Bahamian community; a volunteer at a drug/alcohol recovery center in her neighborhood; and a very involved member of her local community.\(^{29}\)

3. **Rachele**—a 35 year-old Pagan priestess; an uncertified doula; and an environmental educator and activist.

4. **Gloria**—a 78 year-old psychotherapist; a former public health nurse and university professor; and a former front line activist in the American civil rights and women’s movements.

5. **Paula**—a 50 year-old Buddhist woman who does mindfulness and nonviolent communication work with prisoners; a gay/lesbian dignity activist; and a former organizer in a feminist book collective.

I completed two interviews with each woman, and each interview lasted approximately one and a half hours. Total time spent with participants ranged from three to four and half hours each.\(^{30}\) The interviews were completed at the time and place of my participants’ choosing (i.e. I tried to make my schedule as flexible as possible), and all but one of the interviews took place at my participants’ homes or offices. With permission, interviews were audio-taped, and I also took notes during our sessions.

Keeping with the goals of narrative inquiry, I posed open-ended questions to elicit responses that were organic and free-flowing. Though I came to each interview with a thorough list of questions, my goal was to be responsive to the energies, insights and stories emerging in the moment. Yet I also tried to keep a certain amount of focus to our interviews, thinking of my overall goals and gradually returning to my interview questions when it felt right to do so. My intention was not to provide comprehensive life histories of the activists; rather, I shaped my questions specifically to explore their inner motivations for activism and the role their spiritual paths played here. The first interviews focused on the primary thematic areas of my study: social justice, activism and spirituality (see *Appendix C: First*...)

\(^{29}\) Whitney’s age is not listed because I have been unable to get ahold of her to ask her how old she is.

\(^{30}\) I spent about four and a half hours with both Rachele and Paula. This was because I had technological problems—the tape recorder ran out of batteries and I did not know this—and had to re-do both of their second interviews.
Interview Questions); and the second interviews investigated issues that emerged from the first in more depth (see Appendix D: Sample of Second Interview Questions).

Upon completion of the interviews, I transcribed them into written form, and then sent these transcriptions to the participants for review. Three of the participants provided feedback on their interviews (either in person or over email); two did not. In order to enlist my narrators’ permission and assistance in the “telling” of their stories, I also offered them the option of reading my preliminary analysis before their narratives officially became part of my document. Here, two of my participants provided feedback, three did not. Most of the feedback I received involved minor corrections on wording, as well as a few clarifications on the meanings behind certain responses and quotes.

To analyze my data, I kept with the spirit of narrative inquiry by trying to allow themes and threads to emerge intuitively and with much presence and mindfulness. As I reflected on the interviews and shared highlights with friends and colleagues, I paid close attention to the differences and similarities between participants, and also to what most excited and inspired me. Throughout this process, I asked myself: what are the crucial pieces of wisdom and insight here? What needs to be remembered and celebrated about these women? This was not a scientific or detached process. I interpreted my data remaining empathetic, connected and intimately involved (Clinchy, 2003).

Yet with over 300 pages of interview text in front of me, my analysis was not as simple as listening to intuition. It was quite systematic as well, and I read, re-read, 

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31 I transcribed the first round of interviews myself, and hired someone to transcribe the rest.
32 It is important to note there was not a finite point in the research process where I ceased collecting data, and then began writing. In narrative inquiry, the relationship between collection and analysis is an ongoing process, as this technique asks for as much a continual researcher-participant dialogue as possible. Because I contacted participants throughout my analysis and writing, “data” was collected until the final document was complete (see Clandinin & Connelly, 1990 for further discussion).
highlighted and marked my transcriptions with different color pens, while often listening to the taped interviews. Again, my intention was to pin down common themes and moments of difference in women’s responses, as well as occasions of my own surprise and discovery. I also looked for specific narratives to illustrate these themes and moments, and noted areas of text I wanted to probe further in the second interviews. Sifting through hundreds of pages was an often tedious process, yet peeling away non-essential words and paragraphs, I found key meanings and key stories.

An important part of this analysis was paying attention to my own participation in this project. Before interviewing my participants, for instance, I asked my thesis advisor to interview me, as a way to uncover and articulate my own engagements with spiritual activism. Further, I kept a detailed “field notes” journal, recording reactions, insights and feelings after each interview. Here, I chronicled the nonverbal communication I exchanged with my participants, such as my comfort level during our meetings, details of their home environments, what they were wearing that day, or the quality of their energy or mood during our interviews. This journal was also a place for me to deepen my own narrative as a spiritual activist—to jot down spontaneous insights or memories evoked by the research process.

At this point, I organized stories and responses into roughly 15 general themes, and began to write freely on where and how these themes showed up in the interviews. This process naturally emerged into the writing of five separate narratives—one for each woman. Though I first attempted to relate my “data” solely through the structure of common themes, as I progressed, it became apparent that such a format was limiting to the creativity that wanted to reveal itself by describing and retelling the interviews. Instead, I chose free-
flowing narrative text to communicate the rich experiences of listening to these inspiring women. As I wrote these narratives, I wove my own thoughts, reflections and stories throughout. This process truly felt like a dialogue between the participants and me. It was creative, inspiring and fun.

So far, I have detailed the purpose of this thesis, positioned myself as researcher, explored literature most useful to this study, and specified the methodological framework and techniques used to carry it out. At this point, the reader is introduced to Gloria, Rachele, Paula, Whitney and Bettina, in that order, and is given the opportunity to travel through some inspiring moments of their lives and their work through story-telling and dialogue. Through these pages, I evoke the presence of these women and share some of their most significant engagements with spirituality and action for social justice.
CHAPTER IV: GLORIA

“As long as there are people who are enslaved, I am also enslaved.”

I first met Gloria four years ago, in a workshop she was facilitating on grief and loss. I was there as a participant, encouraged by my therapist to attend and to let Gloria impart her insights into the unhealed wounds of my premature birth and somewhat tumultuous four-year partnership. I had heard about this woman for some time, as she was (and is) the mentor of my therapist; and long before I met Gloria, I felt an affinity towards her for the ways she’d already vicariously touched my life.

Fast forward several years: I’m now a graduate student looking for women to participate in my thesis project. Actually, while visioning this project, I kept Gloria in mind, as I’d heard stories from my therapist of Gloria’s activism—including some of her acts of resistance during the civil rights movement, and also something about chaining herself to a church gate in support of women’s rights...? Plus, what I remembered most about Gloria from the grief workshop was a kind of peace about her, a steady wisdom I guessed had come about through a life well lived, and a larger, perhaps spiritual perspective on being alive.

Both interviews with Gloria were rich and delightful. Sitting at my kitchen table, and later at hers, I wanted to talk with her for hours. The tapes ran out long before her stories were ready to end, and both times we continued talking after I turned the recorder off. After the second interview, I had a strong urge to curl up on her couch with a cup of tea, asking big questions and soaking up the answers: “Really, why do you think things are sometimes so difficult, for me and for so many? What are the lessons your soul has learned so far in this lifetime, and how do I figure out what my soul needs to learn in mine?” When we parted ways, it felt entirely comfortable and comforting to share a big hug with her.
Gloria is a 78 year-old woman who was born and raised in Angola, central Africa, by Congregationalist missionary parents committed to social and spiritual justice. When asked to reflect on her path towards spiritual activism, Gloria explained that her political sensibilities were mentored and shaped at the family dinner table, where “there was always conversation about the Portuguese oppressing the Africans... and [about] the complaints of the [Angolan] government that the missions were teaching the Africans to be revolutionaries.” Gloria’s family and their guests “were always discussing theology, [specifically] ... the Christian message, [and] how ... distorted it became over the years.”

Her parents, especially her father, were lifelong social activists inspired by Jesus Christ’s teachings, and Gloria remembers from a young age hearing her father say: “As long as there are people who are enslaved, I am also enslaved.”

One image Gloria shared of her father was particularly powerful: she remembers him sitting “with his head in the radio during the BBC newscasts” throughout the World War II years:

We learned to be pretty respectful when that was happening ... cause it was the only time of day he could get the news ... He had a short wave radio. That made an impression on me! The news is important! What’s going on in the rest of the world is important. We’re not just sitting here on a mission station in the middle of Africa—and Angola is the middle of Africa, and we were on the high plateau about a third of the way into the bulk of Africa, so.. we were really remote. But! There was a war going on.

Indeed, from the time Gloria was eleven until she was sixteen, she was very alert to the War raging around her, and with me, shared many memories of this time period. A few others stand out, like this one:

[It was 1939,] and [my family was] on a German liner to South Africa. [I was 11 years old] ... We were about four or five days out of Southampton, [which was our destination], and the ... ship [had to turn] around. It was September 3, 1939, which is a big date—the day the Germans invaded Poland. We [had to] sail ... around in the
North Atlantic for ... 10 days or something like that—while the captain got his orders. There were Jewish people on board; they were going to South Africa. And we all got told that we were stopping in northern Spain—in Vigo, northern Spain, and everybody who could get off, better get off. And so all the people who had embassies in Lisbon or Madrid—got ambassadors, or representatives from embassies to come sign for them. Well the Jewish people didn’t have anybody! So my father got the American embassy to speak for the Jewish people on that ship. He was a mini Schindler! And they got off in Spain ... I think it was 38 or 39 people that he got off the boat. They’d be safer in Spain and Portugal at that time ... I don’t know what happened to them after that. We went on to Lisbon and stayed with friends until my father could get passage back to Angola. Meanwhile the war was going on big time...

Anyway, [while we were] ... on the German ship, ... [we heard] the Nazis all standing at the radio doing their sig heil. And I said to my mother, “What are they doing?” And she said, “They’re saluting Hitler.” And by then I knew Hitler was the bad guy. So I have these little vignettes of [injustices against the Jews during World War II]—little pictures in my head.

So although Gloria did not personally experience anti-Semitic violence or lose family and community to genocide, she also was not standing outside these atrocities. From her father, and by mindfully witnessing what was going on around her, Gloria was learning a responsibility to act on behalf of justice.

The War continued well into Gloria’s high school years, which were spent in a British boarding school in South Africa. Asked to describe her experience there, Gloria recalled the school basement where students were confined during air raid warnings, and also her Jewish piano teacher, a refugee, who would “burst into tears over a piece of music”—perhaps because it reminded the teacher of home. Continuing to grow in Gloria the teenager was a “keen ... sensitivity” to the injustices perpetrated against Jews worldwide, and the racism that fueled this violence. Gloria also remembered a professor she met as a Tulane University student in later years:

One of my professors was a Jewish refugee ... and [I] became friends with her. She told me her story. Coming out of Europe, spending years begging, begging her parents to notice what was happening. And finally, just taking her little satchel in her
hands and escaping across Germany and into France and over the Pyrenees, and making it onto a ship that ended up—that was supposed to dock in Miami. And the American government turned it away, because it was full of Jewish refugees... [They] put anchor down near Puerto Rico, and all the Jewish people of course [got] together and pray[ed]. She said somebody had somehow or other gotten hold of a Coca-Cola, and they passed it around sort of like a ceremony—and she said that taste of coke was an epiphany for her! Just makes me cry [choking up] to think about it! And she told me lots of stories about herself and her family. She lost her whole family.

Of course narratives often are not chronological, and as we returned to stories of Gloria’s boarding school through both interviews, it became apparent that these years were formative in marking her “own thinking, and [her] own life purpose.” Indeed, as Gloria became increasingly aware of the Holocaust in progress, and read up on Mahatma Gandhi’s philosophies in the United Church of Christ newspaper her father subscribed her to, Gloria felt more and more called to object to what was happening in her own backyard.

Specifically, Gloria remembers being the only student in her school to vocalize opposition towards apartheid, and felt singled out and at times quite isolated because of her decision to do so. Yet she was inexplicably, irrevocably called to stand her ground:

It was a matter of being moved. I don’t think I would have ... yelled at my classmates about apartheid ... [warning them that they would] pay dearly for this ... if I wasn’t moved to do so. If it had come out of my brain, if my left brain had said, “Well you really should say something about this,” I wouldn’t probably ever have done it. And the reason I say that is that there are times when I had no intention! And surprised myself! The words came out of me. I didn’t think of them ahead or anything like that.

And moved she was. This calling only increased as Gloria grew into young adulthood, and went on to become a public health nurse, political activist, educator, wife, mother, university instructor, and therapist. Living in the segregated south during the American civil rights movement, for example, Gloria could not ignore her call to be the “political animal” that she was; while completing graduate school, teaching nursing classes, raising four adopted
children, and caring for a sick husband, she found time to carry out subtle and not-so-subtle acts of resistance against the white power regime. She told a story, for instance, of "carry[ing] a screw driver with me ... to the [New Orleans] Health Department building ... to quietly unscrew the ‘white’ and ‘colored’ [signs outside] the bathrooms and [above] the drinking fountains ... when nobody was around... I had a shoebox full of them [by the time] I moved from Louisiana! [If] I had gotten caught, there would’ve been a lot of whoop-te-do!"

During these years, Gloria also routinely sat behind screens on public buses—screens used to segregate Blacks and whites:

I made a practice of getting on the bus, walking to the back of the bus and sitting behind the screen. And when the bus driver stopped his bus, came back and told me—you don’t belong back here, you belong in front! I [would say], “Well, I’m sitting back here.” So he [would take] the screen and put it behind me. And I waited for him to get back in his seat, and then went and sat behind the screen. Then he would stop the bus again. I guess he swore and muttered to himself and I didn’t pay any attention.

This determination and feisty spirit later led Gloria to teach reproductive rights and contraception in public health classrooms when it was illegal to do so; to march in protest against the Vietnam War; and, yes, to chain herself to the gates outside a Mormon temple in support of the Equal Rights Amendment during the Reagan era. Closer to home, as the mother of four adopted children, three of whom came from abusive, alcoholic homes and later died as young adults, Gloria also became a staunch advocate of children’s rights:

I’m a member of the Pre- and Perinatal Psychology Association. I’m militant about people being taught the responsibility of pregnancy. ... I teach it to high school kids when I can get my hands on them, [and] ... every time I get a chance, I shoot my mouth off around doctors and nurses, because they are chief perpetrators of prenatal and perinatal birth trauma. I’ve written lots of articles for ... [journals], so in that way, I’ve been vocal. If there is ever a march for babies, I’ll be there!
Even now as a therapist, Gloria sees her work as inherently political, insisting that “anyone who walks through [the therapy] door has made a step in terms of their political freedom... Therapy is a very political act... [as this] is where you learn how to think, [how to stand] on your own two feet, ... [and] how to speak up for yourself.”

Gloria offered many other stories of her own and her family’s activism. Yet what struck me more than the numerous interventions she orchestrated (and witnessed) was her way-of-being throughout these narratives—the presence and essence that make up Gloria the activist, the teacher, the mom, the healer. This woman is lively and spunky, yet sincerely gentle and open-hearted. She has the remarkable ability to be “no-bullshit” assertive, yet genuinely compassionate and loving. Beyond those already presented, there were many illustrations of Gloria’s spunk: on the day of our first interview, she wore purple from head to toe, and described with bellowing laughter how her mother hoped boarding school would tame Gloria’s “wildness and rebellion”! Further, when Gloria’s husband died and friends shared their condolences, she responded honestly and unapologetically: “People would say, ‘Oh you poor widow, you,’ like there is something bad about being a widow. And I would say, ‘HELL no! [These have] been the best years of my life! His dying was the most freeing thing that ever happened to me!’” As she told this anecdote, she had fire in her eyes and an aliveness in her voice. Rather than adopting a tragic outlook on the many losses in her life, Gloria has chosen a sense of humor, a refreshing directness, and a spit-fire energy.

Yet she is also deeply, deeply connected at the heart. Her tenacious spirit and commitment to blowing the whistle on injustice does not keep her from softening and opening when love and compassion is called for. When I asked, for instance, how Gloria thought contemporary social movements should shift or expand their focus, she offered:
"What I did at the University of Washington as a faculty person was simply institute hugging in the School of Nursing"—a move perhaps initially uncomfortable for her colleagues, yet quite effective in building community and camaraderie. To Gloria, engaging the heart is foundational to both inner and outer work, and she sees this energy center as a vital source of knowledge:

A few years ago, I became a heart math consultant, and heart math teaches a very specific process for listening to the heart ... [The] heart has the same kind of brain cells we have [in our heads], but it's not influenced by the limbic system—the fight, flight, or freeze system. The heart is ...clear when it tells you something. The information bypasses the head even ... [The heart is] a sensing organ, and it's got it has the same ... neurological structure that we have in our [brains] ... [Learning this] was the keystone for me. Click. It fell in to place, and ... my own practices became a whole lot clearer.

The practices that Gloria refers to here are not simply her practices as a therapist and healer. They also include listening to her inner wisdom when it comes to making decisions, charting the course of her life, and choosing her politics. She went on to explain that she sees the "heart center" as essentially synonymous with the "soul," and believes her soul is largely responsible for the events of her life—including her urges to confront injustice. Gloria is a deeply spiritual woman, and when I asked if her spiritual life had anything to do with her political work, she asserted:

Oh yes! I'm sure. I know at this point that the soul is why I'm here. I know that my soul is on a spiritual path. And this whole life is what my soul cooked up. And I know deeply that when I object to something that is happening in my life [or in the world], I just have to listen to my soul, and my soul goes, "Well, you asked for this." It makes it easier to handle once you stop acting like a victim and recognizing that hey, this is simply a part of the soul's path.

Naming her activist and spiritual journeys as "one stalk growing from the same seed,"

Gloria's call towards social justice work is a spiritual call:

[In the face of injustice,] there [is] a kind of inner pressure. I guess I would say it's my soul's path that [I] wouldn't let these things happen, that's all there was to it ...
[What I say and do] just comes spilling out. Like I know there’s a march going on, but I’ve got a million things to do, [so] I’m not gonna go. [But] I wouldn’t have been surprised Saturday if my car hadn’t turned around and taken me downtown [to the protest] instead of to the ... class [I was signed up for]. When my soul thinks I better do it, I better do it.

Gloria’s openness and commitment to a spiritual life began with the progressive Christianity of her childhood; and she has also been profoundly influenced by many spiritual teachers over the years, including Mahatma Gandhi, Ammachi and Yogananda, to name a few. Unlike my four other participants, Gloria does not currently identify with a particular religious tradition; yet her spiritual foundations are strong, and absolutely inform her values and priorities, her political work and her everyday life. At this point, says Gloria, the nuggets of spiritual wisdom that have led her to live and act in the ways she does have simply become a part of her:

It’s hard for me to separate [my various spiritual teachers from my inner self from my activism] because [they’re] all a part of me now when I reference my heart ... [I] simply allow the instructions to come through ... I’ve studied so many [spiritual teachers, and] I realize it’s all the same message. The message is ... well, love yourself totally, completely, unconditionally. Love and honor your family and friends and associates, and if and when you’re successful with that, then you can love God, which is circular because I am God. It’s coming to that realization that I am in this place of the universe. Nobody else occupies it. I am the embodiment of the Great Spirit, so I can’t separate [God, self and other] out.

As I listened to Gloria describe her relationship with Spirit, and as I learned how her “soul” speaks to her, I pictured Gloria sitting quietly in meditation, or walking slowly along the beach near her home, contemplating a decision or challenge she currently faced. Pulling out the Tarot cards, using runes to confirm her intuitions, getting an astrology reading every year—all of these are techniques that deepen Gloria’s connection to God and gently nudge her on a path of action. In her own words: “I am a soul on a spiritual path...There is a life beyond, [and] however it unfolds for each of us is going to be different.” So for this activist
and healer, it makes no sense to try to separate spirituality from activism—for all of life, including efforts to confront injustice, is spiritual.

Though I understood the seamlessness of these paths for Gloria, I wondered if she ever felt tensions between her spiritual and political communities:

No, I’ve never experienced [that, really] ... I belonged to the Congregational Church and also to the Presbyterian Church [at different times in my life]. The Congregational [Church I belonged to in Louisiana] was the Black church, and they certainly didn’t turn against me [when I talked about social justice], and the Presbyterians were trying to understand what to do with civil rights, so I was welcomed because I [had experience dealing with those issues]. No, I can’t say that [my] spiritual communities ever did turn against me.

When I asked her how she would respond if a spiritual teacher ever told her social justice had nothing to do with spiritual practice, she said, “[Well], I would disagree with that Rabbi and that priest or that minister and say, ‘You guys are missing the boat.’ I would be right in their face.” So for the most part, Gloria has felt supported in being the spiritual activist she is—not feeling “closeted” about her religion as an activist, or vice versa. And if tensions ever did arise, I gathered Gloria would remain true to her values, and would confront those who failed to understand the mutuality of these concerns. Yet later in our interview, she did mention some irritation with the lack of political rigor in certain spiritual communities:

[I have encountered] a lot of shallow, phoney ommm people ... It’s one of the reasons I haven’t joined [any of the] gurus who’ve come down the pike. Because of their followers! Not because of them! I have tremendous love and respect for Amachi. But the people who wander around, starry eyed, bla-bla-bla! It bothers me! ... [One time, I went to a Sufi retreat ... and the people were running around, looking up all the time, and not talking to you in the dining room, stuff like that. [They seemed pretty flakey to me] ... I thought, well that’s not the way I want my spirituality to unfold.

Listening to these anecdotes, I was reminded of the way I sometimes feel at the spiritual center I currently attend, a Church of Religious Science—which has fed me so much spiritually, but lacks, in my view, a commitment to social justice. Perhaps I am comparing
my experience there to those of my childhood Quaker meeting, where simplicity and social justice were core tenets, but frankly, I miss these commitments. Though I have never felt “closeted” as an activist in my church, I do find myself wondering if my co-Religious Scientists really value living lightly and consciously on the earth, or think deeply about how individual patterns of consumption affect collective well-being and conditions of life. I do feel tensions here—not because my social and political values are eschewed, but rather because I question if they are shared to the extent I need to feel completely at home spiritually. Like Gloria, I sometimes feel frustrated by the lack of political understanding and rigor I experience there.

Returning to my time with Gloria, I could go on and on. Thinking of my initial intention to be mentored through this project, I feel satisfied through my engagement with Gloria. Though we only spent a few hours together, I learned so much from her, for instance, about working with darkness and despair as part of activism. Let me back up a step: I did not realize this before I began my interviews, but a huge curiosity I brought to this project was how to work with the emotional challenges that seem to plague my life, and often zap the energy I want to give to my activism. To be frank, I have often felt in conflict with myself to the extent that I feel I have very little to give to others and to the world. I wish I could say that my bouts of depression, loneliness, anxiety and self-destruction were a thing of the past, a thing of my high school and college years. Yet this is not the case, and even as I write this I wonder if my occasional struggles for self-confidence and self-worth are interfering with my ability to finish this thesis. Or if my obsessive thoughts about food and body image are distracting me from my feminist commitment to better the lives of women and girls.
As I sat with Gloria, I was relieved to hear stories of overcoming her own struggle with depression, stories of alchemizing her own pain in order to become the healer and activist she is. Compassionate yet warrior-like as usual, she gave me some very pointed advice when I told her of my tendency to wallow in despair:

My attitude is that there is no excuse. You ruminate. [You might] sit and mull things over and over again. That ... behavior [is familiar to you]! Even though [you may feel] desperate or in despair or sad, mad or scared, [you have the power to] totally reduce these feelings ... [What works for me is to] bracket. I’ll take care of that [feeling] tonight, I’ll take care of that at lunchtime, or I’ll work on it this weekend. But now I have a job to do ... I guess that was from nurses’ training, but also from watching my parents—they were on 24/7, because the mission was right there, and the hospital was across the river. People were knocking on the door—all the time, there were things they desperately need! [My parents] never had a break unless they went off the mission station ... You don’t have time to self-indulge, I guess. Is the way to look at it.

She also offered that it is perhaps my soul’s path to heal depression in this lifetime, and encouraged me to be gentle with myself in the process. Listening to Gloria, appreciating once again her strength of spirit, I realized how very small my world can become, and how this self-absorption really does keep me from the work I am here to do. However, as Gloria pointed out, dark feelings and experiences need not paralyze the activist engine. Struggle and set-back has been, and may continue to be, a part of my life—as is the human condition. Yet I can still be a passionate and powerful social justice worker, for my commitment to healing, to inner work, is an important part of this process. Thank you, Gloria, for that affirmation.
CHAPTER V: RACHELE

"It's just this rush of religious ecstasy..."

As I drove to meet Rachele for our first interview, approaching the address she gave me, I realized she lived in one of my favorite parts of Seattle. Front door opening to Puget Sound, her house faces sunsets and a beach that turns pink in the evenings, and is situated a few doors down from a beautiful, forested public park. As I pulled up in front, I noticed her place was the only one on the block that wasn't multiple stories tall, and the only one without pristine landscaping and brand-new windows. With a small willow tree next to a child's swing set in the yard, and stacks of flower pots and gardening tools near her front door, Rachele's home seemed well-loved and well-lived in.

While Rachele and I sat in her dining room for one, two, three interviews, it was hard to take my eyes off the expansive beach views through her windows. Yet there was plenty to look at inside as well: Rachele's animated face, her cats jumping on and off the table, and the baby tomato plants sprouting in their starter boxes nearby. Somehow, this space was familiar to me... Not because it reminded me of my own home, but rather, it brought me back to my uncle and aunt's house in rural Iowa: dusty, sometimes musty, with stacks of books and toys scattered throughout the house, and bathroom walls the color of mint-green tic tacs. It indicated the presence of people who have more important things to do than incessantly organize and clean.

Indeed. Rachele has been a full-time educator and administrator for the same nonprofit environmental organization for fourteen years. Yet this "paid" work is only one area of Rachele's social justice activism. In addition to being a mom, she is a priestess for her non-denominational pagan group, where she provides "spiritual direction and facilitation"; organizes and plans rituals; offers resources and counseling for community...
members; and addresses issues such as homophobia, racism, classism (etc.) among the group’s constituency. Rachele also serves as an uncertified doula, where she helps women obtain fair and accurate access to reproductive knowledge and health care.

I first met Rachele eight years ago when she worked for the same environmental organization as my former housemate. This housemate always talked fondly of Rachele, sharing with me the admiration she felt towards her activism and the lively, open energy Rachele brought to their office. Five years later, I re-encountered Rachele—this time through my sister, who had recently joined the pagan group Rachele co-founded with her husband. As my sister continued her involvement with this community, I bumped into Rachele at occasional parties and outings, and always enjoyed the opportunity to talk about her inspiring work and life.

Reflecting on our three sessions together, I think what moved me the most was when she disclosed how she lives much of her life in religious ecstasy. That’s right, for Rachele, work as environmentalist, priestess and doula brings her into sacred contact with the Divine. Throughout her life, Rachele explained, she has “felt as close to God outdoors” as she was in a church, and has always been drawn to honor the natural environment as a religious practice. And by young adulthood Rachele felt her activism and spiritual practice had really become one:

There was a moment… it might have been as long as 10 years ago now when I just looked up one day, and [realized] I’d managed to completely integrate my spirituality with my day to day life, [and with my work]… It’s seamless now. I mean, there are certainly times when I’m more focused on the spiritual stuff, and I don’t pretend that I’ve overcome the mind, body, spirit dichotomy I was raised with, but at the same time, I can be on a field trip with the kids and will … have this completely unusual experience of seeing wildlife… and it’s just this rush of religious ecstasy… When I’m making that connection between the earth and another person or when a mother is deep into labor, and … I can see her power, or when I’m getting my garden bed ready to plant. It’s just overwhelming. I cease functioning… It’s so feeding. It’s
so nourishing to my soul to do those things. When I’m sitting at the office, it doesn’t happen quite so often (laughs). If I’m folding laundry, it doesn’t really happen so often, but it’s definitely something that ...happens fairly frequently. [My activism is part of this, and] it’s not an isolated experience for me.

For Rachele, being an activist means being in sacred service to the earth, so it makes no sense to separate her political work from her spiritual path. As was true for Gloria, they are one and the same—interdependent and interwoven.

Exploring this seamlessness, I asked Rachele to think of a time she called upon her spiritual beliefs to inform her activism. She shared this story:

[During my junior year in high school, I was reading] the book *Spiral Dance* by Starhawk, and ... this was my first exposure to the idea of Wicca and specifically a female deity which had enormous appeal to me. [That same year, I went to an ecology camp with a bunch of other high school students.] On the last night of the camp we were asked to put together a ceremony to honor our time there, and for my part of the ceremony, I took on the role of the mother goddess, and as we were walking across this meadow to a fire... I felt this mind altering moment of being the earth and feeling all the things that were happening to her... And it just cemented right there this idea of, you know, if I’m going, if I’m going to honor this earth spiritually, then there is a necessary action that has to take place too. And ... so I came home and promptly started writing a radical environmental column for the school newspaper. It was just like boom! (Snaps fingers.) Okay, here you go. This is what you’re going to do now.

So for Rachele, the message was (snap!) clear: it is a spiritual responsibility to work on behalf of the planet, to give back to the earth in gratitude for all the gifts she has received. She continued: “I’m in service to my deities, and that for me is service to the earth... What I do for my employment comes directly out of the agreement that I have with my gods ... to help people understand and appreciate what it is that [the gods have] given us.”

As our dialogue progressed, I learned that honoring the environment as a sacred practice had been with Rachele from an early age. From the setting of her childhood home (where she now lives in as an adult), to her family’s many camping and hiking excursions, to being raised by conservationist parents—Rachele has always felt at home in nature. I
pictures her as a kid, climbing trees in the woods near her house, curly red hair tied back in braids, sorting rocks and sticks on the ocean’s edge, and eagerly joining her dad and brother on fishing trips throughout Washington state. Yet my felt sense of Rachele the spiritual environmentalist really solidified when she told the following story:

Rachele: I was about 12 or 13 when I really started to tap into the specific spirituality that I practice now ... which is very much based on the energy of this place and the seasonal round of this place, and the animals and plants that are native to this place. It was about that time when I was questioning a lot about religion. I was going to a Christian church youth group because it was social time, and a lot of my friends were already going, and ironically, the youth group leader was a guy who was really involved in Eastern mysticism. He did a guided meditation for us at a youth group meeting during which I met a spirit guide who ... [was] an animistic representation of the Spirit of the Wind and Waves ...

Interviewer: How did you know at 12 or 13 who you were meeting?

Rachele: Cause he told me (laughs) ... He’s one of the guides ... and he introduced me to many others... He was always my buddy, and he was my mentor in a lot of ways, and was a friend in need too. If I was alone, I wasn’t alone because I could talk with him, and he became really linked with my spending time on the beach.

As I listened to this narrative, I felt chills along my arms, and wanted to hear more about the sacred experiences and encounters of young Rachele’s life. Sure, I’ve often felt the presence of the Divine near the water, or when hiking deep into the forest—but to have such clear spiritual communion at age thirteen? Wow. And what was even more amazing is what Rachele told me a few minutes later:

... the more I learn about Salish beliefs and traditions—which is a hard thing to do because there’s so much cultural mining of the Native traditions. I’m not like actively searching to find more information about this because I haven’t quite figured out how to make the approach in a respectful way. Yet the more I learn about it, the more there are just some really eerie similarities between [Salish traditions] and what was shown to me by my guides at age 13. Similar beliefs, similar animistic descriptions. [It’s] as though there is an energetic current that’s happening in this place that informs a pretty similar set of [spiritual] beliefs.
I take the similarities between Salish traditions and Rachele’s early experiences of the Sacred as a confirmation of her receptivity to what was (and is) spiritually alive in our geographic area, the Pacific Northwest. Personally, I do believe certain spirits, deities, or energies co-exist alongside those three-dimensional beings I can see and touch. Perhaps Rachele was (and is) simply more receptive to non-human life than I have been—too busy, too left-brained and/or too skeptical to commune with the transpersonal realms.

And receptive she is. As our interview went on, I was struck by how interconnected Rachele feels to all of life, human and non-human, and how this is a primary inspiration for the work she does. Exploring her definition of justice, for instance, Rachele explained:

Humans are a species, but there are a lot of other species who deserve justice as well, and they can’t speak for themselves, at least not in ways that most people are willing to listen to. So my work is very much trying to be a voice for them as well. To help people understand and appreciate the connectivity of it all, that we are not alone in this. The earth is not an optional thing.

Throughout our interviews, Rachele shared many stories of being keenly aware of the non-human creatures around her—from how her parents taught her to “know what all the plants and bugs and animals and stars” were, to the time her pagan group unintentionally called a beaver, raccoons and coyotes into their ritual one summer afternoon. A few other narratives are particularly illustrative here, including:

[Once when I was a kid, a] fire happened at a ...sawmill near a cabin that my family has on the Snohomish River. I remember coming up out of the river, I’d been swimming, and I came up out of the river, and there was this little alder tree that was in flames. A live alder tree that was in flames, and it just about killed me! I was just so aware of the excruciating pain that this creature was in, and nobody was going to pay any attention to little, you know, silly little me. “Oh, there’s [Rachele] all upset about the plants again!” [I’ve always had that level of receptivity with trees and plants]. One of the things that I notice is that trees really love attention ... I’ve had experiences with trees where I just don’t want to leave them because this is the first person’s who’s acknowledged their existence, ever ... It is a matter of knowing how to communicate with them.
And a similarly powerful anecdote from more recent times:

I went hiking in the Olympics last summer, and had not done any serious backpacking before that. I packed my pack way too heavy, and my knees are not strong to begin with, and so by the time we got to camp, ... I was ready to die ... And so (sighs), we set up our camp, and [there was] this beautiful cold river, and I [thought], “Ok, I’m going to go soak my feet and my legs in the river, and then hopefully, I’ll feel better.” And I’m out in the middle of this relatively untrammelled space, so I have an expectation of the kind of plants that I’m going to encounter, [and] the kinds of plants I’m not going to encounter there. The last thing I was expecting to encounter was the stinging nettle because they like disturbed soil, and that’s not what I thought would be there at all. [So] I’m stumbling down the bank, and I put my left knee fully into this stinging nettle—which upon reflection, that’s what had to happen because the sting irritated the inflammation in the knee. And my knee felt fine after that! It was just this crazy little, “Ok, the monkey brain is not scanning, so we’re going to go at a different level here.” (Laughs.) It was the only nettle for 50 miles around!

So for Rachele, to believe in justice and dignity means to attend to the plants and animals with which humans share the planet, and to be receptive to the communications they share with us. And to live spiritually means to acknowledge and commune “with the spirits of all the ... plants and trees and [the] weather,” and to work for their well-being in addition to our own.

As I continue to compose Rachele’s story, I do not intend to paint a picture of a woman who spends all of her “activist” time talking with plants and animals. Rachele is also fiercely political, feminist, and very much engaged in grassroots efforts to change structures of domination and control. She has a good grasp on the work being done by human rights and environmental advocacy groups, and participates strongly in such efforts. Though she named herself a “conflict avoider,” this woman is more than willing to go to task for what she believes in, and can call up a warrior spirit and mama-bear energy to take her points home. For instance, when I asked her to remember the time she first felt compelled to act, she shared:
I was probably 14 or 15, and I was riding the bus with my mom, and there was this guy on the bus with his daughter, and she was just a beautiful. She looked like a little fairy. She was just this six or seven year-old skinny little elfin-featured blonde girl, and she just really looked like she was out of a storybook or something. Her dad was giving her a really hard time and teasing her, and it was clear that she didn’t like it. And he was like, “What are you going to do about it? What are you going to do about it?” And [he started] smacking her. Finally, I just couldn’t sit still, and I said, “Would you please refrain from disciplining your child while you’re on the bus?” And, oh, he just gave me hell! And nobody backed me up. [I mean] my mom didn’t back me up. [But I had to do it].

Similarly, describing her reaction when a man inappropriately joined the sacred space during one of her community’s rituals, Rachele said: “I was very upset! He couldn’t just come in! I was very assertive, and confronted the guy who invited him to join the ritual. A few people in the community had a big response to my assertiveness. It was like Kali-energy or something, and nothing could stand in my way.”

As Rachele shared this anecdote, she made large hand gestures, stretching her arms wide and curling her fingers into claws. These stories, along with a spark in her eyes and forcefulness in her voice, gave me a strong sense of the energy Rachele brings to her activism. Probing the source of this power, I asked where she gets the fuel for her activism. Returning to her spiritual path, she offered:

I’ve noticed in my organization that… there seems to be this sort of… new breed of young white liberals that’s this very earnest [slaps table], no nonsense! … They [can be] so grim about it, [no] celebration and joyous energy, [no] … looking forward to what we’re working for—or even the hope that it’s coming. It’s just this grim, determined, nose-to-the grindstone battle. I feel that energy, and I understand where that’s coming from, [to] … keep fighting, keep fighting, keep fighting … but you can’t do that constantly or you burn out, and without … a deep spiritual center, … I just wonder how do they get their fuel? Where do they get the energy to keep going, and what’s going to happen when it runs out? … This weekend was a great example [for me]. It’s Beltane! It’s spring! It’s beautiful! I’m in love, and why not have a great time and just put everything else aside for a while, and allow the mirth and the joy to come through and feed my soul? So then I can get up and keep going? And at the end of the day yesterday [after the Beltane celebration], I physically was so wiped out. (Laughs). I’m still feeling a little tired physically, but emotionally I’m feeling

33 Beltane is a Pagan holiday, which marks the beginning of summer.
really energized and inspired! Let’s go out there! Let’s plant the garden! Let’s write letters!... I’m ready to take on another big bite of the part of life that’s more difficult, and that’s nice.

Illustrating again the seamlessness of spiritual and activist concerns, many of the resources Rachele needs for political work come directly from religious practices such as ritual and celebration. She also talked of this “deep spiritual center” as a source of solace and rejuvenation when she feels powerless to effect change:

[For me,] the act of prayer, the act of ritual is ... a release of energy, a therapy, a way of dealing with strong emotions that [I] have around [a social or political issue] ... Like journaling, or ‘God is my therapist’ kind of idea: that just being able to communicate with the Divine is ...a way to deal with situations that you might not have any other way of dealing with. From that Divine message, [I can] start to reframe things in [my] own mind, [and am able to move forward from there].”

So spiritual practices may not make obvious, visible impacts on social or political conditions, yet they are important steps in Rachele’s activist process.

While Rachele remains firmly committed to both spirituality and politics, she does occasionally feel tensions between these communities:

[In some of my political circles I don’t feel like I can talk about my religion.] The Christian right can come out and be so clearly spiritually focused with their politics, but if the left does it, we’re all a bunch of rainbow chasing smurf worshipers ... “Oh, you touchy feely new age freaks who believe in love and all this stuff,” and again, it’s a bad thing to be that way. It’s a bad thing to connect with each other and to honestly, you know, try to have love and compassion for each other. That destroys your credibility... I don’t find many of my colleagues pursuing a similar [religious] path [of Paganism], and that surprises me.... I don’t know how safe it is to open up to them about my spirituality, and it’s such a huge part of my life.

Listening to Rachele, I realized she was putting words to frustrations I have sometimes felt working within progressive social change movements where my spiritual beliefs have not always felt welcome. As an advocate for battered women, for instance, I once mentioned to my co-workers the idea of bringing up spiritual beliefs in support group. In response, my supervisor told me, basically, that “religion” was off-limits in our work with survivors. In
fact, I soon learned of an organizational policy that discouraged staff from disclosing religious orientation to clients, and also from celebrating religious holidays at work. While I completely understand the intention behind such policies—to make all women feel welcome (regardless of faith, or lack thereof)—I also felt a part of me shut down as a result. I am a Quaker, I do meditate and pray regularly, and these beliefs and practices enhance who I am as a counselor, educator and activist. I wanted to share in support group, for instance, the healing I’d found through spiritual work, sensing my experiences might be of help to the women in their dark times. Ironically, though my critical analysis and feminist actions were definitely welcome at this agency, a primary inspiration for these commitments was not.

Rachele seemed to resonate. Though she sometimes feels her politics are rejected by her faith community (and cites members of her pagan group who say: “Why do you let that bother you, [Rachele]? Why do you get so worked up about it?”), the tensions seem to be stronger in activist than spiritual circles:

With the outcome of the recent presidential election, I found it very energizing in a really awful way (laughs)... When [things turned out the way] they did, I felt like, “Well, you know, now it’s time to go in swinging, and so what can I do?” ... I had examined how the Christian right had ... been slowly spinning and slowly building with media attention, and what happened in November should not have been that shocking if you look at all the time and effort that [the Christian right] put in to it, so I thought, “Well, okay, if they can do it, we can do it,” and started creating some coalitions of people to start a similar campaign from a more liberal side ... I got together a bunch of folks in the pagan community [and a few others], and we did a focus group that was ... based on sort of our spiritual world view ... We wound up ... with some key words that we could use in the same way that the Christian right has been using language.

What I found myself struggling with is that I feel like so much of what the Right has done is based on this culture of hate and ... the idea of that love is not okay. It’s not

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34 It is important here to note that I fully acknowledge the source of (some) progressive activists’ apprehensions about religion. As mentioned previously, the Religious Right equates God with the repressive policies they want to further; consequently, progressive activists (like my supervisor perhaps) have become wary of bringing any kind of “spirituality” into an organization focused on safety and empowerment for women. (See Minow, 2002, for further discussion on how religious activist groups have taken over public functions).
okay to love your neighbor. It’s not okay to love the people that you want to love if it
doesn’t fit a very narrow mandate that they’ve come up with. It’s not okay to love
people in other countries if you don’t like the way things are going there. [What I
realized is that] basically my message as I’m looking towards social change … is
[that] love is okay. When did it become okay to not love people, to not say yes to love
that you feel in your heart? When did it become okay to just ignore that and isolate
yourself in fear and anger and hatred? … [Yet] the traditional means of being an
activist don’t really provide me with a clear avenue for getting that message across in
a way that’s not just going to be looked at as, “Oh, well, look at that nut burger,” and
so there is a tension and a struggle there.

What I found particularly insightful about this story were Rachele’s comments on “love,” as I
too have often felt a lack of warm-hearted and open energy from folks committed to social
justice. This of course has not been true across the board, but I definitely understand
Rachele’s description of many contemporary activists as “grim, determined and nose-to-the
grindstone,” and often wonder if how we approach our political work is what we will be left
with in the end. “We make the road by walking,” as Paulo Freire and Myles Horton have
said. Though focusing on “love” may be dismissed by some activists as flakey or new-agey,
I really get Rachele’s argument. As Gloria pointed out, bringing the heart into activism is not
an escape from politics; rather, progressives need a platform that addresses how we treat each
other, ourselves and even our supposed “enemies.” Working to change material conditions is
of course crucial to social justice, but the world also needs to be envisioned and approached
through gentle, hopeful, and (dare I say) loving eyes. Perhaps, as Rachele implies, it is
precisely by incorporating “spiritual” values such as compassion and openheartedness that
movements can be best sustained and furthered.
"Condoleezza Rice is like a sister to me."

Talking to Paula was like talking to a wise older sister, or to the aunt I always wished I had. Paula came to me through a mutual acquaintance—a woman I know from the Quaker meeting, and Paula knows through her Buddhist sangha. Turns out Paula lives in the same neighborhood I do, just a short walk from my place... When she greeted me at her door for our first interview, I was struck by how comfortable she felt to me, and wanted immediately to hug her. So I did. Her apartment was tidy, with expansive windows and views of Lake Washington and the Cascades in the distance, and a breeze that circulated the room. Even now, several months later, I can still hear the wind chimes that filled her living room, dusting it with a peaceful presence. Settling onto her couch with the tape recorder between us, I felt I was having tea with an old friend rather than conducting a research interview.

The sense of sanctuary in Paula’s home extends to other realms of her life as well. I was touched, for instance, by how central Paula’s spiritual path has been to her for some time, despite the fact that she felt very little connection to her religious upbringing as a child. She was raised Christian, “a shallow kind of Christian orientation, [where] it was most important to be seen as a family at church,” and therefore felt very disconnected for many years from organized religion. Yet Paula said she has always had a “strong sense of spirituality,” and remembers wanting to be a Catholic nun as a teen because the monastic lifestyle intrigued her, though she knew virtually nothing about Catholicism at the time. She also recalled:

When I was seven, we were on our way to Pakistan and we were in Bangkok for three days. [Standing on the street, watching a group of monks walking past], I was sooo ready to leave my parents and go with the monks! I was like “Why not? There they are!” It was so familiar to me in that way, so homey, and so... I can’t say exactly but I just have this sense that I’ve had many lifetimes in Asia practicing, and certainly
with some of the people I’m practicing with now, certainly with my co-workers. My main people, I’ve been with most of them many times before. I don’t know that for sure, but I have this enduring sense of longevity, you know?

To me, this anecdote points not only to the soul-level connection Paula feels presently with those closest to her, but also to a receptivity towards the Sacred that has been with her from a young age. Currently an active member of the Order of Interbeing, a Buddhist community founded by Thich Nhat Hanh, Paula found Buddhism in her early twenties. Since then—for the last thirty years or so—Paula has practiced fairly consistently and names Buddhism as integral to all parts of her life.

Like her spiritual inclinations, Paula’s political sensibilities began to come alive at a young age. Though she says these sensibilities were not directly nurtured by her parents, she credits the years she lived abroad from age seven to nine with her family as the “most formative political experience” of her life:

In Pakistan, there were so many people living, and dying, in poverty. Very huge big dramas of injustice being played out, on a much bigger canvas than anything I’d experienced in my hometown. It was a microcosm of the world, where disparities and inequities were very pronounced and much more obvious than at home. And I really saw for the first time. I saw the race and class grid for the first time. It was just the right time for me. I was really blessed with that formative experience—really seeing how race affected your status in society, for example. There was this whole thing from light colored to dark colored—the lighter you were in Pakistan, the better your life was. People with lighter skin had the better jobs. And the same thing with class... The reasons people were in Pakistan made a difference—whether it was diplomatic or military or as missionaries... Only wealthy Pakistanis could go to the international school my brother and I attended, but they still were Pakistanis. They still had that racial place on the scale. There was this girl I went to school with and we used to share birthday parties. She was from this wealthy Pakistani family who had a beautiful home, but they were still Pakistani. There was this daughter of the Japanese ambassador at my school too, but she was still Japanese... And then the locals. They lived so differently than any of us at the school! It was such a graphic learning.

As was true for Gloria as well as for me, living abroad and witnessing social divisions in a pronounced way provided the graphic learning Paula needed to begin to understand the
magnitude of the world’s racial and economic disparities. She returned to the States with an altered, more embodied sense of what constituted injustice—and as she was readjusting to middle-class suburban life, the civil rights movement began to heat up. Not long after, Paula began to hear about protests against the Vietnam War, and for the first time, realized it was actually possible to speak and act against the injustices she felt in her body:

When I came back to this country after living abroad ...there were the voting rights marches. Particularly, I remember Selma in 1965 was a big deal in the media, and I could so understand what these people were marching about even though I didn’t really have a lot of African Americans in my life ... I totally understood what the civil rights movement was about when I saw it on TV because of having lived overseas and [having] seen [the] race and class [dynamics] in third world country. And protest against the Vietnam War was starting to heat up! Even though I’d never heard of Vietnam, I knew what they were talking about because I had lived in Pakistan … "Wow," [I thought], “there’s a community of people who are putting themselves at risk in the civil rights movement and Vietnam,” even though I was 11 years old. It was like, “I know what that’s about, and I want to be part of it,” and I think from then on [I felt] … that sense of there are other people like me, and we can make a difference! All of a sudden, I was empowered...

God it was great! I mean, it was great. That’s when I started becoming a news person … And I started reading about Harriet Tubman and ... about slavery and about liberation from slavery. It was this fabulous awakening, and ... [even though] I was up in upstate New York, I just felt very close to [the demonstrations in the South] and [felt] very excited and connected … It was interesting too ‘cause … the lesson from my family was just be real quiet (whispering) and try to be nice. Just try not to be noticed, just try to be really invisible and not be noticed … Things are the way they are, that’s how it is. You can’t really do anything about it… [But] then afterwards, it was like “Wow, it’s really important to be visible. It’s really important to see people and talk with them and be connected. [And I can speak up!]”

Since these adolescent experiences, Paula has continued to cultivate and honor this sense of empowerment and connection, committing to social justice on many fronts. Her activism has included antiracism organizing, helping to run a progressive bookstore, efforts towards peace and nonviolence, and gay and lesbian dignity work. She currently teaches nonviolent communication and mindfulness meditation to western Washington prisoners—as part of a project run by a nonprofit organization.
With longtime commitments to both spirituality and activism, Paula understands, and lives, the seamlessness of these paths. As a case in point, when I asked Paula to describe her work towards social justice, she immediately began to discuss spirituality:

For me, social justice comes from the same place that spirituality comes from. Which is that desire to honor life and to be in right relationship with life and with non-life, with material things that maybe we don’t consider alive, and [to be present with myself and my] thoughts and habitual energy. So trying to have some consciousness and to live in integrity.

Paula insisted that her spiritual path and political work “come from the same place... That expansive quality, that spiritual yearning for everyone. It’s wanting everyone to have well-being! It’s like two shoots of the same seed, [or maybe] it’s the same shoot.” Further, she named her religion as a source of sanctuary and fuel for her political work:

[When I’m feeling overwhelmed by the magnitude of the work that needs to be done], I take refuge in the tools of Buddhism—we call them the Buddha, the dharma and the sangha. I take refuge in our capacity to wake up. I know all of us have this capacity, I know that. There’s this way that it is kind of like prayer, by taking refuge in that. In settling into “I don’t know what to do.” Not “there’s nothing I can do,” which is the doubt place, but “I don’t know what to do, I’m lost, and I know there is a bigger order of things, and that there is a way forward” ... And the same with the dharma, which is how things are and the ability to learn from our lives. And then sangha is people on the path, specifically on this spiritual path, but also all of life that is supporting life—you know this plant is giving me oxygen. So taking refuge in the whole thing, including the mess—that that’s an opportunity to wake up.

Paula’s taking refuge in “spiritual” tools extends to facing a not-so-optimistic fate of the planet. To my surprise, when I asked her if she had faith in the survival of our earth and its people, she explained:

No, I don’t feel optimistic. I don’t think it looks very promising for the planet to survive, at least for human beings to survive on the planet. Actually, I have a lot of despair about that because I just love our earth so much! ... I think optimism and hope in some ways can be a little bit trite. It’s like there’s this attachment to the outcome which to me is sometimes a distraction from what is actually happening in the present ... “Yeah, it’s bad now, but maybe it’ll be better in the future.” There’s this element of denial in there that I’m nervous about ... but the thing that we can take refuge in our interconnection, and we can take refuge in what we have right now, the
richness that we have. And in our capacity to heal, and to heal the planet. We can take refuge in that, and without saying “until we...” Just that to know that I have this moment with you. I have this day, maybe I’ll have the rest of this day to be alive, and I have these tools that can really help me when I’m stuck. Basically to take refuge in the richness [of] our inner resources and... our collective resources, and nobody can take that away from us... That interconnection is our wealth... Yes, there are rapists in this world that don’t have any skills, and they’re going to be getting out of prison tomorrow. Yes, we have politicians [whose] idea of safety means destroying people on the planet. That is how it is, and yet, we still have all these tools, and we can use them to have an influence on George Bush or whoever.

So for Paula, spiritual beliefs not only fuel her political work, but also allow her to re-direct her focus towards the richness and beauty she experiences right now rather than some illusive future outcome.

Deepening our discussion on the seamlessness of spirituality and politics, I learned this mutuality was not without occasional challenge, however. Though Paula feels the two “come from the same place,” sometimes those around her do not seem to resonate:

The Sunday after 9/11 we went for a day of mindfulness, and this teacher gave a dharma talk about how all we can do is purify our own heart. And it was like, that was it! That was totally it! And I just got “I’m going home, I’m not staying here the rest of day.”... And I went home and made signs on the computer that said, “Only love and compassion can end hatred and ignorance.” I made them on card stock, and spent the rest of the afternoon taking them [around] to people, and putting them [up] in my car.

Another time, after Paula gave a talk at a Dharma center about her work in Palestine, several teachers at this center were quite upset, saying, “This is not the purpose of our center.”

Despite such frustrations, Paula says she has come to the understanding that, ultimately, it’s all the same work:

It’s my work to work with my political activists friends and help inspire them to feel their pain, and connect with other people’s pain... And at the same time, [to work with] my spiritual friends who... [ask] why would you waste your time sitting on your cushion? To really help them feel the pain of their denial, to help them feel the pain of shutting out so much of the world... Really, I think our spiritual lives are about making our world bigger, making our hearts bigger, and making more space for people we don’t agree with, or we don’t understand... Pema Chodron has said you
can take your temperature spiritually by asking: Am I comfortable in fewer situations [I find myself], wanting to be around people just like [me], or [am I] more comfortable with different kinds of people? … The work is expanding our hearts.

This is related to what touched me perhaps most about Paula: her continual referencing of the interconnectedness of all beings—human and non-human. Listening to her stories, I came to understand that this sense of “co-arising” is far more than an abstract idea, or a principle for Paula—it is something she lives, breathes and holds close to heart in her spiritual practice, her political work and her everyday life. Exploring definitions of social justice, for instance, she shared:

I believe … the inspiration and the passion to care for your well-being or [my cat’s] well being, or the well-being of the women who made the saris that make up this rug, is not really separate from caring for my own well-being. So … the definition [of social justice] for me includes doing inner work, really exploring what is going on for me, and having that commitment to inner work. And commitment to developing healthy, respectful, honest relationships, and then … starting or joining groups that have the same intention. And then working in the bigger world, for cultural or global institutions… creating those kinds of structures too. So that pretty much covers everything from waking up in the morning till you go to bed at night… The food I eat has to do with it, the water from the place where these cotton socks came from, the water that gets destroyed by pesticides because it’s not organic cotton. That is all part of the whole picture.

Paula’s beliefs make perfect sense to me: if we recognize the interdependency of our actions towards self, others and our planet, we cannot help but work towards change. As we affect the lives of others, we affect our own lives, and vice versa. No longer are we cordoned off in our own nuclear-family, picket-fence homes in suburbia, each driving separate cars and looking after only our own well-being. Rather, strength comes from togetherness, from mutual care for one another, from generosity and sharing. A story Paula told furthers these ideas:

[Last] Friday night, [I met with the] multiracial sangha [of my spiritual community] – I brought up that I’d seen this amazing documentary about Birmingham 1963, the Children’s Crusade—ahh, it was so inspiring. So then we were talking about the civil
rights movement, and slavery, the Dred Scott case, etc. ... A dear friend of mine was talking about how African Americans often times have not had the luxury to trust that white people randomly, or even white people they knew necessarily were going to act in ways that would support their lives as African Americans. And how this led to just trusting [people in your own "group"]—the more insular, you know, the better. You can only trust people like "us." [I totally understand where this comes from,] and I [felt it important] to speak up and say that that is the kool-aid, that idea that our safety comes from [our] being separate. I can [only] be safe with people like me. That is what is forces fascism are counting on us to take refuge in—as opposed to our safety comes from our connection, that's where our wealth comes from. And also in terms of greed. This idea that I'm really nobody but I can import, I might be somebody if I can buy these shoes or something like that. I can buy my way into somebody-ness ... As opposed to the mindfulness model, which is we are wealthy because of our sharing, and because of the abundance of the earth! There is no scarcity, it's just about how we share...

And so ... the next day we were at the [antiwar] rally, and we were [seeing a lot] of enemy images all around. So I think the four of us who were together [and who had been at the multiracial sangha the night before] were able to see things. Rather than buy into the enemy images of, you know, the fucking Bush administration... We could reflect with each other... "Oh yeah, I do hate Donald Rumsfeld." But then flip over, to "Oh yeah, actually it's about the core of hatred in ourselves, not Donald Rumsfield."

So for Paula, as for Rachele, activism is not just about transforming political and social structures. It is also about recognizing and honoring the "humanness" that we all share, and extending compassion even to those we disagree with the most, or those we believe are perpetrating the greatest injustices. Though Paula offered many examples of using such an approach, one story was particularly powerful:

Did I tell you I was born on the same day as Condoleezza Rice? Yeah, we share the same birthday, same year, so she's kind of a sister... We both turned fifty in November, and so we had this sort of collective virtual birthday party where some [of my] friends came over, and we [talked about] how [we could] live in this world with Condeleeza and [Paula]. I have had a practice [where] I really make a point to check in with her heart. Several times a week, really making a practice of cultivating a relationship with her heart, and sending her loving kindness in a way that she could maybe open up to the hearts of other people. [It could] make a big difference now (laughs) if she would! I have this very strong sense that she is not separate from me. When I hear on Democracy Now what she's done yesterday and want to puke, I can really still connect with Condoleezza Rice's heart. I'm not there with George Bush, I haven't done that practice with him. But I have a strong sense she is my sister. [I
know] she really wants to help the world in her way, and she’s got this strategy for
how to do it. It’s completely 180 from what I would choose. And spirituality is
really important to her too, in a very different way. But I can see ... that we’ve had
parallel influences, and we’ve made parallel decisions with our lives, and I’m really
committed to working with her and not hating her. I hated Madeline Albright, and
I’ve hated so many Secretaries of State. [That hatred is such] a waste! Yeah it just
poisons me ... It’s not like I have optimism that “Wow, we’re going to open Condie’s
heart, and she’s going to change the State Department!” But there is this knowing
fundamentally that she is me, and we can connect with each other, and we can
influence each other. I know that. I know that cause she’s let me see her in various
states of openness and closed-ness.

Clearly, Paula’s commitment to honoring the interconnectedness of all beings is foundational
to her activism. This also came through when I asked what inspired and sustained her
activism. Citing the many “people on the margins” she had worked with over the years, she
said:

Throughout my life, people at the margins have been such teachers for me. And so
often, many of them think they are nobodys. That they are just nothing! And they
have no idea how much their commitment to trying to have a nice day can reach the
world! It’s been such a privilege to be around and to encourage that, and to learn
from that, and get inspiration for my practice. Because in my life, I haven’t had nearly
the kind of challenges that many of the people I’ve worked with have had ... To work
with them as equal parts of that circle of humanity, and to watch as they see they are
valued—that they have a place at the table, and a unique contribution that only they
can make in this world. [These are the people who need to teach us all] ... There are
just so many incredible stories! The inspiration that those people have to share is so
enormous, encouraging me to continue my growth. But also, [they] help other people
who feel alone, [who may not know it is possible for their lives to be different].
Because the whole thing is about connection. When we feel we’re connected, we all
grow.

As Paula spoke of these inspirational teachers—a few of the prisoners she worked
with, one of her co-workers, a client from her days working in hospice—she had tears in her
eyes, and her voice broke with emotion. Listening to Paula, I really sensed, again, the heart-
level connection with others that fuels her activism. Folks on the margins have been
inspirational to Paula because they have been willing to show up in the world, to bear the
truth of their anger, pain and suffering—and have chosen to grow and heal and love anyway.
Witnessing this process has taught Paula to be a better healer, teacher, activist, and person.

The following story about Paula’s “beloved co-worker” is illustrative:

One of the trainers [for our project in prisons] is this African American man [who used to be a prisoner]. He grew up with so much suffering that it is almost unspeakable. His step mother perpetrated all kinds of violence and shaming not only on him but all of his five siblings. And, wow, he has worked with that! He’s since come around to … loving and accepting that she didn’t know how to be a mom … He left home when he was, I don’t know, 10 or 12 something like that, and lived on the streets. It was safer for him to live on the streets than in his own household. He would try to get money here and there and take it to his sisters. As he got older, he really wanted people to understand his pain. So when the energy and pain would build up in him, he would take drugs and or drink alcohol, and then he would rape women. He was trying to get somebody else to understand the pain that he was going through—pretty ineffective strategy, yes. He went to prison for the better part of 20 years, in and out …

So for 20 years, he’d say, “Oh, no, I’m going to be different when I go out this time.” But that incredible suffering! He didn’t know any other way to express it except putting a needle in his arm or raping, and that went on for years. The last time he was going to be arrested, he was standing on this bridge in Seattle, and he was ready to jump. He was thinking to himself, “This is the third strike. I’m not willing to deal with this anymore. I just can’t go back to prison.” And he could see the police coming from both sides. Then he just felt this physical, uh, wind that literally pushed him back on to the bridge! And this voice says to him, “There’s another way. There’s another way.” He knows now that that was his inner teacher, his inner voice. So he went to prison. He allowed himself to be arrested. And then that night in prison, he rolled up his pillow, and he sat quietly with his eyes closed for 20 minutes, and then he did that in the morning, and then he did it that night. And then he did it the following morning, and he just kept doing it, and … Like drops of water in a bucket, this had this big effect on how he saw the world. He started being able to distinguish between what he was interpreting and what was actually happening because of that practice, and he gradually … came to non-violent communication. He came to a workshop. He just heard about it, and he thought he would check it out.

... And then over time, he got out of prison and he had tons of challenges as a sex offender. Now he’s been out for about four years, and has used his experience and his transformation to help many, many, many other people. He goes back in to the prison and helps people who have the same kind of habitual behaviors as him, but also people who have been in all kinds of mental prisons—who have limited themselves in all kinds of ways ... Because of the work he has done on himself, he has this natural gift for drawing people out and supporting their healing. And he has also been able to help so many people who are survivors of violence to actually have a safe place to talk about their experience.
I share this narrative at length because Paula’s words do better than mine to capture the connection she feels to those who have inspired her activism as well as her spiritual path. This story also speaks to a final piece of wisdom I gathered from Paula: that “inner” work is a crucial part of activism towards social justice. Like Gloria and Rachele, Paula insisted that attention to emotional and spiritual concerns is not separate from work to change the world materially. For one, Paula explained, attending to ourselves spiritually (i.e. doing “inner work”) allows us to be more integrated, aware and effective social change agents. An example from Paula’s life:

[Being on a spiritual path allowed me] to notice [once when] I was attracted to this woman, but in an icky way... When I worked with it, I realized that in a past life, I had been her dad, and I had molested her ... [These kinds of realizations have] definitely taken me closer to the [prisoners I work with] ... and also to people who are survivors of violence. [It is crucial that] I really get into the experience, understand the experience, understand the ignorance that is at the root of choosing [a violent] strategy to meet a need for intimacy ... There’s something about experientially doing that inner work to really accept the pedophile in me and the survivor of sexual abuse in me that ... adds this vibrancy to whatever work for sexual freedom that we all have, [or other kinds of liberation work I am trying to facilitate] ... [Basically], it just would be impossible for me to do this work [in the prisons] without doing [inner] work on myself. It would be just completely impossible ... I’d be completely ineffective. I’d just be this wall that goes in there or something.

The personal is political, as feminists have been saying for generations. Yet beyond simply being more effective teachers or healers as a result of inner work, Paula also suggested that such work can often lead the way for external (i.e. social, political) change. Like her co-worker, when we connect with our hearts, the depth of our isolation and pain, and express our vulnerabilities to others, we lay the groundwork for collective healing and transformation. As Paula shared:

I am clear that political activism is about understanding the connection between people, understanding the conditions of what’s happening, accepting them, not endorsing them, but accepting them, and then finding ways to inspire myself and other people to do something about it. The best way to inspire people to do
something is through their heart, not through intellect, or not through judgment. Not through creating enemy images—you know, “these people are wrong! ... If they could just see that they’re murderers, then, they would change.” Well, it’s not usually how people change... In order to be effective as an activist, our work is to connect with people at the heart level. [To] open up ourselves to their experience and open up their hearts to our experience ... I think that so much of the [activist] work I do is about acknowledging what is going on. And that being vulnerable opens the door for other people to be vulnerable. So if I was going through a break up, I would probably share some of the sadness. Not all the details. But the feeling, and usually that allows me to be more present, and allows other people to connect with me—with my humanity too—that everybody’s been through that. So often I see that—where somebody shares something and then it moves us all forward ... [Change] comes from our vulnerability; we go forward with our hearts, and the people who have had their hearts stomped the most—when they bring their hearts out and inspire others to bring their hearts out, this really brings us all forward as a human race.

So for Paula, it’s circular: attending to ourselves and to others spiritually and emotionally, we grow and heal. Growing and healing, we inspire others to do the same. As others do the same, we create the context in which political action and transformation can take place. Here, “activism” is reconceptualized to include, or perhaps to emphasize, what happens in everyday life, internally and between people. As with Gloria and Rachele, the heart is deeply involved in activism for social justice, and engaging it becomes a foundation for social change. One final story to illustrate:

I have had such a strong love and passion for the people of Palestine. I went there a couple of years ago when the war was starting ... when they were starting to kill internationals. I went there for a month, because I just had to, Palestine has had such a big place in my heart. The pain, and there’s something about actually being there, about actually experiencing—really feeling the pain, that is connecting. It is such a tragedy. How many times—just crying about that! Acknowledging, yes it really hurts! It really hurts, and I was only there for one month. Meanwhile, people have been going on day after day after day for two years since then. And the years before that! ... Sometimes when I was there I just felt like jumping out of my skin, and I could so relate to how people... just want a solution! [They think,] “I’m just not willing to feel this! So I’m going to be a suicide bomber because I just can’t stand it!” I could so understand in my body where that comes from! So definitely feeling the pain of the world is definitely part of the beginning, which is really different from hating the Israeli government or hating the Bush administration ... We have to experience the deep despair we have about the earth, and the fact that it doesn’t look good that we are going to survive another 15 years, I mean it really doesn’t! ... And
to really feel that, and then from that bottom place, find a way to move forward ... There’s something about feeling the pain that is just so basic in liberation, in this work.

As Paula shared this narrative, I thought of the many nights I facilitated support groups for survivors of domestic violence—supposedly the wise one in the room on the subject of relationships—while simultaneously living through a pretty awful break-up. Often, hearing the women’s stories of abuse and violence would bring forth acute sadness in me, partly because I was open and empathetic, but also because I was feeling so unheard and unseen in my own partnership. In these moments, I often chose to be real about my pain—to express it vulnerably and honestly, and to let the women know that there was space in our circle for the despair they were feeling. Somehow, this would move us forward, opening our hearts, connecting us, and letting the grief be part of the transformative process. Though this example may seem trite compared to the pain of the Palestinian people Paula met, I share it to illustrate, again, how the heart is not removed from social justice work. As Paula points out, it is in acknowledging the “bottom place” that paths forward are often then discovered. Again, whether advocating for incarcerated men, survivors of domestic violence or the Palestinian people, emotional and spiritual growth is integral to the process.
CHAPTER VII: WHITNEY
"You have to put legs on those prayers!"

The first time I encountered Whitney was seven years ago, at the Seattle Folk Festival, when her choir was performing on the Gospel Stage. Actually, I stumbled upon her performance, passing by on my way to a friend's guitar show across the festival grounds. I didn’t plan to see Whitney’s choir—yet as I walked past, the upper half of my body twisted to get closer to the incredibly powerful gospel sound. Something pulled me towards the choir, something in my core resonating deeply with the joy and celebration of the sixty or seventy voices I heard. Stopping, I wondered who was responsible for the creation of this group? Watching Whitney’s profile as she directed the choir, I remember thinking, “Wow. She has quite the presence.” Needless to say, I changed my plans, found a spot on the lawn, and decided to stay till the end of the show.

Then about three years ago, I was sitting at my church one Sunday morning and saw Whitney for the second time: she and her choir were the guest musicians. In the rather intimate space of our sanctuary, I was even more deeply moved by her music. When I heard a few years later from a mutual acquaintance that Whitney was quite the community organizer, and was a pastor herself, I figured she would be a great participant for my project.

Sure enough, Whitney is amazing. Not only is she a gifted musician, but she is an incredibly committed social activist and community organizer. She is a powerhouse, a one-woman show, and I can honestly say I have never met anyone so spontaneously and creatively responsive to the hardships of others. In my short time with Whitney, I came to understand that when she senses a need—a community experiencing difficulty, a person suffering, a call for action—Whitney gathers her resources and finds a way to respond. It is my impression that she never really stops, single-handedly and determinedly networking,
fundraising, and pushing forth until the need has been filled. This perseverance is
demonstrated by her long list of community and activist projects: serving as the pastor of a Disciples of Christ church; directing an internationally-known choir; volunteering at a drug and alcohol recovery center; working as part of a group of ministers who respond to community tragedies; and running a project to rebuild a hurricane-ravaged Bahamian island.

And these are just her current endeavors. Whitney says that she has always worked towards racial and social justice, has always engaged in efforts to make others’ lives better, and has “fought for the underdog” since she was a kid. The extent to which Whitney has offered herself in service of others is not to be understated. Wondering about this well-spring of devotion, I asked her to share the first time she felt compelled to act against injustice. She said:

I was born and raised in little place ... in the middle of east Texas. We went to an all Black school, and everything we got was a hand-me-down from the white school— including the food we ate in the cafeteria. Yes. The books we had were already [used]—the pages were torn out, the answers were already written in ... We had to put up with that kind of injustice all of the twelve years I was in school. And during my ... sophomore year, ... the year before integration came, the food in the cafeteria had gotten pretty bad. I was president of the student council. And I organized the student body into boycotting the cafeteria ... The food cost 25 cents a day—this was back in 1959. Soo...there were 250 students and I persuaded 200 of them not to eat the food for a week—to bring whatever they could bring from home there—which practically broke the cafeteria. And forced the principal of the school to speak with the principal of the white school. And they quit sending us their leftovers—and we got our own delivery of fresh stuff, and our own cooks, and to the time that they totally integrated the school system down there, this provided jobs, this provided fresh nutrition—and I became the villain! I loved it!

“Do you remember what inspired you to act in that moment?” I inquired. “Did you get support from your friends to do this kind of thing?”

Whitney: Well, I must’ve been out of my cotton picking mind. [I had a friend, and his] name was [Samuel]. He and I were buddies. He was kind of a rebel like I am, and I just said to him all of a sudden, “[Samuel], let’s just not eat it. Let’s not buy it. I mean, that quarter is a lot of money to me, so if I save all five of my quarters this
week, I’ve got a little pot.” That was a whole lot of money back in that day ... I looked at everybody, and I said, “Tell you what. If you do it, I’ll do it, and if I do it, you’re going to do it.” And he said, “Okay,” and we just did it. It was like a wave. Something just said, “Enough is enough.”

Interviewer: A wave in your body?

Whitney: Yeah ... something inside of you that just overpowers you, and it just pushes you in to doing what you need to do. Cause I didn’t come to school that day with that in mind.

So Whitney had support from a friend here or there, those also willing to risk potential repercussion and backlash by blowing the whistle on the racism of the segregated South. I wondered if Whitney’s parents supported their teenage daughter as she vocalized her discontent in a climate incredibly hostile and violent towards African-Americans who did.

“What did your parents think?” I asked her.

My father and mother were like that also. Especially my mother. Ooooooh, she was a go getter! ... [Here is an example. When I was growing up,] our land bordered another neighbor’s land. This neighbor had a hog that would always root up under the fence and get out and come in to our property, and [my mother] told him several times to keep his hog in. She was tired of him rooting up our yard while he just ignored her, and she said, “All right, I’ve told you. Don’t let that hog uproot and come over here again.” My mother had a slow eye, and sometimes you couldn’t tell who she was looking at, [and her look could be intimidating]. The neighbor just thought, “Well, she’s a woman. It ain’t [really] bothering her.” Well, he should’ve listened ... Cause the next time the pig rooted up the fence and came over, and she went over and rooted him up! And he called the sheriff, and the sheriff came by. The sheriff said, “Hey, [Nettie]”—that’s my mother’s name—“What you doing beating up on [James]?” She said, “Well, you can see for yourself,” and she took him out to the fence. He looked at [James], and he looked at my mother, and he said, “[James], I guess you’d better keep your hog in.” He got in his car and drove away ... That hog never came over there again!

Taking the matter into her own hands, Whitney’s mom modeled a fierce, rebellious spirit that did not tolerate mistreatment of her personhood, her people, or her land. Like Gloria’s father, Whitney’s mom taught when enough was enough, and also that a person has the
power to make things different. Another story, this time about Whitney’s dad, further illustrates this kind of modeling:

See my father was half white. My mother was part African American, part Japanese, part Indian. And so she was very dark—with beautiful hair, long hair. She looked like an African queen ... My father [though] was very very fair—he was as fair as you are! He had blue eyes, long straight hair. One day we were at a Skelly station ... in Carthage, Texas, where we had gone for many, many years for gas. And that particular day, the attendant ... came out, and he said to my dad, “How ya doin’ today, coon?” Coon is a very negative term for African Americans. My daddy looked at him and said, “Do I look like a coon to you? I got four legs? I got circles around my eyes? I got a tail? I look like a coon to you?” And this guy turned so red that I thought he was gonna have a heart attack on the spot. I was about ten. And my sister and two little brothers were in the back seat with me. My father said to him, “You know, all the sudden I don’t need gas.” And he got in the car ... My father was the pastor of the church; my mother was a school teacher. And she said, “Honey, let’s go.” Because my father was getting ready to take this guy on. Now if he took the guy on, of course he’d get hung. My mother said, “Now don’t spend the energy with that, let’s go.” My father looked at him, “Don’t you ever call a Black person a coon. As long as you live.” Looked him eyeball to eyeball. And I learned courage right there. And I’ve been courageous ever since!

As Whitney shared her father’s words, she lowered her voice to an intense whisper, punctuating his message with clarity and fervor. To me, this story depicts not only a model of courage for young Whitney, but also one of intentionality. With his wife’s support, Whitney’s dad did not act rashly or aggressively, but rather chose his words and actions to make a clear impact while also protecting himself and his family.

In here was also an element of compassion, as Whitney definitely learned to act with compassion from her parents. When I asked her, for instance, what inspired her fierce loyalties to the “underdog,” she shared:

[This was] the example that [was] set for us. My mother and father would always fight for the underdog. We grew a lot of vegetables on our farm, and on Saturdays, my father and mother would go down to the city of Carthage [Texas], and they would buy the staples that we needed like sugar, salt, flour, milk. That was basically all we bought, and we’d be out in the field working, and some of the neighborhood kids would come and tease us because we were not free to run the streets or go play basketball or baseball ... because we were working the dirt. Winter time would
come, and ... we’d always have lots of food. My father worked as a carpenter, and somebody had given him an old freezer, and so we had this big old upright chest type freezer full of stuff! In the winter time, [we’d have a lot of] collard greens. They thrive in the cold weather, and so my mother would make us go out when these kids would come over to our house and pick the collard greens, wash them, put them in bags, and give them to [these kids] so that they would have food. These are the same kids who made fun of us while we were out there working in the field, and I used to get so angry with my mother, and say “Why do we have to feed them?” She’d say, “Because they’re hungry. That’s why.” And I was going, “Has to be something in there for me later on maybe, and I ain’t seeing it now! [Well, look at me now!] Here I go. Just like my mother.

So Whitney learned to share with, and to have compassion for, even those with a shoddy track record of reciprocity. Like Gloria’s, Whitney’s parents were deeply affected by the injustices of the world, and chose not to stand outside these injustices. Rather, they connected intimately with them, and used their personal agency and resources to make an impact. According to both sets of parents, hunger and poverty were everybody’s business. Of course for Gloria’s family it was more of an option to be aware and to respond—as they had the race and class privilege to ignore injustices if they chose. In contrast, as working-class Blacks in rural Texas circa 1950, with community members beaten and murdered in the name of white supremacy, Whitney’s family had no such luxury.

Which leads me to the deep respect I feel for Whitney, and the reverence I feel for the life she has lived. My intention here is not to idealize or fetishize Whitney’s experiences, or to purge my own white guilt. Rather, I aim to express deep gratitude for what I learned from her—especially the example she provides as someone willing to bear witness to all that is painful and awful in the world. As I sat with Whitney, and asked her to share experiences of injustice and action, I was struck by how much she has seen in her lifetime, and how willing she has been to face these injustices head on. To illustrate, here is a story Whitney offered,
one that stayed with me long after our interview, surfacing in dreams for several nights to come:

[I work as part of an Emergency Response Team, three ministers] who go wherever there is a tragedy ... immediately to that family, or that scene, and let them know they are not going through this alone. Nothing we can do except throw our arms around [them], and give [them] some emotional support ... [Anyway,] there was a very tragic murder in our area, middle of last year ... [The woman was] 18 years old, [had] three children. Her boyfriend got angry with her for some reason. They were in the car—they were supposedly trying to work it out. And all the sudden, he doused her with gasoline. He doused the children with gasoline. And lit a match. The woman was the lone survivor, for just a few hours. The children, the oldest being two [years old], passed right away. And people in the area where it this happened ... saw [the woman] running down the street to get help, ablaze ... The authorities were able to get her to Harborview Hospital, which is the burn capital ... of the world. So the minute we heard about it, I was called by the ministers here in town—and ... learned that they had no money. I went and talked with the family, and [pause] she was dying ... I didn’t have time to [prepare], I just had to go. She expired within a few minutes. And then we had an onsite memorial service for the whole family, because the boyfriend died too ... And the site in my mind still haunts me. The shoes still in place where she tried to get out of the car. And the baby’s stuff was still on the seat. A big ugly burn spot out in this field. [Long pause]. That’s what we did.

As Whitney shared these words, her voice became so quiet I had to lean forward to hear her—and by the end of the story, we both had tears in our eyes. How many people are truly willing to do this kind of work, to bare witness to pavement burnt by a murdered woman’s body? How many are willing to have such images burned into their minds, images that stay with them long after the tragedy is over? This is the presence of Whitney I want to evoke—someone who has seen some awful things in her lifetime, and who continues to show up and do what she can to touch, heal, love and act. This willingness humbles and inspires me.

I also want to evoke the sense of anger, outrage and urgency that fuels Whitney’s work, and the important reminder she offered to allow space for such emotions in activism. From the anecdote of her father at the gas station, to stories of trying to get someone to help her rebuild a devastated Bahamian village, to being fed up with white folks who suddenly
decide to respect her once they learn she is the well-known director of such-and-such a choir, Whitney is sick and tired of being mistreated. Understandably so. Recounting a recent experience with a wealthy white lawyer who was rude to her, she shared:

I wanted to say to him, “Oh you guys! You’re still doing the same old stupid stuff you did 25 years ago! I’m a human being! Treat me right! Treat me fair! Just because I’m Black, it doesn’t mean that I’m lesser than. [Who] do you think I was [here at the fundraising breakfast]? *The hired help*?!”

Actually, there were times I found myself feeling uncomfortable as I listened to Whitney’s anger. And uncomfortable was exactly where I needed to be, as it reminded me that social injustices—racism, sexism, homophobia, and all forms of domination—are not fun, and should cause unease and upset. This discomfort reminds me of my privileges as a white middle-class American woman, which can (and should) fuel my activism. It can provoke a sense of urgency to continue working towards equality, especially when I begin to feel comfortable and complacent. As Whitney reminded me: “There have been times when I [wanted to give up]. But every time I reach that point, there’s a little voice in the back of my head saying, ‘No, there’s still work to be done.’ I think it was Martin Luther King, or was it Jesse Jackson, who said, ‘If not you, then who? If not now, then when?’ I have to do this. I can’t give up.”

Beyond this “little voice,” Whitney’s political work is fueled by her deeply religious life. Just as she was called from a young age to fight for the underdog, she has long been receptive to the spirit world, and to the teachings of Christianity. She knew, for instance, at age fourteen that she was called into the ministry:

When I was fourteen, God spoke to me ... and said, “I want you to carry my word.” [But] I certainly wasn’t going to tell my father ‘cause my father wasn’t going to hear about a fourteen year-old girl preaching! [Then something happened] when I was sixteen ... [You see, growing up,] we washed every Saturday. We washed by hand on the rub-boards, and then we hung it out on the line to dry. [One time], I was
hanging out my father’s coveralls on the line to dry—he had gotten sick. My brother-
in-law had taken him to ... Houston, Texas, because there was no medical care
available to Black people in my little home town ... So as I was hangin’ his coveralls
on the line to dry—audibly the Voice came and said, “Your father won’t be back. You
have to carry the story.” Well! I knew that I couldn’t carry the story because I was a
girl! And nobody would pay me any attention—especially in the South, and in the
Baptist church the way it was organized ... [But] I knew I had no choice. To carry
the word. But I did not do it. It bugged me all through my college years, all through
my married years, all through coming to Seattle. Doin’ all this work in church
organizing a choir, trying to escape [this calling] by doing it through the choir. Every
time I’d do a little preachy-preachy thing, the nudging would come, and I’d just
ignore it. [Eventually I had to listen].

With such a resounding call to the ministry, it is no wonder that Whitney names her spiritual
and political paths as seamless—as did Gloria, Rachele, and Paula. In fact, for Whitney, the
former is the ground from which the latter springs; her activism is directly connected to her
religious life:

I can’t be socially conscious until I’m spiritually conscious. My spirituality leads me
on the path of what’s right for the situation, not what’s popular always, but what’s
right ... [Sometimes] you need something stronger than you to hold you together
when all the arrows [are aimed at you], so I depend totally upon my spirituality to
make sure that what I do out in the world is has a strong foundation ... [In fact], I
couldn’t do social justice work if I didn’t have a spiritual foundation! Because I
would ... curse that guy out [who refused humanitarian aid to Abaco]! ... I would
become so disgusted that I would quit. But something inside of me says, “These
people are in need. There are other ways to get what you’re trying to get done, done.
So, go inside yourself, and open your mouth, ask for help. There is always somebody
there.”

The “foundation” Whitney refers to here is her Christianity; her faith in Jesus Christ and his
teachings give her the direction she needs to be of effective and radical service to others.

Illustrating the strength of this relationship, Whitney told this story:

On March 18, 2001, I had cardiac arrhythmia—in the pulpit! It was so devastating
that they thought I was dead. And I was actually gone for about nine minutes. A
woman who works as a nurse in our congregation, and the co-founder of the church,
worked on me with CPR, but to no avail. I was just gone. And I actually had an out-

35 Abaco is the name of the Bahamian island that Whitney is helping to rebuild; it was devastated about five
years ago by a hurricane, and after learning this and visiting there, Whitney has single-handedly organized a
project to aid this community.
of-body death experience. Didn’t see the white light, none of that stuff, but I went to a place where there was perfect peace. I also saw the figure, the profile, of what I believe to be Jesus Christ, holding up his hand and telling me to go back. [He said there was still work to be done] I didn’t want to go back! I fought that. But who am I to fight against a higher power? So, as I was comin’ back through I heard this beautiful music ... I thought it was the heavenly choir—but it was the guest choir of high school kids we had there. And the co-founder of the church said, “Sing her back, sing her back! Pray her back, pray her back! Everybody start praying! Pray her back, sing her back, talk loud, sing loud! So she can hear you, so she’ll come back to us!” And I came back.

[And so this experience inspires me to keep doing the work I do, to keep] walking in the footsteps of Jesus. I feel in my heart, totally, in my heart of hearts, that I am walking in the footsteps of Jesus. I have been ridiculed, I have been lied upon, I have been spat on, I have been threatened. I have been put down by my own people—as Jesus Christ was. I have been kicked out of churches. I have been cursed at. I have left on my own to wither on the vine. I have been in a state of need and want, and left there. But I have not given up. I won’t give up. Till my dying day, I’ll be fighting.

There is no doubt Whitney’s faith provides the tools and resources she needs for her political work, and there are many other narratives I could share to illustrate this connection.

A few, however, stand out. When I asked what sustained and motivated her outer work, for instance, she replied immediately:

My relationship with the Godhead: God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit. They motivate and sustain me ... I know that there is a God. And so I thank Him, and I praise Him, and I have this little church here to give Him the praise and the honor all the time—outwardly. Inside of me, when I am drained, and I cannot function, and I don’t see a way to go on. That’s when I really have to call upon the inner powers, and I say to the inner powers “You have to help me, because I’m drowning and I need a life boat. I need a life jacket. You need to help me.” And somehow I get infused with a feeling that’s, like, when you’re really hungry and you get that meal, and it just satisfies you totally? I get complete peace. It’s like a shot in the arm, and it just goes all over my body. And all I can say is Yes Lord!

He’s here. Right now. It’s the same feeling I get all the time when He’s here. He whispers to me, “I’m with you,” and I believe that. I’ve been in some situations that I shouldn’t have come through! Like that death experience. I’ve had people that have threatened my life. Because I am vocal and I’m out there and visible! A woman came to me with a gun; she was getting ready to kill me! Because she thought I had wronged her. But something happened—she just walked away! So I know that this inner strength is not of me! Because I’m wasted. I’m totally gone—my strength has waned, it’s gone bye-bye! And then all the sudden, I’m picked up!
As I listened to these words, I thought to myself, “Wow. This woman really has a direct line to God.” Like Rachele, Whitney seems to have integrated her faith into all aspects of her life—including her community work and activism. Similarly, like Gloria, the spiritual teachings Whitney has received over her lifetime have simply become a part of her, guiding and directing her, impossible to separate from her core values, decisions and actions. And later, discussing whether prayer constitutes “activism,” she disclosed: “I don’t go into any situation until I pray about it... Sometimes it’s a short prayer, sometimes it’s a long prayer ... Then I go ahead... The power of prayer is more powerful than anything else ... it readies your spirit to do what needs to be done.” But here, she also insisted that prayer was not enough:

You have to put legs on those prayers! If [all] Martin Luther King... did was pray, you and I wouldn’t be sitting across from each other right now! He put some legs on those prayers! He got out there, he marched, he protested, he spoke, he went to jail—he did all those things! ... And all the time his life was in jeopardy, his family in jeopardy—but he said, my life is nothing if we continue to live the way we live on this earth.

So for Whitney, although prayer is the preparation she needs to ready herself for action, it is crucial not to stop there. As argued in Gloria’s narrative, religious traditions and communities that lack critical analysis and action are missing the mark—for they fail to couple spiritual practice with marching, protesting, speaking and “doing” in the name of justice. As Whitney urges, it is the everyday, often difficult efforts of grassroots movements that put these spiritual preparations into material form. Like Martin Luther King Jr., we work, we rest, we pray—and then we work again. Spiritual activists like Whitney demonstrate the perseverance and the ability to make such integrated approaches to social change a reality.
CHAPTER VIII: BETTINA

"My personal motto is: More Justice! More Joy!"

Finding Bettina’s house for our first interview was a bit of an adventure. Running into dead end streets and roundabouts that sent me in the wrong direction, I got lost, then decided to park my car and search by foot. Luckily, I ran into a postal carrier finishing his late-afternoon route in Bettina’s neighborhood. When I asked if he knew where she lived, he took one glance at my scrap of paper, and smiled. “Oh, her house is just up the block,” he said. “You can’t miss it.”

He was right. Up the hill I went, and even before I saw the street number, I knew it was her place. Painted bright blues and reds, Bettina’s house was surrounded by one of the most fertile gardens I’ve seen in Seattle, with Tibetan prayer flags, a three-foot goldfish sculpture, and rainbow-colored yard art sprinkled throughout. Parked in the driveway was an old truck with a bumper sticker that said “Peace is Patriotic.” As I climbed the curving stone staircase to Bettina’s front door, I noticed dozens of tiny new flowers coming to the earth’s surface, and started to feel like I had been transported into some fairytale land. Hearing a soft clattering sound, I looked up and was greeted by a big fluffy dog from the porch. I almost expected a magical Godmother to appear next in the doorway.

This enchanted energy was alive inside Bettina’s house as well. With walls of lime green, soft purple and red, and curtains, couch and pillows of all sorts of bright colors and rich textures, her home was full of light and love and warmth. Paintings and mosaics hung affectionately on the walls, their little mirrors and abstract shapes welcoming visitors. On the kitchen table, Bettina had set out fresh glasses of water, two mugs, a pot of tea in a tea-cozy, and a little crystal goblet of chocolate goodies for our time together. Simply lovely. And as we talked, I received nudges and kisses from the fluffy dog curled under the table. At the
end of our first interview, Bettina offered me a cookie “because she wanted to make sure all my needs were met.” I knew I was on sacred ground.

The warmth with which Bettina greeted me, I came to learn, is the warmth with which Bettina greets her activism. Taking this celebratory, life-affirming aura with her, Bettina currently fundraises for nonprofit organizations; teaches Jewish kids about social activism; educates herself and others about the violence facing Palestinians; and raises awareness regarding homelessness and economic justice as part of a group of artists to end poverty. In years past, she has volunteered for public libraries; advocated on behalf of First Nations communities; fundraised for women’s health centers; taught courses on women in the Torah for a progressive Jewish organization; and worked in the anti-nuclear and environmental movements.

As such, Bettina is (and has been) deeply engaged in grassroots efforts to dismantle that which is “wrong” in the world. Yet she also stresses the importance of offering gratitude and reverence for all that is right. As she articulated in an email:

Unlike many more “serious” activists, I devote the same amount of time, money and energy to creating and fulfilling the commands to celebrate, to beautify/embellish and to enjoy worldly pleasures through the celebration of the seasons—as I do to “activist” work. The great medieval sage Maimonides … spoke about why Jews do not become monks or live in the chosen poverty of the ascetic. He said that G-d created a world/universe of complete and eternal abundance—with enough of all good things for everyone. That everyone should have the pleasure of wholesome and plentiful food, of fragrant spices and flowers, of sweet wine—and that poverty, want, injustice were not the work of G-d, but the work of man, and so must be remedied by man. To go without those joys did not solve the essential problem which is one of greed vs. need, and the solution to that problem was part of our lives’ work as shomrei as well as G-d’s partners in the continuing work of creation.36

36 According to Bettina, shomrei adamah means “guardians of the earth.” And to clarify, Bettina reports that she writes “G-d” (instead of “God”) because in Jewish tradition, one doesn’t write the sacred name of God. To do so, according to Bettina, is to deface the name of the creator. When the middle letter is omitted, then it is not actually the name, and thus if that writing is damaged or destroyed, the writer is not responsible for defacing the name of the creator. This gesture is also symbolically important, because the reader understands the writer is referring to his/her “God,” not to Christian or pagan gods.
I loved Bettina’s affirmation that despite all that absolutely needs to be changed in the world, we have much to celebrate as is. Perhaps more than any of my other narrators, Bettina laughed and laughed during our interviews, finding humor even as we plowed through some pretty intense topics. She also named “deep gratitude for life” as a primary motivation for her activism, and returned many times to a sense of “complete and eternal abundance” that is everyone’s divine right:

There are people who really truly say I would never bring children into this world [because things are so awful here]—and I guess for me, that’s my spiritual place. There’s a point where belief overwhelms argument or reason or logic, and there aren’t enough facts that you can lay at my feet that will budge my belief that people are inherently good, and that we yearn towards life, and that we can create a future! And so I think that’s [a] place where I have that transcendent feeling … [an] area of belief that confounds proof.

Insisting that humanity is ultimately called towards a peaceful, restored and socially just planet, Bettina offered various natural metaphors to illustrate: just as streams, lakes and forests recover from contamination and destruction, she explained, all webs of life yearn towards survival and proliferation. She introduced planting trees as an example:

I have thought a lot about faith in the future … In the Torah, it’s against the law to cut down trees in war. For a number of reasons—because they provide food and shade and sustain the land … [But] the thing about trees is that planting anything—but especially a tree—implies belief that there is a future. We might plant apple trees today, but I won’t live long enough to get a crop out of it. I have to believe that that apple tree will be there for my collective children, and children’s children. And we do live in a world where people continue to plant trees! You know, both metaphorically and literally. And as long as that continues to be so, I continue to have hope in people’s essential longing towards life being more powerful than the nihilistic desire to be [selfish and] … narcissistic.

To me, the “hope” Bettina offers here could reflect a spiritual conviction that all of life is, perhaps, being taken care of by a Higher Power, or a deeply held belief that we are somehow, slowly, returning to our intrinsic (Divine) state of abundance and equity. Yet as I
write Bettina’s narrative, let me be clear that she does not consider herself a particularly “spirit-filled” woman—at least she did not initially. It was ironic: I experienced Bettina alive with joy, open-heartedness, compassion and “spirit”—the colors and warmth of her home, her person and her work simply reflections of the sacred in her life. Yet this was not necessarily Bettina’s experience of herself. When I articulated the magic I felt in her presence, she was surprised, and insisted that she lived a rather humdrum life:

My everyday reality is so frigging mundane! ... It’s not like living a monastic life, or something where I’m engaged constantly in spiritual thought. [Sacred consciousness] ... is an underpinning of my ... religious artwork, or doing midrash, or teaching kids... but the rest of the time, I’m just worrying about why the snails are eating all of my flowers, the little bastards! (Laughing). Or why the squirrels hate me so, and why they don’t keep their little chompers off my tulips! ... If I were all about the Sacred in the world, [I] would not have those bad thoughts!

Similarly, on the phone before we met, Bettina explained that although her activism is definitely motivated by her Judaism, if I wanted a “spirit-filled” woman, she was probably not my best bet. And when I asked her to what extent she had personal experiences of the sacred, she explained:

I do believe in the sacred, but I don’t know that I believe in a personal thing ... [I mean sometimes I have transcendent experiences,] like when I am chanting or dovening ... [This] just carries me away from the temporal, the here and now, the difficulties of the day ... [But during] the Sabbath, if I get moments of ... moving out of mundane time into sacred time, I’m just ecstatic! I’m very, very happy! ... It might be while singing, or it might be the scent of lilies that just moves me. Or how light plays in the world ... I can be so aware of the enormity of beauty and wonder that’s in the world ... But they’re such little, fleeting moments, you know?

However, by our second interview, Bettina disclosed that talking with me had begun to change her ideas about what constituted “spiritual” experience:

Until we spoke, I’d always defined spirituality as the other. It [was] something that other people experience. It [was] essentially something that I didn’t have access to ...

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37 According to Bettina, *midrash* is “where you create stories that answer questions that are left open in the writing of the Torah.”
38 *Dovening* means praying.
I thought it was something very life changing, like what monastic people would experience or maybe a priest or somebody who has really dedicated their life to that experience, or people who meditate all the time like Buddhists. That it was something outside of regular life. While we were talking ... I came more to the idea that in fact I do have access to spirituality. That the spirituality I experience is ... everyday as [opposed] to extraordinary. [It’s] not miraculous in the sense of big things, but miraculous in the small [sense] ... [Since] our conversation ... I’ve been much more aware that there are all of these moments that are very transcendent. [That I have more of] an encompassing sense of oneness than I had thought ... Maybe it’s not all the time like somebody who’s a monk, but it’s every day, which I loved. That was really very life affirming!

Bettina’s realization that she too had everyday transcendent moments confirmed my experience of her as a “spirit-filled” woman—regardless of the words she or I chose to describe this quality of being. Though she may not identify as “spiritual,” she does call herself a “religious” woman, and names Judaism as the foundation of her commitments to social justice. In an email, she wrote:

My ethical will is informed by Jewish values; the one which is foremost in my life (and so activism) concerns the reason we exist (in a religious as well as social context) which is to act as ... guardians of the earth, which is accomplished through tikkun olam: the repair of the world, and finally through gemillut chassidim: or acts of loving kindness. Since most Jewish pathways do not emphasize an afterlife, but instead place the bulk of expectation on the here and now, it is easy to see why the ideal for most of us is to work toward the creation of a just, abundant and joyful world today. My personal motto is: More Justice! More Joy! So [these are] the philosophical reason[s] for my community work.

Though I’ve had many Jewish friends share vaguely how their religion supported progressive politics, I was heartened to learn more concretely these connections. In person, I asked Bettina to share more on this topic:

Like paganism and environmentalism is such a perfect match up, social justice work is a perfect match up for Jews, generally. [In] most strains of Judaism ... all the non-ecstatic versions [anyway], the ethical underpinnings of the religion, or tenets, are amongst the most important parts of Jewish life. [For instance,] Jews are forced to confront the moral ambiguity of the Torah every week ... You go through the stories over and over again, and you examine them ... and you have to encounter how morally ambiguous a-a-a-all of the stories and the characters are. You know, Abraham lets his wife out to the pharaoh in order to escape from having to take
responsibility for what they’re doing, and Hagar is thrust out of the community with Ishmael, and Moses is told to tell his ... people that when they get to the promise land that they should take every cistern, every field, every house, every building—and kill every single person without remorse and without any survivors! ... And so there isn’t a story in there—and there isn’t a hero that is not enormously flawed, or a heroine! Every one of what they call the matriarchs and the patriarchs ... every one of them is a deeply flawed human being, and yet still heroic ... And so [we learn] to believe that those flaws and that moral ambiguity are there for a purpose, and the purpose is to teach us through their faults where they went wrong, which is how the laws become the laws ...

[Another thing in Judaism is that] reunion with the divine generally is inevitable. The image that people frequently use is a pottery vessel that’s filled with light, and the vessel breaks and all the light becomes broken. And then each little piece of light is embedded throughout the universe, and throughout all time, and all people and all things. Every time you do an act of kindness, or care for the world, you’re unifying more and more those pieces of divinity. And inevitably that vessel’s divine light will ... come together—eventually all of those pieces that have been lost will come back together again ... Working on social justice is a way to try to work towards those pieces of light coming together, towards a world of abundance, towards that time when people can be free of poverty and prejudice and neglect ... And so whatever people do—whether it’s assuring that there are trees and land and water for the future, or doing triage in emergency care for people who are in crisis—all those things give us the opportunity to build towards that time!

Learning of this “broken vessel” metaphor, I remembered what I was taught in Quaker meeting as a kid—that there is an Inner Light within every person, and this Light is God showing up in each of us. Because we are all sacred, all spiritually equal in the eyes of God, I learned, we all have the Divine birthrights of shelter, sustenance, safety, the love of others, and peace in our communities. The messages spoken every Sunday in meeting for worship reflected this—members shared the challenges of writing letters to Congress about nuclear power, or the joys of organizing a march in support of gay marriage. These “activist” messages were commonplace in the sacred space of our meetinghouse, and as a result, I learned that to deepen one’s union with God was to work towards a world in which everyone is valued equally. Like Bettina’s Judaism, my Quakerism was, and is, a perfect match-up with social justice work.
Returning to my interview with Bettina, I was struck by her frequent references to the Torah, and found myself wanting to categorize her activism as motivated by religious doctrine rather than by spiritual or emotional makeup. In other words, I was beginning to fall into the false dichotomy of head versus heart, reason versus emotion—pigeonholing Bettina’s activism as inspired by ethics or philosophy, rather than by an embodied, heart-felt, soul-level calling towards social justice. I suppose I was expecting the kind of responses my other narrators had given when asked what motivated their activism—Whitney’s “shot in the arm,” Rachele’s “spirit guides,” or Gloria’s “soul’s calling,” for example. In viewing “religion” as somehow separate from “spirituality,” I was also beginning to succumb to the fear of bringing religion back into politics, despite the commitment of this research to do the opposite.

Catching myself, I shared my binary thinking with Bettina. Here, she pointed out that while her activism is philosophically-based and text-driven, it is also very much a part of her heart and her “soul”:

I do feel like my ethical framework … has for me been part of my whole experience. One of the ideas of Judaism is that even if you don’t believe, you do, and in doing, your belief comes … You simply have to do what’s right … I and millions of others find that in the doing comes the belief, [and out of that] comes the spiritual or interior experience of it … It’s been integrated into my entire self for quite some time. Just the words of the of the Sabbath liturgy, when I hear them on a Friday night or a Saturday, really do realign me, and every Yom Kippur, I really do get a tune up—through reflection and through encountering the text, it becomes so physical and so emotional and so spiritual.

Further illustrating the head-heart connection in relation to her political work, she offered:

[I cannot separate my activism from my spiritual path]. They feel like they’re the same thing … They come from the same well. However people want to define it, I can’t imagine an activist that is not engaged with the spirit and the sacred somehow. Maybe it’s like a link to the earth like hikers have or [something, but] … I don’t think it’s possible [to be one without the other] … The desire for repair of the world, and to create wholeness and health and beauty … [None of this is] a merely intellectual
pursuit ... I really just don’t think anybody does activist work without it being grounded in something, even if it’s undefined, but in some feeling of hopefulness. And I think hopefulness in its very nature is spiritual. It’s irrational. If you really, really look, there’s no rational reason to be hopeful! ... And I don’t think you can be an activist without being hopeful—even those grumpy ones ... are so hopeful; otherwise, why would they be engaged in that work?

So Bettina and I returned again to the sense of celebration, beauty, and hope that struck me from my first steps into her garden. And by defining “spiritual” as that which is “irrational” and “hopeful,” Bettina argued the inherent seamlessness of activist and spiritual paths, in her life as well as the lives of many others working for social justice.

As our dialogue deepened, I wanted to learn more about what beyond her religious path motivated her community work. Inspiring people, she said, people who can experience intense hardship, and still be incredibly loving and generous. Here, she was talking specifically about her travels to Palestine, and the amazing individuals she met there. When I asked her to share a story or two, she offered:

[When I was there], I was constantly overwhelmed with the heat and exhaustion, and I was sick the whole time. But Palestinian people would see me on the street, and they would say, “Let me go find you some water.” They are unbelievably poor [yet] would go buy water and bring it to me. [One time]—it’s really hard to find ... Internet cafés—[and I finally found one. But] it wasn’t a good fit because it was only men, and it was all Arabic keyboards, no English keyboards. So I’m sitting there ... and I’m writing, and I’m just crying. I’m writing to [my husband], and I’m just crying and crying. [Soon the owner of the café] comes over, and ... he takes me into to the back where he and his family live. His wife is there waiting—he had called his wife and told her there was a woman crying. She couldn’t speak a word of English, and I had maybe 50 words of Arabic. [But there she was], patting me and giving me something cool to drink, and telling me it’s going to be okay. Well, for Christ’s sake! Here they are living with people shooting them constantly, [and somehow they find the energy to be so big-hearted!]

Listening to this story, tears welled in my eyes—and even now, as I revisit the gentleness with which Bettina was treated by strangers, I feel quite moved. She continued:

One of the places we slept was on the roof of the apartment building ... It was very near the hospital, and you could hear women keening at night, Palestinian women
sobbing, “Habibi! Habibi!”—which means “Darling, darling!” And then they’d be screaming about the Egrets, the Jews—and you could just tell that yet another [person had been killed] ... [The Israeli soldiers] blow up houses that have never housed anybody who’s been associated with suicide bombings, ... houses [with] thirty to forty people, with many generations [living there] ... The bombs also explode [everything] around [these houses], and people are living like this every single day! But I could walk around, and they were interested in talking! They were cordial. They were hospitable. They were funny. They were kind ... 

[I realized] they felt so unseen and forgotten by the world, so abandoned and alone—[yet] even with all of that they were so [loving]! [And talk about the strength of the human spirit!] We got to see what women wear underneath their hijab—which let me tell you! They are the sexiest dressers I have ever encountered! You can go to the markets there, and all of the bras have sequins on them! We’d have these all-women dances, and women would take off their hijab because no men were around. So here I’d be such a slepper, and exhausted, and wearing slippery clothes, and underneath they wore skin tight jeans and backless, topless, toob-y tops! ... Bright red, satin, see-through chiffon! Dyed hair, punked hair, [and so much more]! That was something else.

“So what changed me,” Bettina explained, “was to see how truly awful [the conditions are in Palestine], yet how loving and beautiful and courageous and filled with life and hope the people are.” Witnessing this paradox first hand, how could Bettina not continue her work as a solidarity activist? How could she not return to the States with a renewed commitment to making such realities known, to doing her part to carry forth the gentle spirit of the people she came to know?

Here, I revisited my own experiences traveling and living abroad. As mentioned previously, I was profoundly affected by my time in Cameroon and Guatemala, not only because the social disparities were so much more pronounced and obvious than at home, but also because so many of the people I encountered there were loving, funny, warm and generous despite all they lived though. I think, for instance, of my host family in Dschang, Cameroon, who lived five people in a three-room house (I made six), with no running water, flush toilets or change of shoes for the kids. The father had recently lost his job as an electric
worker, and the mom worked as a cook for one of the few wealthy (white) families in town. But their lack of material wealth did not stop them from living generously, and with so much spirit and gratitude for the love they shared with family and community. They sat on the porch for hours, braiding each other’s hair or preparing food, sharing stories and adventures from their days at work or school. Never have I experienced the kind of laughter I did with these folks—and I could only understand half the jokes they told due to my broken French!

And then in Guatemala, I lived for a short time in a returned refugee village called Chacula, a community of about 300 people who’d been forced off their lands in the late 1980s by the “scorched earth” policy—the government’s mandate to burn entire villages if they so much as heard a rumor that one of its inhabitants was aligned with the revolutionary forces. Though the members of Chacula had lived as refugees in Mexico for almost fifteen years, and had lost many, many loved ones to the war, they too were amazingly warm, generous and open-hearted. Greeting me with hugs, and insisting I take their weavings free of charge, they inspired me to make their realities known when I returned to the States. For almost a year after I came back, I told their stories to anyone who would listen. Like Bettina, my travels reminded me again and again of my privilege, and I was changed as a result.

Truly, fostering these kinds of human connections seems to lie at the heart of Bettina’s political work. Though Bettina has been involved in large-scale social movements, she seems to focus more on what happens at “micro” levels—small acts of courage and kindness, for instance, and creating loving relationships with the people she knows and meets. As a case-in-point, as part of our conversation about what motivated her activism, Bettina shared:

I’m inspired by so many people through generations who have done such extraordinary things that aren’t necessarily giant things … but really are community-
led initiatives. Feeding programs and all kinds of [projects] that are very day-to-day [and] come from people’s hearts. [When they] see there’s something wrong and then ... find the way to fix it. I find that very inspiring! ... I remember reading a few years ago about this [girl] whose brother was in the hospital with ... cancer or something. She was eight or nine, and when she was visiting her brother in the hospital, she realized that [none of the kids] had any stuff to do there ... So she started ... making these artists’ packets with art supplies and paper and sending them to hospitals for kids ... What more perfect example is there? Encountering something that isn’t working, coming up with a plan, actually doing the fundraising, figuring out how to make it happen? ... It ended up being a non-profit organization that she founded as a child ... [And I recently heard about] this elderly ... woman who was a housekeeper, and saved and saved and saved, and when she passed, she had a million dollars to gift to the community for scholarship funds! How remarkable it [would be to be] that person! I think [of] her [often] ... being a housekeeper, living a life of simplicity so that she could make this enormous gift!

Moreover, when I asked Bettina to give a brief history of her own activism, she went immediately to the ways her parents cared for others throughout her childhood:

I used to think my parents were ca-ca, because they weren’t big political activists. But they were people who took care of everybody around them. My entire childhood was spent helping my mother make clothes and food for people who had kids they couldn’t afford to care for, and taking care of animals that’d been hurt, whose owners couldn’t take them to the vet ... My parents took care of our family and our extended family [of course], but also people in the extended family that was our community ... Those early [lessons] ... really stuck with me. That idea of taking care of the people around you, the people you encounter in your life and your family, and whoever you call your community.

As Bettina and I talked, it became increasingly clear that she continued to hold such values close to heart. Discussing the highlights of her political work, she told this story:

One of my happiest [activist moments] ever ... was cooking for [a small church in an inner-city neighborhood] ... They have a residency program for about 25 men who are in recovery, who would otherwise be homeless. Most nights, someone comes and cooks, a religious organization or whatever, but [one night I did it] ... Shortly after that, I read an article in the Real Change magazine, [where] homeless people rated the food in various soup kitchens [around town] ... The reviews of [the night I cooked at this church] said that [the meal] was made with enormous amounts of love! I was so happy!

Here, Bettina realized how much this one effort of cooking a meal had made a difference in people’s lives, and how such small acts of kindness could—little by little—contribute to a
peaceful and socially just world. A final story Bettina shared about her travels in Palestine really brought this point home:

One of my main jobs [as an activist] was to help people get over the borders ... On the Palestinian side, there’s a whole military stockade, and ... there are people with guns all over, and they have shock grenades, and all kinds of stuff that they can use on you. So all the Palestinians are lined up wanting to go to the doctors’, to the university, to see their family. Many people haven’t seen their family in years because they can’t get out ... Our presence there is supposed to help restrain the abuses ... [One time when I was observing, I went up to one the guards] and asked if I could speak with the captain, and the captain happened to be a young American who was serving—he had dual citizenship [with Israel] and was serving his duty there, and ... [I said to him] “We need more water ... You have these big containers of water... and we really need some for people here.” And he said, “Well, okay.” And as we were talking, [I told him about] the five or six girls [I had met in line] who needed to get to university to take their exams. They told me that they had been coming every single day asking for permission to go to university, and every single day, they were denied. One of the girls told me it would take a miracle to get across. So I was talking to the captain ... and I said ... “[There are] these girls who say it would take a miracle to get across. You’re Jewish. Do you believe in miracles? You know, the whole Hanukkah thing, do you believe in miracles?” And he said, “Well, yes.” And I said, “Well, let’s just make a miracle happen today. Let’s make a small miracle so that these girls can go to university.” And he said, “Okay.” So those girls got through.

Again, there was Bettina, connecting with a stranger, looking into his eyes and asking him to make a difference in the lives of thirsty border-crossers, and five girls who needed to take their university exams. Though this may not seem like much compared to the magnitude of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, such little acts of courage and conviction do constitute activism—and they do add up. And like my other narrators, Bettina demonstrated the willingness to not only bear witness to injustice, but to step into that injustice, taking an active role to make an impact in whatever way she could.

From my time with Bettina, I am left with gratitude for the many pieces of wisdom she shared with me, and for the generous spirit that infused her stories and her being. Yet what touches me perhaps even more is that I know this gratitude was mutual. In addition to expressing thanks for helping her see her everyday life as more “spiritual,” she also said:
[These interviews have] been a wonderful experience. I hope that your instructors are aware of how much heart you’ve put into this, and how much you give to the people you’re interviewing. It’s a very equitable redistribution of spiritual wealth. It really is very nice. It’s very fabulous. I think you do a really good job.

Much to my joy, Bettina also affirmed the importance of spiritual activism as a topic worth investigating. Speaking of my thesis, she said, “I can’t wait to read it. I was telling [my husband] that it’s so interesting to hear what you and the other [women] think, because it isn’t something I’ve found any of us talk about very much ... I’ve never talked to my co-religionists about activism and my religious experience, [even though] ... I’ve been with some of [them] for almost thirty years.” Hearing this, I felt re-energized and re-committed to my project, and delighted our sharing had been mutual.
CHAPTER IX: DISCUSSION

Having taken the reader on a journey through my conversations with Gloria, Rachele, Paula, Whitney and Bettina, I now reflect more deeply on these engagements. The purpose of this chapter is to weave together the threads of previous chapters, and to articulate the most significant pearls of wisdom I gathered through my thesis research process. Importantly, this chapter also invites some scholars into the conversation with my narrators, and allows the women’s voices to add insight to the literature on spiritual activism. The themes explored in these pages will not be new to the reader; rather, my intent is to frame them primarily within the context of the research questions that guided my study:

1. What motivates, inspires and sustains women’s activism for social justice?
2. To what extent do the participants in my study frame activism as a spiritual calling and/or responsibility? What do their spiritual lives add to their activism, and their activism to their spiritual lives?
3. Do they experience tensions between their spiritual paths and their political work? If so, what are these challenges and how do they navigate them? If not, why/how is this the case?

To begin, a brief reminder of the literature reviewed in Chapter II: while increasing numbers of scholars are bringing “spirituality” into the academic space, the topic of spiritual activism is still largely uncharted. Though some theorists attend to the influence of the inner life on outer work, and others to the role of spirituality in feminist social change, there is certainly room for further clarity and depth. Specifically, I argue that existing literature lacks attention to the nature of spiritual activism—the lived experiences and stories of everyday activists in the contemporary setting. In other words, what does it mean to actually live out a simultaneous commitment to spirituality and politics? What are the everyday realities of spiritual women working for social justice? What can their stories add to the study of spirituality and social justice?
**Seamlessness of Spirituality and Politics**

Through this research process, I was gifted many narratives that begin to answer such questions. First it needs to be stated, explicitly, that for all the women in this study, spirituality (or religion) is a primary motivation for activism. This may seem obvious—after all, my narrators were chosen because they identify as “spiritual activists.” Yet the importance of this connection should not be understated. There are of course many factors that motivate my narrators’ political work: gratitude for the earth, and for life; living abroad and witnessing injustice in a pronounced way; growing up African-American in the segregated south; parents who modeled the courage to take action; inspiring people met along the way; intense anger and outrage; compassion; an “inner pressure”; and so on. However, what all the women have in common is a spiritual commitment to social justice. Whitney, for instance, says she couldn’t do political work without a spiritual foundation, and feels it is a Christian ethic to work for justice and equality. Bettina, Paula, Gloria, and Rachele would agree, as would I, having been taught a spiritual responsibility towards political action by Judaism, Buddhism, Congregationalism, Paganism and Quakerism, respectively.

Indeed, for the women in my study, there is a seamlessness between spiritual and political practice, an interweaving of religious and activist concerns. hooks (1990) refers to this connection when she explains:

Spirituality has to do with the fundamental belief in divine spirit—in God and in love as a force that enables one to call forth one’s godliness and spiritual power… And that concern has not been experienced as being in conflict with political concerns, but more as in harmony with them. They are integrated for me, part of a whole (218-219).
Like hooks, my narrators do not experience this relationship necessarily as linear in nature—as though their spiritual beliefs precede their activism, or make them into activists; rather, spiritual and political commitments seem to emerge from the same well. Paula, for example, explains: “Social justice comes from the same place that spirituality comes from ... which is that expansive quality, that spiritual yearning for everyone. It’s wanting everyone to have well-being.” Further, Gloria names activism and spirituality as “one shoot from the same seed”; Rachele identifies her spiritual path as so woven into the rest of her life (including her politics) that she feels “religious ecstasy” much of the time; and Whitney says it is impossible to talk about her activism without bringing in her faith.

**Spiritual Practice as Refuge and Renewal**

There are many additional ways this seamlessness manifests in my narrators’ lives. Their stories reveal, for instance, the use of spiritual practice as a source of refuge and renewal for (and from) activism. When these women feel frustrated, overwhelmed and/or just worn out in their political work, they lean on spiritual foundations for sustenance and rejuvenation. As Anzaldúa explains, talking here about those committed to social change:

> When you’re going through a lot of ... pain and [feel like no one is] support[ing] you, you’re thrown back onto your own resources. You kind of surrender to the will of universal consciousness, to God ... You commit yourself through intention, so prayer is really good for that. I had some horrendous experiences where I [felt] ... totally alone... I had to find sustenance somewhere. I needed a connection with something outside myself that could sustain me.\(^{39}\)

Paula might resonate with Anzaldúa’s sentiments, as this narrator says she “takes refuge” in the tools of Buddhism—the Buddha, the sangha and the dharma—when she feels overwhelmed by the pain and despair in the world. Similarly, Whitney retreats into her

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\(^{39}\) Here, Anzaldúa is quoted by Keating (2000), p. 73.
“secret closet” to pray when she feels she can’t go on anymore; Bettina cites prayer and chanting as practices that re-inspire awe and wonder for the world, which makes her want to “give back” in gratitude; and Rachele feels rejuvenated and re-inspired to do political work after ritual and celebration with her community. I think in addition of my own experiences at a spiritual activism conference this summer in Berkeley, California, where I was struck by the power of collective silence in centering our efforts and reconnecting us when conversations became tense. I believe it is moments like these that remind spiritual activists of the larger visions and purposes we share, and evoke feelings of compassion, love, and reverence that are at the heart of our movements.

**Spiritual Practice as a Source of New Knowledge**

Beyond refuge and renewal, spiritual practice also provides my narrators with the inspiration, creativity and “knowledge” needed to address social and political concerns in the first place. For these women, forms of spiritual communion such as ritual, religious service, prayer, and meditation are techniques to envision a world that is peaceful, nonviolent and socially just—and to discover ways to move toward such a reality. A few examples: Whitney insists that she doesn’t go into any situation until she prays about it; Rachele names ritual and prayer as “the focusing moment, part of the planning” for political action; Gloria “listens to her soul” to indicate what is right for her to do in that moment; and Paula reminds herself she can always do something in the face of injustice, as she forever has the capacity to send loving-

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40 For more information on this conference, which was held July 20-23, 2005, and was organized by *Tikkun*, a Jewish magazine and interfaith movement, see: [http://www.tikkun.org/community/spiritual_activism_conference/index.html](http://www.tikkun.org/community/spiritual_activism_conference/index.html).

41 Because I did not provide this example in Rachele’s narrative, here is the longer quote: “The prayer or the meditation or the ritual is sort of the focusing moment ...it’s part of the planning, [and] by doing that I can clarify my own mind about where I want to go, what I’m willing to do, what I’m not willing to do.”
kindness to others. And from my own life, I realize that it is only in the context of
meditation that I have truly experienced the well-being, equanimity and joy that I hope to
generate (and institutionalize) through social change work.

The idea of spirituality as a source of knowledge and power is noted in the literature.
Anzaldúa (2002), for instance, urges:

[We must] refuse to accept spirituality as a devalued form of knowledge, and instead
elevate it to the same level occupied by science and rationality. A form of spiritual
inquiry, conocimiento is reached via creative acts—writing, art-making, dancing,
healing, teaching, meditation and spiritual activism ... Breaking out of your mental
and emotional prison and deepening the range of perception enables you to link inner
reflection and vision ... with social, political action and lived experiences to generate
subversive knowledges (542).

Elsewhere Anzaldúa explains that while the “dominant reality mode/academia wants to sever
the dreamer’s connections,” the person who “images and visualizes and dreams”—available,
in part, through spiritual practice—is the person at the forefront of social movements.42

Ruether (2002) is also instructive here, naming “grace or divine power” as the transcendent
potential that allows women to find alternative, creative ways to solve social problems; as is
Lorenz (2002), who suggests unknown possibilities when we tap into our inner, spiritual
resources:

When spirit enters ... rituals of restoration, a kind of cultural alchemy can temporarily
cook what’s raw, unite what’s divided, give meaning to what’s chaotic, and thereby
enchant, refresh, and reanimate all participants ... The alchemy of the creative act
may imagine a transpersonal ground embedded in the personal and social frame: that
in us and our communities which imagines “more” in dream, image, ... inspiration or
desire, even before we fully understand what we’re reaching for, perhaps more
understanding, more creativity, more community, much more than life offers in the
current globalized economy. The realm of the transpersonal “more,” a sense of the
sacred unknown ground of life, announces the presence of the numinous and
uncanny, where we might realize that what we have already understood is a small part
of our potential... Such energies—named in narratives of various cultures as gods and
goddesses, orishas, daimons, invisibles, spirits—can give us the vision and strength

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42 Here, Anzaldúa is quoted by Keating (2000), p. 144.
to author new scripts for ourselves, our cities, and our surrounding environments (497, 504-05).

My study affirms spirituality as a vital source of knowledge and strength—and offers examples of how this is the case. From prayers as preparation for action, to rituals that serve as the “focusing moment,” to “listening to the soul” for direction—my narrators use spiritual practice to imagine and enact liberating alternatives to social injustice. As such, they are affecting not only their own emotional and psychic states of being, but more material forms of reality as well.

Freire’s (1973) concept of praxis is useful in furthering this discussion of spiritual practice as a form of knowledge. As mentioned, this term refers to “conscious reflection and action,” stressing the importance of both “critical consciousness” and action in efforts towards social change (i.e. action linked to certain ethics and values). Using the concept of praxis to consider the women in my study, it becomes clear that spiritual practice serves as a form of “conscious reflection.” Yet, like Freire, my narrators do not stop here, and instead urge subsequent efforts to directly impact social and material inequalities. Whitney, for instance, insists that it’s not enough to sit home and pray: “You have to put legs on those prayers! If [all] Martin Luther King … did was pray, you and I wouldn’t be sitting across from each other right now! … He got out there, he marched, he protested, he spoke, he went to jail!” Similarly, Bettina names prayer as “productive” if (and only if) our “attention is focused on somebody else” who needs our prayers. And Rachele insists that prayer,

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43 Again, the longer quote: “I … do think … prayer [can be] productive or ‘activist.’ I’m always filled with such respect for those people who … pray for somebody’s health … They don’t intrude on the person, but they spend all of this time [emphatically] doing this on behalf of another that is absolutely unconnected to them in any significant way … I’ve always thought that … choosing to focus your attention on somebody else … is activist because our nature is sooo oriented towards self!
mediation, and spells all make an energetic difference, but they are not enough to truly enact change.\textsuperscript{44} As Anzaldúa argues:

The vision of our spirituality provides us with no trap door solution, no escape hatch tempting us to “transcend” our struggle. We must act in the everyday world. Words are not enough. We must perform visible and public acts that might make us more vulnerable to the very oppressions we are fighting against.\textsuperscript{45}

Keating (2002) echoes these sentiments when she insists: “[A] focus on spiritual activism must not be conflated with escapism. The spiritual components of life cannot be divorced from politics, sexuality, writing, or daily living” (529). Indeed, for Freire, Anzaldúa and Keating, as well as for my narrators, spiritual practice is an important component of social change—but it must be coupled with protesting, marching, writing, speaking and acting in the name of justice.

\textit{Spiritual Practice as Source of Agency}

Given that spiritual practice is a source of knowledge and preparation for the women in my study, then it is also a source of agency. In other words, spirituality provides my narrators with (many of) the inner resources they need for outer work. As mentioned previously, issues of agency are fiercely contested in feminist academic circles—with poststructuralists calling into question coherent subjects who can possess agency, and materially-oriented feminists arguing that we cannot kill off agency and subject because we need coherent notions of identity in order to create social change. I argue, however, that the narratives in this study express a third view, one that challenges both poststructural and materialist
perspectives. Specifically, these narratives indicate that agency comes not only from language and identity, but also from an inner, spiritual source. In addition to the examples already given, Gloria talks of it being her “soul’s path” to speak up in the face of injustice; Whitney calls prayer and conscious contact with God a “shot in the arm” that prepares her to enter the battle; and Paula details the sense of “co-arising” she feels during meditation that informs her commitment to equality and justice.

Here, my narrators call into question the rational, individualist notion of the “self,” and also challenge theoretical accounts that equate power solely with language or identity. Specifically, their stories demonstrate that decisions to act can be based not only on individual self-will, but on something larger (i.e. outside of themselves) as well. This relationship seems to echo what hooks (1993a) refers to when she says:

[ Spiritual] surrender is the state of being through which and from which one serves, whether that service manifests as political organizing, writing or teaching. It is this state of surrender that enables one to be in touch with divine will, so that it is not simply our choosing but God who chooses within us. That is the intimate solitary space or our submission where God speaks to us, where we are still, where we are truly “servants.” In that still place, found in meditation, prayer, times of silence, I listen to my heart as I attempt to choose the direction of my work, the causes I support (101).

As hooks implies, spirituality does inform ability to act and to make change; and it is often through self-transcendence and surrender that the inspiration and guidance for action comes. Anzaldúa (2002) furthers this point when she names “power” as spiritual:

When you’re troubled, conocimiento prompts you to take a deep breath, shift your attention away from what’s causing pain and fear, and call upon a power deeper and freer than that of your ego, such as nagualia y los espíritus, for guidance. Direction may also come from an inner impression, dream, meditation, I Ching, Tarot cards. You use these spiritual tools to deal with personal and political problems. Power

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45 Anzaldúa is quoted by Keating (2002), p. 529.
comes from being in touch with your body, soul, and spirit, and letting their wisdom lead you (570).

Building on the insights of hooks and Anzaldúa, it seems my narrators' everyday experiences have something important to offer feminist theoretical debates on agency.

In this context, spirituality is empowering and counter-cultural. I make this point to contest, again, the rhetoric of the Religious Right (and other forms of fundamentalism) that co-opts "faith" as a tool to dominate and dehumanize women, gays and lesbians, the economically-marginalized, and so on. As a source of refuge, renewal, knowledge, power and preparation for activism, spirituality can be revolutionary. Because one's religion or faith is a lens through which a particular reading of the world is constructed and framed, spirituality can "offer powerful spaces of resistance to injustice, and [can] provide avenues for critical contestation and political engagement" (Zine, 2004; 185). Dei echoes these ideas:

There are different spiritualities and the focus on reclaiming the spiritual is for an action-oriented, revolutionary spirituality. The approach moves beyond the liberal focus on compassion, humility and caring, to discussing how we evoke spirituality and spiritual knowledge to transform society and to challenge oppressive systems and structures. This approach thus focuses on questions of power and domination and the role of spirituality in strengthening and empowering the self and the collective to resist marginality.46

As the lives of the women in this study demonstrate, the spiritual path is not an escape from politics; rather, tapping into spiritual knowledge and building on spiritual principles can be an informed political move.

**Sacred Experiences of Interconnectedness**

Returning to a discussion of the seamlessness of spirituality and politics in my narrators’ lives, I pose a fourth significant way this connection emerges in my research. Specifically, my narrators expressed a belief in the “interconnectedness of all beings,” and named this conviction as a primary motivation for their political work. As discussed previously, this sense of “interconnectedness” is related to Anzaldúa’s (2002) concept of *conocimiento*, which encourages a less defensive, more inclusive identity that allows individuals to transcend divisions and to move towards collective transformation:

By moving from a militarized zone to a roundtable [we] acknowledge an unmapped common ground: the humanity of the other... Can you assume that all of us, Ku Klux Klan and holistic alliance members, are in it together just because we’re all human? If consciousness is not local, not contained in separate vessels/bodies, but is like air and water, energy and matter, then we are all in it together (573).

It also shows up in Macy’s (1998) discussion of the “web of life” in Buddhism:

The bodhisattva is one who knows and takes seriously the dependent co-arising of all things. That is why he also knows that there is no private salvation, and that is why she turns back from the gates of nirvana to reenter samsara, the world of suffering, again and again to minister to all beings until each, to every blade of grass, is enlightened. Here is revealed the compassion that blooms naturally when we open to our condition of profound mutuality (52).

Similarly, this interconnectedness is embedded in Lerner’s (2000) theory of *emancipatory spirituality*, which involves the ability to transcend ego so as to see oneself as connected to all beings—including those “on the opposite side of the table” (160).

Each of my narrators mentions this belief at some point in their interviews. Gloria, for instance, quotes the inspiration of her father, who used to say, “As long as there are people who are enslaved, I am also enslaved.” Similarly, Paula names “the passion to care for your well-being or [my cat’s] well being, or the well-being of the women who made ... this rug [as connected to] caring for my own well-being,” and tells of her meditation practice to connect with Condoleeza Rice. Rachele describes when she was ritually performing the
role of Mother Earth and felt “all the things that were happening to her,” and also shares stories of feeling connected to the plants and animals around her. Further, Bettina talks about the responsibility to heal the world she learned from Judaism, stressing that “we have [all] allowed the circumstances to arise in our communities where rape and murder can happen”; and Whitney asks, “If not you, then who? If not now, then when?”

Whether through Buddhist meditation, Mother Earth ritual or Yom Kippur celebration, each narrator talks about having access to this sense of interconnectedness through spirituality. Not only do their “faiths” teach that we are all connected, but their spiritual practices provide embodied experiences that this is the case. As Halifax (1993) articulates:

Originally, I understood interconnectedness in terms of the Buddhist notion of pratityasamutpada, or conditioned co-arising, which says that everything that occurs is conditioned by and conditions everything else. As my meditation practice continued and I spent more time in the wilderness, I began to feel that all creation shares a common skin ... I have for years felt strongly that it is important for us to discover directly this ground of reality, this web of mutuality. The experience of interconnectedness, however one might come to discover it, changes how we perceive the world, and thereby all our relations with the phenomenal world become an expression of an extended self, a self with no boundaries (138).

In altering “all our relations with the phenomenal world,” experiences of sacred interconnectedness can have radical political implications. Namely, as discussed in Paula’s narrative, such experiences challenge the hegemonic framework of liberal individualism under which we currently live—the mechanistic, Western paradigm that promotes self-reliance, separation, and protection of one’s own property and wealth. If all beings “share a common skin,” then the effects of individual decisions and actions on others’ lives become increasingly obvious, and everyone’s well-being becomes a collective responsibility and concern. As such, feelings of interconnectedness become a foundation for social action.
Macy's (1998) "despair and empowerment" work is a good example of how this is the case. Her work involves the use of Buddhist meditation to become aware of internalized sexism and racism; to understand how this contributes to others' pain and suffering; and to let go of such conditioned thoughts and behaviors. To bring my narrators in, Rachele's experience of "being the earth" in high school prompted her to write a radical environmental column for the school newspaper; Paula believes "our deepest joy comes from being connected ... and then from that, there is infinite human creativity to solve specific problems"; and I think of Quakers' practice of recognizing everyone's Inner Light as a precursor for activism. Again, for the women in my study, spiritual understandings are woven with those of social justice, and spiritual practice has practical, tangible effects on the political and material conditions of our communities.

**Tensions between Spiritual and Political Paths**

Continuing to dialogue with the literature, I want to bring one final inquiry to bear on my study. As indicated previously, though some scholars affirm the seamlessness between spirituality and politics (e.g. Lerner, Macy, Anzaldúa, hooks), they also document tensions between these two paths (e.g. Flinders, Zine, Teish, Hunt). This latter group cites, for instance, spiritual seekers who lack commitment to social justice concerns, and secular activists who lack openness to spiritual worldviews. So how do my participants weigh in on this matter? In general, when I posed the question, "Do you ever experience tensions between your spiritual and activist practices or communities?"—my narrators did not quite know how to respond. Most of them first answered negatively, saying, "No, that's never happened to me," or "I'm not sure what you're talking about." There were a few exceptions
to this trend: Bettina, for example, described returning from Palestine to learn that several members of the larger Jewish community were adamantly opposed to her strong political stance against the Israeli government. Similarly, Rachele cited frustrations with “nose-to-the-grindstone liberals” who think pagans are “a bunch of rainbow chasing smurf worshipers,” and admitted she often closets her religion among professional colleagues because she fears they might discount her politics as a result. These experiences seem to echo those of the faith-based activists in Hunt’s study (1999) who felt their “transrational way of functioning” was unwelcome among secular feminists; and seem to be an example of the liberals Lerner describes as “unable to distinguish between those repressive uses of religion and the more liberatory elements.”

Sometimes I tried rephrasing the question, asking instead: “Have there been times you felt your spiritual community didn’t support your political work, or your activist community didn’t support your spiritual path?” In this context, a few of my narrators remembered a moment or two of challenge or tension. Gloria talked about her frustrations with “shallow phoney ommm people” who are not grounded in the everyday realities of the world; Whitney described some fellow Christian ministers who are judgmental of her AIDS benefit work because they are homophobic; and Paula shared when a spiritual teacher told her “all we can do is purify our own heart” after 9/11, and she mentioned several co-practitioners who have asked her, “why would you want to get lost in all that negativity?” in regards to her activism. Corroborating the literature, these incidents seem to mirror Macy’s (2000) experience of Buddhist friends who said she was becoming “sidetracked from the real aims of Dharma practice” in doing political work, as well as what Lerner (2000) refers to

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47 Lerner is quoted on p. 24 of Condor (2005).
when he argues spiritual practices "can be a slippery slope towards narcissism and self-absorption" if they don't incorporate the political (273).

Yet while challenges between spirituality and politics *do* exist for my narrators, it took some digging to get at these moments. More common than expressions of frustration were those of gratitude—as Paula articulated, "There are so many hundred flowers blooming in Seattle" (i.e. so many people who commit to both inner and outer work). Similarly, Gloria named the southern churches she used to attend as "very concerned" with civil rights; Whitney praised several members of her church who donated their time and money to help with her Abaco project; and Bettina said she feels "very supported" by her "chosen spiritual community" in the political work she does. Moreover, my narrators expressed an ability to negotiate such tensions when they *do* arise in large part because of the strong support of other co-religionists and co-activists.

I must admit such responses surprised me, as this has not generally been my experience working for non-profits or attending the church I do in Seattle (as discussed earlier). Yet this trend actually makes sense to me—Seattle is a progressive urban center with many avenues to explore spirituality *as well as* social justice. I sense this is true on a larger scale as well, in part because we live in a temporal moment that necessitates creative and effective response to urgent social and environmental conditions (as discussed in Chapter I). Consequently, as we try out both spiritual and political approaches to social change, more integrated spaces are being nurtured and created. As a case in point, a recent issue of *Utne Reader* remarks:

[There is] a new kind of feminism, slowly growing for a decade and now bursting out everywhere. At its heart lies a new kind of political activism that's guided and sustained by spirituality. Some are calling it the long-awaited "fourth wave" of
feminism—a fusion of spirituality and social justice reminiscent of the American civil rights movement and Gandhi’s call for nonviolent change (Peay, 2005; 59).

Yet beyond the progressive trends of the twenty-first century, I argue another explanation for the (apparent) overall lack of spiritual/political tension in the lives of my participants. Perhaps such tensions are documented in the literature—yet lived out to a lesser degree among my narrators—because of an old-school paradigm that does not operate in the lives of these women. Perhaps scholars document these tensions, at least in part, because they assume the spiritual must be separate from the material—an assumption based on the Enlightenment legacy of divorcing spirit from matter. Again, though spiritual epistemologies and practices have direct effect on material conditions (as argued through this study), most theorists still discredit spiritual concerns as legitimate forms of knowledge and power. In doing so, these scholars ignore the lived experiences of people like my narrators. As indigenous feminists, Chicana theorists, ecowomanists, and other non-Western women have been arguing for a long time, on the level of felt experience, the spiritual and political are interwoven. Perhaps it is time for other academics also to come to this understanding.

The Metanarrative: Inner Work as a Political Act

In short, this chapter has used my participants’ lives to demonstrate how spiritual practice provides the resources, knowledge, agency and power that spiritual activists need for social justice work. I have also argued that despite occasional tensions between the spiritual and the political, for the women in my study, these paths are intimately connected. So what is the larger lesson learned here? What is the metanarrative of all the narratives shared in the interviews? While I do not have definitive answers to all the questions that guided this project, I can say with clarity that inner lives matter to outer work. Echoing Palmer’s (1998)
ideas that “inner landscapes” impact teaching far more than the conditions of our schools or our communities, I have learned that spirituality greatly informs the sensibilities, techniques and visions spiritual activists bring to their political work. The stories shared through this inquiry illustrate that for these women, spirituality is not a form of escape or removal from political struggle; rather, spiritual practice is a kind of activism, as it restores emotionally, physically and psychically; offers new knowledge and power; and provides embodied experiences of the love, joy, equanimity, and interconnection at the heart of revolutionary social movements. From the inspiration of progressive religious teachings, to individual practices such as prayer, ritual, silence, meditation and yoga—inner work is intimately linked with activism. Anzalúda sums this up when she says, "By changing ourselves, we change the world ... going deep into the self and expanding out into the world, [we engage in] a simultaneous recreation of the self and a reconstruction of society."\footnote{Anzaldua is quoted by Keating (2002), p. 522.}

Yet beyond identifying the ways spiritual practice shifts materiality, this research has shared rich and meaningful stories from the lives of five inspiring spiritual activists. As is the case with narrative inquiry, the purpose of this project has been to "record, reflect and wonder" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), and to offer real life illustrations of what has been theorized in the literature. In essence, these stories disclose what it means to be a spiritual activist, and what it means to live with an open-heart and radical commitment to making the world a better place. They celebrate women who can and do create positive, visionary change; illustrate religious traditions that reclaim “spirituality” as a politically progressive force; and demonstrate individuals willing to bear witness to others’ suffering while continuing to impart compassion, joy, love and reverence for all of life. For other spiritual
activists, these stories stand as beacons and reminders of who we are, and why we do the work we do. To quote Halifax (1993):

"Storying is a kind of root medicine, a way for us to enter our depths and derive nourishment from the fruitful darkness... Stories, like the sacred plants, are medicine and food come from the Earth. They remind us that we do not stand alone. Through them we live in the body of coyote and crow, tree and stone, gods and heroes, Ancestral Mothers and Grandmothers. In this way, we confirm our relationship with all of creation (111, 103)."

By sharing their stories with me, and allowing me to pass them on through this project, Gloria, Rachele, Paula, Whitney and Bettina have offered a kind of “root medicine” to nourish the soul, and to reconnect the theoretical with the practical; the heart with the head; and the political with the spiritual. In short, their narratives offer messages of inspiration, hope and action in these trying times.
CHAPTER X: CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Implications for Practice

In offering messages of inspiration, hope and action, the stories of this research have much to offer movements for social justice. To begin, they honor the “spirit” that already exists in everyday activism, indicating that the goal is not to incorporate spirituality into politics, but rather to acknowledge how the former is already very much a part of the latter. Indeed, these narratives remind the reader that spiritual activism is not a new endeavor, but has been practiced in the context of faith-based political action for centuries, and in fact has generated some of the most revolutionary leaders of our time.49 As such, it is my hope that this research encourages activists of all persuasions to take note; whether the concern is the environment, antiracism, economic justice, psychotherapy, working with prisoners, classroom education, or progressive scholarship—spirituality is relevant to practice.

Similarly, the stories of this study can be useful to religious teachers and leaders in that they demonstrate the importance of political concerns to faith. If justice and equality are viewed as spiritual principles, then cultivating progressive political commitments among congregants is central to spiritual development and growth. As Lerner (2000) articulates, “No amount of inner enlightenment can adequately nourish a spiritual life if one’s day is drenched in soul-destroying social realities” (273). Conversely, this thesis also reminds everyday activists that they/we do not need to feel narcissistic (or unproductive) for engaging in spiritual practice when there is so much “outward” work to do. If prayer, meditation, ritual and communion with Mother Earth are forms of refuge and renewal, activists can partake as a way to sustain themselves and their movements. Again, as Lerner (2000) points
out: “The fruits of social change won’t last if they’re implemented by people who are out of
touch with their own spiritual dimensions—and the change won’t ever be achieved, because
most people eventually drop out of social change movements that lack nourishment for the
soul” (273).

Moreover, if spiritual practices are sources of creativity, knowledge and power, then
faith and “spirit” are in effect needed in social change movements as means to envision and
enact liberating alternatives to the political problems we face. As argued previously, how are
progressive activists able move forward unless we are able to experience, on some level, that
which we are working towards? From the celebration and love generated by Rachele’s
rituals, to the sense of “co-arising” in Paula’s meditations, to the little flowers and magical
art in Bettina’s garden, activists need to stay in touch with the gratitude and wonder which
calls forth political action in the first place. As Van Jones, a San Francisco civil rights leader
expressed in his keynote speech at Tikkun’s Spiritual Activism Conference:

We don’t need a nonviolent movement in this county, and we don’t we need a violent
movement in this country. We don’t need a religious movement ... and we don’t need
a not religious movement. We need ... a reverence movement. Where we can just
stand in awe of each other. Stand in awe of creation. Stand in awe of the Creator,
and strive always to act from there... The examples that we need, the path that we
need to walk, the love that we need is bottomless and always there. It’s the love you
had as a child; it’s the tears you shed as a child; it’s the openness to all possibility that
you had as a child. That, and not the debate, that, and not the righteousness, that, and
nothing else, will ensure that we as a human family can and will survive.50

Though a multivocality of techniques towards peace and justice is always welcome, social
movements need to be grounded in the commonality of possibility and love that is, as Jones
points out, “bottomless and always there.” It is my hope that the narratives of this study have
demonstrated moments of such reverence and awe.

49 This is also true in the contemporary setting, as explored throughout this paper. I have included an appendix
(Appendix E) which lists a few of the many spiritually-based political initiatives I found through this research.
Challenges of this Study

This inquiry also contributes to practice in that it provides a launching pad for deeper explorations into the lives of spiritual activists. This thesis has created space for five very inspiring women to tell their stories, and has shared these stories with a larger audience. Yet, as is true for any research project, it offers only glimpses into the larger phenomenon of spiritual activism—as the questions I could pose, the subjects I could interview and the relationships I could investigate are indeed limitless. I see this thesis as an open text—one ripe for challenge, revision and expansion, and one that shares a story of spiritual activism, not the story. As Leggo (2004a) points out:

> Any story we tell will always be a fragment of the complex and wide-ranging experiences that each of us lives daily in our bodies and imaginations, the experiences we live daily in interconnections with family, colleagues, and community ... [As] narrative researchers ... [we] acknowledge[e] ... we can never tell the whole story (99-100).

I do not argue that my findings are true for all activists, or even for all spiritual activists in Seattle; rather I present these narratives as the gift I have to offer at this particular time, knowing my participants’ lives are continually evolving and changing, and knowing much more could always be said.

I acknowledge the partiality of my study (and all studies) not because I wish to launch a broad discussion on the limitations of social science research, but rather as a way to continue my commitment to self-reflexivity. Indeed, the story of spiritual activism I have composed is inherently shaped by my own perceptions and sensibilities, and the lens I use to interpret my narrators’ lives is dependent on the assumptions, worldviews, and life experiences I bring as an inquirer. Importantly, my positionality as a white, middle-class,

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American, university-educated woman also affects the research relationship, influencing who I chose to interview, how comfortable I felt with them, and how I articulated the data I received. Such challenges are of course faced by all researchers, and I simply acknowledge the paradox of trying to "give voice" to participants while simultaneously holding the reigns of interpretation and delivery in my own hands.

Yet perhaps the greatest challenge of this project has been to try to articulate the very subjective, ephemeral nature of spiritual practice through language. Beyond the partiality of stories and the privileging of the researcher's voice, this study offers only glimpses of spiritual activism because it is so difficult to capture and represent experiences of spirituality on paper. From the energetic calm of Paula's living room, to the divine beauty of Bettina's garden, to the tear-filled quality of Gloria's voice—I cannot portray my full experiences of these women through text, nor can I truly understand their spiritual journeys as they too must use words to relate them to me. Spiritual practice is held in body, in heart, in stillness, and seldom is it possible to step out of these experiences in ways that allow true explanation and representation. As such, writer and reader alike have available only what can be grasped given the elusive nature of spirituality and spiritual practice. And what we can grasp are simply moments of explanation and representation, snapshot descriptions of the awe, inspiration, hope and faith that surround and infuse the courageous actions of these five women.

Ideas for Future Research

Because this study provides only glimpses into the lives of spiritual activists, the possibilities for future exploration and discovery are vast. A few priorities, however, stand out. First, I
propose an inquiry that is more culturally and racially representative than my project. Though I sought (and found) diversity in terms of religious tradition, sexual orientation, age, and type of activism, my participants were a relatively privileged group. Only one of them grew up poor, and only one is a woman of color. To be an activist who lives in comfort is different than to be one who does not, and the stories generated by a more marginalized group of women would add essential wisdom and knowledge to literature on spiritual activism. I am curious how findings would shift, for instance, if I interviewed activists raised in working-class, indigenous and/or non-Western families and cultures. Would stories be markedly different if participants were exposed from a young age to worldviews that honored the seamlessness of political and spiritual concerns in ways that mainstream Western cultures do not? More generally, how would narratives change if I remained focused on contemporary Seattle activists, yet simply interviewed a larger, more diverse sample?

To continue, I am interested in comparing different approaches to progressive activism—the "nose-to-the-grindstone" liberals Rachele describes, for example, versus those who bring spiritual practice directly into their activism. Though my research investigates this inquiry to a certain degree, it does not specifically ask the question: how do results change when spiritual practice is employed before, during and/or after political action? If an activist, for instance, steps into the boardroom with compassion towards those on the other side of the table, or with an embodied sense of interconnectedness, how does this alter the headway she is able to make? Perhaps a future study could interview activists who have transferred from the "nose-to-the-grindstone" camp to the "spiritual activist" camp (or vice versa), and could share stories of why and how these shifts happened.
I would also like to further explore women’s definitions of activism—specifically in regards to fostering healthy, loving relationships as a kind of political work. As noted in Bettina’s narrative, rather banal activities—such as making dinner or sewing clothes—can be infused with the spirit of social justice, as these efforts are also geared towards touching peoples’ lives. Do such gestures make as much of an impact in the lives of homeless women (for instance) as, say, legislative action? Why or why not? Similarly, as Gloria indicated, “instituting hugging” in an academic environment can be a kind of spiritual activism, as it brings the heart into spaces where it is needed to create systemic change. In such contexts, how does the personal become political, and the political personal, and what insight do spiritual activists have to offer here?

In a related vein, what is the connection between emotional and psychological “healing” and social change? Several of my narrators touched on this dynamic—including Paula, who said that she would “be a wall or something that went into the prisons” if she didn’t do her healing work, and Gloria, who argued that “therapy is a political act.” Scholars also document this relationship, including hooks (1993b), who says:

We cannot fully create effective movements for social change if individuals struggling for that change are not also self-actualized or working towards that end. When wounded individuals come together ... our collective struggle is often undermined by all that has not been dealt with emotionally ... Self actualization [is] part of our political efforts to resist ... supremacy and ... oppression (5).

Furthering the inner-outer exploration, I propose research that investigates “inner work” that is not explicitly spiritual in nature (i.e. physical, emotional, psychological, mental)—inquiring how restoring oneself in these ways can be an informed political move.

Finally, I recommend a project that inquires into the possibilities of “love” as a social movement. The theme of “love” in relation to social justice came up with all of my
narrators, including Rachele who asked: “When did it become okay not to love people, to
not say yes to the love that you feel in your heart?” Referring to progressive activists who
see “love” as flakey, Rachele argues that love can be a political force. She continues:

If I were to be honest, [I] really recogniz[e] that nothing is accomplished, nothing
positive is accomplished, and no progress is made as long as people stonewall and
don’t approach each other with compassion and, ultimately, love. I mean, even if it is
that sort of universal love of . . . life or . . . a connection that I’m calling love . . . A
huge part of my belief and practice is to try and bring that forward in the world and
recognize that there’s not enough of it now, so the more that I can personally help to
bring manifest into the world, it’s got to help.

Scholars echo these sentiments, including hooks (2000), who sees “loving practice . . . as the
primary way we end domination and oppression” (76); and Sandoval (2000), who posits a
“methodology of love” as a key framework that U.S. third world women use towards
emancipation. Building on the insights of such scholars, as well as on those of my narrators,
I propose research that uncovers into the revolutionary possibilities of love.

**Bringing It Home**

In closing, I end this narrative inquiry into spiritual activism by returning to my own story.

Many pages ago, I shared some moments from my life that had cultivated and enlivened my
commitments to spirituality and social justice—and now, as I write these last sentences, I
come full circle. This research has only deepened these commitments in me, and in fact has
challenged me to become even more familiar with the ways they inspire my work and my
life. From the afternoon I began to envision this project, to the many, many hours I spent
with my narrators and their transcripts, to the words I write now—this inquiry has
transformed me and helped me grow. It has introduced me to writers and thinkers whose
words hearten and inspire me, and remind me I am in good company in my desire to live

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51 See footnotes in my literature review for a definition of “healing.”
consciously and lovingly. It has prompted me to talk with family, friends and colleagues about the spiritual life, and has inspired a deeper understanding of and gratitude towards my parents and their passions for social justice and spirituality. It has given me space to reflect on my practices as an educator and activist, and challenged me to think about where I want to go from here in terms of my life’s work. It has offered opportunity to collaborate with other graduate students studying spirituality and activism, and to travel to conferences where I have met others similarly excited about this theory and practice.

In essence, this narrative inquiry has taken me on a journey of coming to better know myself, my priorities and my people. Importantly, it has also allowed me to connect with five very inspiring women in a meaningful way. Though these pages only begin to express the creative exchange that transpired through our interviews, I feel changed as a result. Beyond the few hours I spent in person with each woman, I spent many, many more listening to and reflecting upon their words, thinking about their contributions as spiritual activists, and relating their lives to my own. In truth, these narrators have become mentors and confidants to me—women I reference internally when I begin to doubt my ability to make a difference in the world, or when I forget to approach personal and political challenges with grace and ease. Similarly, these women have also affirmed my ability to listen deeply and connect with others—as they seem to have been positively impacted by our time together as well. Bettina, for example, realized the true nature of her “spiritual” capacities; Gloria insisted my subject was “a great topic, absolutely great, [and] I have no doubt you’re going to get a book out of it!”; and Paula ended our second interview with:

I’m curious about what you’re learning, what this process was like for you, and then how it will go into your own life as a living, breathing being, and then move out to the people you touch, your advisor, and whoever will read it. You’ve done a ton of work. It’s like you’re pregnant, and I gave you a meal. And you’ve gotten some
other meals [from the other women], but you’re the one [who is giving birth. I want to know] what will this little baby be like?

Sharing reciprocal respect and gratitude, my narrators have shown me the importance (and possibility) of community and connection in work towards social justice. I have come to envision these women as members of my ever-growing community; and though the six of us have never met (together), I picture a circle of kindred spirits, women who support each other on our paths as seekers and activists.

Yet perhaps the most significant gift of all is that I now have a more tangible understanding of the ways the soul and spirit are very much alive in activists’ lives, and in my life. Beyond theories I read, or abstractions I tried to pin down, I now have stories of how this is the case—and feel inspired to apply these understandings to my own life. Regardless of my next steps as an educator—whether I choose nonprofit management, community organizing, research or teaching—I have been shown the importance of attending to my inner life as a crucial part of this process. Coming to know these five women, I now realize I do not have to choose between a contemplative, spiritual life—or one of political action. Both are available to me, and with Gloria, Rachele, Paula, Whitney and Bettina as testimony, I understand how these paths can truly nourish and support each other. Spirituality is a part of my work because it is a part of me. It renews and sustains my activism; offers creativity, inspiration and knowledge for my practice; and connects me to myself, to all beings and to my higher power. Indeed, as this study has illustrated, spirituality does not stand apart from political action; rather, one’s connection to “spirit,” to the soul, to faith, is at the heart of any enduring commitment to peace, social justice and progressive political change.
I speak of the soul and seven people rise
from their chairs and leave the room, seven others
lean forward to listen. I speak of the body, the spirit,
the mockingbird, the hollyhock, leaves opening in the
rain, music, faith, angels seen at dusk — and seven
more people leave the room and are seen running
down the road. Seven more stay where they are but
make murmurous disruptive sounds. Another seven
hang their heads, feigning disinterest though their
hearts are open, their hope is high that they will hear
the word even again...They know already how every­
thing is better — the dark trees less terrible, the ocean
less hungry — when it comes forth, and looks around
with its crisp and lovely eye, and begins to sing.

~Mary Oliver (2002; 4)

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Hernandez-Avila, I. (2002). In the presence of spirit(s): a meditation on the politics of solidarity and transformation. In G. Anzaldúa & A. Keating (Eds.), *This bridge we call home.* (pp. 530-538). New York: Routledge.


Leggo, C. (2004b). Personal communication


March 2005

Dear [Name]:

Hello, my name is Anna Treadway, and I am writing to ask if you might be interested in participating in a research project exploring the lives of women who work for social justice. I am currently a graduate student in Educational Studies at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, B.C. From Seattle, I worked there for many years as a domestic violence advocate (with New Beginnings for Battered Women and their Children) as well as a community organizer (with Powerful Schools and Seattle AIDS Support Group).

The title of my research project is: *Exploring the Inner Lives of Women Activists for Social Justice*, and it will form the basis of my Masters thesis. This purpose of this study is to investigate what offers motivation and sustenance to women’s activism, focusing specifically on the relationship between spirituality and hope and vision for social justice. Here, I use ‘spirituality’ as a broad term to refer to a set of beliefs that recognizes the existence of some kind of ‘force’ that connects us to all people, to all creatures, and to the Earth. For my research, I will interview community organizers, therapists, healers, domestic violence workers, spiritual teachers and/or political leaders (etc.) who are involved in a variety of spiritual traditions and practices. I intend my study to remind us why and how we act in these challenging times.

I am asking you to participate in this project because you have demonstrated a substantial commitment to issues of social justice, and have indicated that your ‘spiritual’ life significantly influences your work.

If you chose to participate in this study, you are agreeing to two interviews of approximately one-and-a-half hours each. In the first interview, we will explore your experiences with the primary thematic areas of my study: activism and spirituality. In the second, we will discuss issues that emerged from the first interview in more depth. You will be asked to answer open-ended questions designed to encourage story-telling and easy dialogue. While I intend to create an environment of shared conversation, my purpose is more to listen than to offer my own insights. With your permission, our interviews will be audio-taped. I will then transcribe these interviews and send you the transcriptions for your review. I will also offer you the option of reading my preliminary analysis before your narrative becomes part of my official thesis document. (If you choose to review this analysis, the total time required for...
APPENDIX C: First Interview Questions

PRELIMINARY QUESTIONS:

1. How would you describe the social justice work that you do currently? How did you come to do this work? Tell me that story.
2. Tell me a little about other work towards social justice you have done in your life.
3. What motivates and sustains you?
4. What does activism mean to you? What is an activist, in your view?
5. What compels you to act? Tell me a story of the first time you remember feeling compelled to act.
6. What does spirituality mean to you? Do you identify as 'spiritual'?
7. Tell me a little about your 'spiritual' upbringing? What kind of spiritual practices are currently important to you? How do these compare to those of your childhood?
8. How would you describe the connection between spirituality and social justice in your own life and work? Do you remember when you realized you called upon your spiritual beliefs to inform your political work? Tell me about it.
9. Do you consider yourself a feminist? Why or why not? Do you think you do 'feminist' work?

MORE FOCUSED QUESTIONS (for 1st interview, if time; for 2nd interview, if not):

10. What need does spirituality/spiritual practice fill in your activist work? Can you think of a moment, an example, that illustrates how spirituality informs your activism and vice versa?
11. In reading about 'spiritual activists,' it seems that notions of spirituality and activism are often seen as separate. What do you think? Are they separate? Are there, in your experience, tensions between the two? If so, what are these tensions and how do you negotiate them? If not, tell me a little about that.
12. Another area of interest for me, and one explored to some extent in the literature, is the issue of burnout. Do you ever feel 'burnout'? If so, what do you do/where do you go internally and/or externally?
APPENDIX D: Sample of Second Interview Questions

1. Is there anything from transcripts they want to clarify/say more about? Anything lingering from first interview that you’ve reflected on, or what to say more about?

2. You talked about how people at the margins have been such teachers for. Can you give me a story or an example of someone who has been particularly inspiring?

3. In your work, do you hold an affirmative vision of the changes you want to see? Describe this vision.

4. Do you feel optimistic in the face of current political/environmental/social conditions? How do you find/maintain that optimism?

5. During our last interview, we talked a lot about inner work and awareness is such an act of empowerment. Can you reflect more on how inner work is related to social justice, and activism?

6. Do you have personal experiences of the sacred in everyday life? Can you describe what this feels like?

7. When talking about nonviolent communication, you said “our deepest joy comes from being connected to ourselves and to each other, and that from that, then there is infinite human creativity that can solve specific problems” (2). Can you think of a story or an example that illustrates how creative solutions can be found once we realize our fundamental connectedness?

8. You challenged traditional ideas about wealth and power, saying that a “powerful person is one that sees the opportunity to reach back and help others” (p2). What do you think these kind of spiritual perspectives add to current movements for social justice? How would our priorities as activist change if we redefined what it meant to be rich or powerful?

9. Discussing the interconnectedness of all beings, you said “if you accept the idea that God is everywhere, and God is in everything...then everything is sacred.” Can you say more about that? How, if at all, does this belief motivate your activism?

10. Are there other things you’d like to say that we have not covered?

11. What advice would you offer me for this study?

12. If we are to support each other in our work, in our activism, what do you think we need to know, remember, learn?
APPENDIX E: Contemporary Spiritually-Based Political Initiatives/Projects

1. Tools for Change. (Based in San Francisco, CA). Promotes the integration of spiritual and political perspectives to promote personal, spiritual and political transformation to help bring about a just society. www.toolsforchange.org

2. Spirit in Action. (Based in Belchertown, MA). Dedicated to building a successful movement for social change in the US that integrates a spiritual perspective. www.spiritinaction.net/ezpublish/index.php/spirit


4. American Friends Service Committee. (Headquartered in Philadelphia, PA). Carries out service, development, social justice, and peace programs throughout the world. Attracts the support and partnership of people of many races, religions, and cultures. www.afsc.org/about/default.htm


6. Fellowship of Reconciliation. (Headquartered in New York, NY). The largest, oldest Interfaith Peace organization in the U.S. Committed to active nonviolence as a transforming way of life and as a means of radical change. www.forusa.org

7. Nonviolent Peaceforce. (International). Diverse political, ethnic and religious leaders are creating a professional, international unarmed force of trained nonviolent civilian personnel. www.nonviolentpeaceforce.org


10. Tikkun Community. (Based in Berkeley, CA). International community of many faiths calling for social justice and political freedom in the context of new structures of work, caring communities, and democratic social and economic arrangement. www.tikkun.org

12. Church Council of Greater Seattle. (Seattle, WA). Represents more than 400 churches and 15 denominations united to promote justice and increase compassion in our community.  www.churchcouncilseattle.org

13. Crosswalk America. (Scottsdale, AZ). Seeks to explore and articulate the theological principles behind both faith and politics from a distinctly progressive Christian perspective.  www.crosswalkamerica.org

14. Gather the Women. A web site and communications hub that 5,000 women (plus) have used to chronicle their local events (faith-based and secular) in support of world peace.  www.gatherthewomen.org
