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Womanism in Religion and Society

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Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas

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Chapter 6

Hospitality, Haints, and Healing
A Southern African American Meaning of Religion

Rosemarie Freeney Harding with
Rachel Elizabeth Harding

A Daughter's Preface

In 1997, my mother was awarded a fellowship to the Mary I. Bunting Institute at Radcliffe College. At the time she was very sick. She had recently been diagnosed with diabetic neuropathic cachexia (a rare and debilitating neurological complication of diabetes) and was struggling to find a treatment that her very sensitive body could tolerate. She wanted very badly to accept the fellowship and do a research project on connections between spirituality and social justice activism among veterans of the southern Freedom Movement. I had just finished graduate school and was taking care of her as her condition became more acute, so I accompanied my mother to Cambridge, Massachusetts where we shared a one-bedroom apartment for almost a year. We began work on a collection of essays and stories, poems and recipes, play fragments and autobiographical remembrances that connected my mother's history with those of her mother and grandmothers, and with the stories of many of the extraordinary women and men she knew from the movement days. My mother called the collection *Remnants: A Spiritual Autobiography.*

From September to June we visited medical specialists, experimented with various treatments for the wracking pain and extreme weight loss she was experiencing, and in the moments when she was strong enough to sit with a tape recorder, we talked—about family history; about activism; the joys and lessons of her childhood; the strangeness and meaning of her current illness; the plays and performance pieces she envisioned as healing

ceremonies for our fractured nation; the ancestors, the orixás, and God; and the black southern mysticism that informed so much of her mother's and grandmothers' wisdom.

This essay is drawn from a lecture my mother gave at the Bunting Institute in the spring of her fellowship year. It examines elements of an indigenous, southern, African American religious orientation. Essentially a personal reflection on the cultural/spiritual experience of a single Georgia family, the text also explores the significance of specific traditions in the shaping of a generalized worldview. Ghost stories, death rituals, communions of food and conversation, midwifery, and herbal medicine are among the components of that worldview discussed here. Not by chance, the stories my mother tells resonate strongly with the ethics and spirituality of Alice Walker's Womanism. The lives of black folks in rural Georgia in the early to mid-twentieth century shared a great deal in common, and it was this rural southern experience that informed the religious and cultural orientation of my mother's family, as well as the grounding out of which Walker's life and writings emerged. Examining the rituals, stories, healing practices, and welcoming ways of five generations of a family (especially its women), "Hospitality, Haints, and Healing" identifies the foundations of a meaning of religion in the black southern context that includes, but is by no means limited to, the institutional church. In fact, this particular analysis employs a much wider understanding of religion as *that which keeps us human in the world.*

In March 2004, my mother passed on. I thank her for everything she left me.

Introduction

My family is a southern family. Though we have lived in Chicago for five generations now, we are, in many respects, still deeply influenced by the rituals and traditions that traveled with us on the Seminole Limited from Macon, Georgia. My parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and most of my brothers and sisters were born in small southwest Georgia towns—Leesburg, Poulan, Albany, Macon. In the nineteen-teens and twenties, they began to move north. First my mother's sisters, their husbands, my father, and his brother. Then other relatives—wives, children, and parents. They were drawn to jobs in steel mills and railroad yards and escaping nightmares of lynching and the stinging, arbitrary humiliations of daily life in

the South between the wars. In some ways they were pulling up roots, moving to Detroit, New York, Philadelphia, and Chicago. In other ways, they were simply stretching the roots, changing the contours a bit, but holding fast to the deep nourishment that rose there.

Recently, I have been reflecting on what religion may have meant for my great grandmother, Mariah Grant, who is the oldest remembered ancestor on my mother's side of the family. Not only am I working to understand the meaning of religion for Mama Rye, as we called her, but I am also trying to trace the religious and spiritual values that have come down to the family through her and through her daughter, Liza, who was my grandmother.

Some who remember the stories say that Mama Rye was born in Africa. If she was, she was probably born around 1824 and must have come to the United States as a young girl in one of the last shipments of the (then illegal) slave trade. She died in 1930 or 1931 in Macon at the age of 107. She had worked in Virginia and along the eastern seaboard on a ship where she cooked for the captain and crew. By the time my grandmother, Mama Liza, was born, freedom was three years old and Mariah and her children were living in Georgia.

In my attempts to examine and understand the religious and spiritual values that have come down to my family from Mama Rye, I am deeply influenced by the work of historian of religions Charles Long and playwright-philosopher George Bass.[1] The meaning of religion for black folks, they insist, is in the heart of our history, our trauma, and our hope. It is in the way we have oriented ourselves—over the long centuries in these Americas and extending back before our arrival on these shores—to "mash out a meaning" of life in the midst of tremendous suffering and pain. Religion, in this sense, is not simply a doctrine of faith or the methods and practices of church, rather it is all the ways we remind ourselves of who we really are, in spite of who the temporal powers may say we are. Religion is how we situate ourselves, how we understand ourselves, in a particular place and time vis-à-vis ultimate reality, vis-à-vis God. It seems to me that this too is the meaning of religion for the women Walker recalls and honors in the essay "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens,"—the women who kept their creativity alive "year after year and century after century, when for most of the years black people have been in America it was a punishable crime for a black person to read or write."[2] It was these women, Walker's mother, my mother, our grandmothers, and aunts and the "crazy" ladies down the street, who "order[ed] the universe" in the

image of their own conception of Beauty, their own understanding of who and how they were in relationship to God.[3]

Black religion, then, is not only in the music, the drama, the communion, and the interpretation of text within the walls of the physical church, but it is also in the orientation of black people to so-called secular culture. Black religion is Otis Redding and D'Angelo as much as Mahalia Jackson and Mary Mary; it is as much hip hop as holy dance; and root work as much as the laying on of hands. It is how we make meaning and joy out of our human experience. With this understanding in mind, I am looking within the myriad cultural and spiritual traditions of my family for the meanings and manifestations of a distinct, southern, African American orientation to being. I am looking at how we have come this far and how we continue on.

This orientation is not unique to my folks. Having grown up with many extended families of black Mississippians, Alabamans, and Georgians (and having lived for many years in Georgia as an adult), I am keenly aware of the pervasiveness of the orientation that I describe. However, because the experience of my family is the one that is closest to me, most of the examples I use in illustration come from stories and traditions I witnessed, heard, and participated in as a member of the Freeney-Harris clan in Southside Chicago.

Hospitality

My mother and aunts always kept a ready pitcher of iced tea or lemonade in the refrigerator and a plate of cookies, a fresh-baked cake, or rolls with homemade preserves on the counter. Anyone who came by to visit was offered something cool to drink (unless it was winter, of course, when they'd be offered coffee or tea) and something tasty to eat. In the years when I was growing up, people visited back and forth at each other's homes more regularly than folks do now and our house seemed to be an especially popular destination for neighbors and relatives. This was partly due to the fact that we had a large family and my older brothers and sisters were all outgoing with lots of friends. And it was partly because my mother and father made the house so welcoming. Sometimes, it seemed almost "too" welcoming—all kinds of people would come through, not just relatives and neighborhood friends but peddlers and preachers, professional gamblers, and union organizers, petty thieves, street walkers, and

people we would probably refer to today as homeless. Mom loved "bad" people—that is, people other folks thought were "bad." She didn't judge and she taught us how to respect, how to listen, how to learn from everyone. Mom would set out beautiful china dishes and slices of her homemade pound cake for all of them—especially for the most transient-looking people it seemed sometimes. As if she knew they needed the extra attention and acknowledgment. But then too, Mom genuinely enjoyed their conversation and wisdom.

I remember there was an itinerant bookseller, an immigrant from Europe, who would come to visit Mom now and then. The two of them would sit down in the dining room with Mom's best dishes and talk for hours about the events of the world and the world of books. The man was not always very clean and sometimes, especially in the winter when the heat was on full blast in our house, we could smell the mustiness of his old and ragged clothes, the heavy acrid sweat of his body. He talked funny too, and as children, we were occasionally tempted to laugh—as much from awkwardness as anything else. But if we let loose the tiniest snicker, Mom would cut her eyes at us deftly, and we would abandon the temptation and keep our faces straight.

As I said, I have a large family. My mother birthed sixteen children, although only nine lived to adulthood. We nine were just one contingent of a large coterie of cousins, uncles, and aunts, some of whom I didn't know were *not* blood kin until I was grown with children of my own. Until 1976, when my father died and my mother sold the house, there was always someone living with my parents at the family home at 4160 South Wentworth—a child, a niece, or nephew, then later grandchildren, grandnieces, and grandnephews. Mama and Daddy Freeney always made room and any of us could always come home. Hospitality was a foundation of my family's spirituality, as it had been for so many southern blacks. The efforts my parents made to be neighborly, welcoming, and to reserve judgment against those the society viewed as outcasts, served as important examples for their children and grandchildren as we grew into adulthood.

Ghost Stories and Boundaries

My mom used to love to tell ghost stories. They were a tradition of the Georgia woods that she brought to Chicago, and Mama Freeney was an expert ghost story-teller. She could scare you so bad you'd be afraid to go

to the bathroom by yourself to pee. Some of the stories she told were regional favorites that she most likely inherited from older family members like Mama Rye. But many of my mother's ghost stories were from her own experience. As my sister Mildred says, she wasn't telling "stories" she was telling "what happened"—meaning, it was true. She would tell us about the ghost-lady who tried to push her creaking, transparent babyless buggy alongside anyone who passed through a certain stand of pines at a certain hour of the evening. She reminisced with my father about a beloved and well-trained horse who reared up on his hind legs and stubbornly refused to cross a particular bridge one moonless night. The fact that Mama Freeney often had corroborating witnesses only made her stories more terrifying and delightful. But I have remembered very few of the tales on my own and had to ask my sisters and other relatives to help me piece the stories together again. I seldom heard the full versions as a child. (And when I did remember, I tried to forget.) Whenever Mom started to tell about the headless man she met on the road from Leesburg to Albany, or the time the door to her house was locked and there was no one at home but all the lights were on and she could hear voices inside—whenever she started to tell one of *these,* I would get up and go into another room. I didn't take well to being terrified.

My own sensibilities aside, these stories were a great entertainment for the family, but they were not just entertainment. My mother told these stories and others as a way to pass on lessons. One of the most important lessons was that of acknowledging the reality and presence of spirit. Whether one called them ghosts, haints, angels, spirits, presences, or winds, the beings that inhabited Mom's stories were recognized, on some level, as real. Through her stories we learned a respect for the unseen/the unknown and an appreciation for the transmutability of reality and form.

Most of the ghosts and haints of my mother's repertoire were essentially harmless even if frightening. But there were other stories that emphasized protective relationships between humans and the spirit world. For example, my mother and other members of my family have had experiences of being helped by people who show up out of nowhere and disappear the moment danger is no longer present. My sister Alma had this experience years ago in a long pedestrian tunnel in a Chicago subway. It was late one evening and Alma was alone, except for a tall, white policeman who stayed a few dozen feet ahead of her as she walked. The tunnel was quiet in the resonant way of tunnels and Alma was intensely aware of her surroundings. Once she got to an open gate near an exit, she looked

around, and the policeman (who had never turned toward her and never acknowledged her calls out to him, even though he was clearly in hearing range) was suddenly no where to be found.

Mama Freeney's transformative energies were sometimes unnerving—to both family and strangers. My sister Mildred recalls with humor that some people thought Mama was a conjure woman because of the way she engaged and inhabited the world of the spirits. Our mother could so convincingly evoke the presence of an unseen person in the room that her listeners would swear they felt the breeze in the wake of the invisible woman's skirt as she walked past them. "There she go!" Mama Freeney would whisper with urgency and certainty, pointing a finger to the space just in front of her grandchildren, indicating the path of the unwitnessed visitor. Conjure indeed. Although the term was probably not meant as a compliment by those who used it, I think that in its broader signification it is true. Conjure and healing are both forms of transformation. And Mama Freeney was capable of shifting herself and the atmosphere around her in myriad ways, especially for the benefit and protection (and even amusement) of others.

Carrie Lewis was a childhood friend of my mother who was as close to her as a sister. They played together as girls, went to school together, got married around the same time, and had their first children within months of each other; both babies were boys. When Carrie's son, Everett,[4] was very young, he sometimes suffered from the presence of an unwelcome spirit that would appear and hover over him. Carrie would bring the baby to my mother's house anxious and frightened for her child. I am told that Mama Freeney would call the spirit by its name and say "Get away from that child." Although Carrie couldn't see the spirit the way Mom could, she could feel its presence, heavy and threatening around her baby, and she would instinctively shield Everett with her body and call out to my mother, "Ella, tell it to go away." Mama and Carrie would cover the child with their arms, talking to the entity and praying to God to keep the spirit away from Everett, and eventually there would be a respite. When Carrie got ready to leave, Mama Freeney bundled up her own baby, my oldest sibling whom everybody called Brother, and the two women and their children would walk down the road to the fork where Carrie and Everett would turn off to go home, finally undeterred.

This kind of encounter reinforces the idea that while a connection or affiliation exists between humans and other, less readily visible entities, there is also a boundary—and the need to recognize and at times insist

upon that boundary. This has been one of the most valuable lessons of African American mysticism for my life and work. As my mother emphasized in her stories and as the family experienced in other ways as well, a healthy respect for the unseen is essential to understanding the nature of human life and the web of connection that binds all beings to each other. As in many other places of the Afro-Atlantic diaspora, the Black South, through stories, ritual, and family traditions, cultivated an appreciation for both interdependence and restraint. The world is full of all kinds of living beings—humans, animals, spirits, plants, earth, waters, and winds—and we are all related to each other, but there are both appropriate and inappropriate ways for each to interact. It was important for us to know this and one of the ways we learned it was through the stories my mother told.

Fluidity and constraint, connection and boundary, were also present in interpersonal and familial relationships. In most southern black families I knew growing up, children and adults of various ages spent a great deal of time together. There were often three generations living in our household. The young people benefited from the loving presence and guidance of grandparents and older relatives. Conversely, the older members of our family could always count on the energetic companionship of younger ones and did not have to worry about being alone or abandoned in the final years of their lives. In these multigenerational households, children were taught to respect their elders and to recognize that there were spaces and times when they could not enter "grown folks' business."

There was also a certain formality of relations, rooted in southern and African traditions, in which respect was shown through the courteous use of titles when talking to strangers, persons of authority, and anyone in an age-group higher than one's own. Women were always "Miss" or "Mrs." So-and-So and men were called "Mr." (unless they were relatives, and then they were called Auntie, Uncle, or Cousin). As children our responses of "ma'am" and "sir" indicated the good "home-training" we had received from the adults who raised us. Even among adults of comparable age and status, who had known each other for many years, there was often a kind of quasi-ceremonial care in the way they interacted with each other. In some respects, this must have been an antidote to the indignities these men and women regularly suffered from a discriminatory white society. But, from all I can tell, this practice of almost exaggerated mutual-deference and politeness was an important element of interpersonal relations in many of the West and Central African communities from which most

North American blacks originated, and it was a common feature in slave communities throughout the Americas.

The recognition of boundaries is, I think, also related to an acknowledgment of and respect for others and the limits of intrusion into another person's space. This kind of respect is actually a foundation for compassion, and I used it as the basis of my social work practice in Chicago and later in Denver. In spite of policies that encouraged imposing questions and miserly reckonings of financial need, I tried to interact with my clients in a way that emphasized their intrinsic value as human beings and their integrity.

Dreams and Sight

Closely related to the experience of ghosts and spirits in the African American mystic tradition are dreams, visions, and sight. Anyone familiar with southern folk traditions—black and white—has probably heard of the "caul." Some people are believed to have the gift of divination or foresight because they were "born with a caul" or a "veil," which means that the amniotic sac was on their head and face when they came through the birth canal. My mother and great-grandmother were recognized as having this kind of sight. But Mom used to say that she could "see," not because of being born with a caul, but because she came from a "clean womb." When my grandmother, Eliza Harris, affectionately called Mama Liza, was pregnant with my mother and very close to her delivery date, she tripped on a railroad tie and fell in a truss. It was a hard fall and she feared for the well-being of her unborn baby. Mama Liza's water broke, but the baby wasn't delivered for a few more days. When my mother finally came into the world there was hardly any water or blood—because Mama Liza had lost it all in the accident. But the child, Ella Lee Harris, was born healthy and lived to be 103 with a number of abilities, the greatest omen of which she attributed to coming from a "clean womb." Interestingly enough, I discovered later that there is a tradition among Tibetans that their diviners and seers are born from "clean wombs."

"Sight" and "seeing" is not simply a matter of the ability to foretell future events. It is part of a larger orientation which recognizes the existence of a variety of means of access to information, help, wisdom, and warning. Here, too, as with the ghost and spirit stories, is a vigorous connection between the seen and unseen worlds. Dreams, visions, and signs are other

axial elements of this orientation. There is a vast tradition among African Americans of dreaming and paying close attention to dreams. Dreams can be auguries of coming good or ill. Dreams of deceased relatives and friends are often interpreted as forms of communication with them, and the sharing of dreams within a household or among friends is a way to connect with a collective wisdom regarding the meaning of a particular feeling or event. (Furthermore, there is a whole industry of books and pamphlets for playing *policy* and lottery numbers based on dreams.)

Death and Dying

My mother often "saw" the impending deaths of family members in dreams and signs. She recalled, for example, that a rainbow she saw in her sleep, days before her husband died, was an omen that his time was not long. (I don't know if my mother was conscious that the rainbow is a symbol of the continuity of life and death among the Yoruba and Ewe peoples of West Africa.)

Death and dying were surrounded by signs in my family. Omens and forewarnings: My grandmother, Mama Liza, standing before my mother and rising from the floor in a whirlwind. My brother's gift of red roses falling over new in a vase. Aunt Mary fighting with her arms and fists as if death were a man, "Ella do you see him. Do you see him Ella?" And her sister, Ella, my mother, helping her to hold off death's hunger for a little while. The three days of snow when Aunt Mary finally went on. And the rainbow sign of my father's time coming.

The time of dying is an important moment, an important process, in many cultures around the world. This was certainly the case in my community as I was growing up, and to a large extent, it remains so. I learned from my parents and other relatives how to accompany people in death, through death. The dying were never left alone and children were included in the process of comforting and encouraging them. My mother used to take me with her whenever she visited people who were dying. I grew up with a great respect for death, but no fear of it. It was a very sacred time. And even though I didn't always understand what was going on, I was aware of the special nature of the moment, its mystical quality. There was a reverence for the dead and we were taught never to speak ill of them.

Most of the people we visited died at home—some were family members, some friends. In the 1930s and 40s, the practice of dying in the hospi-

tal was not common among African Americans. Often we carried food, but sometimes we would just go and visit and sit. Sometimes talking, sometimes not. Many of the people we visited had come up to Chicago in the same era as my parents, and they would reminisce with my mother about old times, good times, in the South. I enjoyed listening to the adults talk. I was aware that their remembrances were always positive, joyful ones —how they joked and laughed. But I also saw the sadness in my mother's face as she acknowledged to herself that a good friend, a cousin, or a sister was leaving. It gave me a sense of how one balances one's own grief with the need to encourage a dying person to leave amid as much happiness as possible. The need for joy around death, happiness amid mourning, seems to me now a central element in my family's cultural traditions. We learned to laugh and joke and have a good time in life, and simultaneously to understand that life means mourning too.

My mother was a consummate teacher. She could use any opportunity to pass on a lesson—and half the time she did it so well you didn't even know you were learning anything until you thought about it later. When I was about ten, my Uncle Clarence died of a cancerous tumor in his face. My mother visited him in the days and weeks before he passed and took me along. It was a difficult thing to see—his entire right jaw was a gaping hole and he was in almost unbearable pain. He turned his head toward us when we walked in, but he couldn't speak.

On the way home from the visit my mother said to me, "Do you know where he got that cancer from? From working with all that bad meat." We could smell the stockyard from where we lived. Sometimes it reeked so overpoweringly we ourselves felt sick. "How many men work at that stockyard do you think are sick like your uncle?" I didn't know the answer, but the question got me to thinking. "Rose," my mother said, "all races of men work there. And it's dangerous for all of them." Soon my mother and I were having a conversation about the extremely unhealthy conditions of the Chicago stockyards, a filthy, disease-producing environment, where many men labored under insufferable conditions with little concern from their bosses for protecting their health.

From experiences like this, I learned very early about injustice. My mother was using an African American cultural tradition—that is, not shielding children from the reality of pain and death—as a bridge to help me understand some broader truths about exploitation and serious social inequity. In the midst of it all, was the caring and concern for Uncle Clarence and for many others like him. And so, even with our anger, our pain,

our profound sense of the wrong we had been done, we talked to Uncle Clarence, tried to make him laugh a little, and remembered together the stories that made us all feel more human.

Death is also an important time for gathering. The wake and the dinner after the funeral are unique moments of fellowship and abundance. There is a plenteousness of everything: food, people, laughter, liquor, music, and memory. At funerals, family who have not seen each other for years will come back to celebrate and remember the life of the loved one they have lost. Old ties are renewed and new relatives are introduced to each other—the children and grandchildren of cousins, the new spouses, and the new babies. It is as if in compensation for the loss, we use the time of death as an opportunity to assert the continuity of life, the line going on.

Fortunately, we didn't wait for death to create occasions for gathering and joyousness. We are a family that likes to laugh. We have been blessed with singers, musicians, and a wide strain of humor in the family genes. Whenever more than two or three of us are together, we make each other happy. African American humor has long been recognized for its emotional flexibility—the ability to speak to the absurdities and humiliations of racial discrimination and to reveal those abasements as essentially ludicrous (albeit often painful). In my experience, laughing and joking give black people more room to "be" in the world. Dance and music do this too. They all expand the space that we live in—stretch it beyond the limits of our assigned "places" in society. Transform the air we walk in so that we can breathe.

Healing and Transformation

The work of transformation, changing the insides and outsides of a situation, is a long and venerable tradition in the southern African American experience. Looking back on our history, one sees a tremendous flexibility among people who had to navigate the vicissitudes of life under a violent and arbitrary Jim Crow segregationist system and yet continually cultivate a sense of their own personal and collective dignity. My parents, grandparents, aunts, and uncles were among the southern blacks who decided that the best way to respond to the terror they were experiencing was to leave it, but I have other relatives and friends who searched for alternative ways to address the madness and remain in what had become our homeland. In both cases, the internal work, the work of physical and psychic healing,

was an important tool in the creation of individuals, families, and communities who could continue reaching for the best in themselves and the best in the society in which they lived, people who could "keep on keeping on."

This work of inner transformation, calling on the deep mystic resources, was aided by our churches, our singers, our dancers, our artists, our musicians, our teachers, our poets, and our healers. My great-grandmother, Mariah, was in this mystic line. So were the "sainted" women Alice Walker recalls, the ones Jean Toomer had seen as he walked across the early twentieth century south. Walker writes in "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens," these women were not merely the possessors of an intense and deep spirituality, but, living with the grave limitations of the place and time, they sometimes appeared strange, crazy, or "sainted."[5] These were the women who "went off" into the edges of the vast pains, the afflictions both personal and transatlantic. Sometimes they could heal themselves and others with what they found there and sometimes they were overwhelmed.

Most of the people in the family who remember Mama Rye are gone now. But the stories that remain of her include recollections of her healing work and her African ways of perceiving and inhering in the world. Mama Rye was a root doctor. She collected plants and flowers, roots and leaves in the fields and forests around her Leesburg and Macon, Georgia homes and made these into medicines to treat family members and others who came to her for advice and counsel. When she was in her nineties, she was still fishing in the Kinchafoonee Creek every day and her grandchildren would take turns accompanying here to and from this meditative recreation. Mama Rye tried to teach various ones of them what she knew. Some showed more interest than others. But even those who thought they were leaving "the old ways" behind would call on the collective wisdom of the family to remember at least a few of Mama Rye's herbs and recipes when they needed them.

Mama Liza, one of Mariah's daughters, carried on her mother's healing tradition in another way. In Lee County, Georgia, Eliza Harris was known to be an excellent midwife, assisting the deliveries of both black and white women. My cousin Pansy tells me that Mama Liza brought hundreds of babies into the world. Even white doctors in the area called on her to help them with difficult pregnancies because of her successful reputation. Following Mama Liza, there is a tradition of nursing among women in my family. My Aunt Mary and my sister Mildred were nurses and I too studied

for a time to practice nursing. I like to think that my continuing interest in natural healing and counseling are part of my inheritance from the medicine women in my family.

My mother, Mama Freeney, shared many of the healing qualities of her mother and grandmother. When I was a child, she used to keep herbs in the kitchen pantry to make teas for us when we were sick. Her pantry was something akin to a local herbal pharmacy, serving friends and neighbors as well as family. She also used home remedies like placing socks with thin slices of onion on the feet of a person with fever to draw the heat out. My mother and her sisters firmly believed in the power of spirit to heal, to transform. When my sister Alma was a little girl, she was struck with tuberculosis of the bone and doctors told the family that her leg would have to be amputated. Instead of yielding to the doctor's orders, mom and Aunt Mary took Alma home and through a combination of poultices and prayers Alma kept her leg.

In my own life, I am drawn to traditional, natural healing modalities, remembering the tea recipes and home remedies of my mother and great-grandmother and learning as much as I can about laying on of hands —massage therapies, acupuncture, Therapeutic Touch, Feldenkrais, and other techniques of alternative care. But even beyond issues of personal health and well-being, I try to follow the examples of my mother and aunts in recognizing the need to create a larger atmosphere of healing and wellness at the level of human relations and societal structures.

Throughout the 1980s, my husband and I cotaught a course at the Iliff School of Theology called, "Healing of Persons and Healing of Society." We introduced students to the concept that the body politic is, in many ways, analogous to the body human—intensely interdependent in all its parts and very responsive to both negative and positive stimuli. Texts from folks as varied as Buckminster Fuller, Hannah Arendt, Howard Thurman, and Thich Nhat Han were central readings, emphasizing that the Spirit, the Universe, does indeed provide abundantly for all living beings on earth. There is truly enough for everyone. The offense is greed. And it is just as destructive to societies as it is to the organisms of individual people. Guests came to the course to share their perspectives and stories—community activists, philosophers, physicians, scientists, religious leaders, writers. Our students were always deeply encouraged by the connections the guests made between caring for the well-being of individuals and creating more humane and compassionate societies.

In fact, our present work, The Veterans of Hope Project, arises directly

from this experience and others of sharing the "testimonies" and encouragement of social change activists with a younger generation of people concerned for justice, healing, and nonviolent social transformation. It is fundamentally to my mother's credit that I am able to recognize and appreciate the links between personal health, generosity, and social transformation—for Mama Freeney's hospitality and welcome were as healing as her teas and touch.

Secrecy and Discretion

The final aspect in this brief discussion of a black southern religious ethic is secrecy. There were certain things in my experience as a child, certain events, which were never discussed. Some stories, some customs, were shared only as knowledge was necessary and then with an attitude of hesitation, reticence. My sense is that the reasons for concealment centered around two issues. Sometimes, the information revealed was too painful—so tremendously and profoundly painful that the act of recognition risked the release of a haphazard power, an energy whose discharge required a careful, almost ritual attention. This, I believe, was the case in the almost complete lack of conversation about the horrors that sent my family fleeing to the North in the late twenties. It was not until 1960, when I was preparing to return to Georgia to work full-time in the Freedom Movement, and when white vigilante terrorism—and the economic and political system that supported it—was being confronted with a mass movement, that my father and mother began to open up about some of the barbarities they had experienced. Events like the hanging of a pregnant woman, upside down, with her womb split open and her body dragged then through the black neighborhoods of Macon were a large part of the reason my family left their farms and moved away. I didn't hear those stories until decades later. It was as if there had to have been a way out of (or the urgent concern for a daughter who was going into) the madness before it was safe to talk about it.

In other cases, secrecy is a sign of intimate connection to the life-force. There are certain practices around birth and death that my relatives refuse to register on audiotape. Certain spirit stories which are told only in hushes when told at all. As with the ghost stories, where we began, there is, here in the matter of secrecy, a strong element of propriety at work. Some things are kept protected—either so that their strength will not do harm

to the unwary or so that their energy and efficacy will not be diluted by misuse and misinterpretation.

Mariah's Legacy

Mariah Grant's children and grandchildren manifested a remarkable diversity of approaches to organized religion. Many were regular churchgoers, and while the family lived in southwest Georgia, they mostly attended Baptist churches. In fact, my grandfather, Papa Jim, was a deacon at Shady Grove Baptist in Leesburg. When the family moved to Chicago, some of Mama Rye's granddaughters joined the Congregational Church, others remained Baptist, and some, like my mother, went to church only occasionally.

Among the next generation, my siblings and cousins—Mariah's great grandchildren—there has been even more variety in the church traditions we have chosen. One of my sisters married into the Roman Catholic faith, another is a matron in a Presbyterian church. I have a cousin who is Soka Gakkai Buddhist and another of my sisters was a founding member of a Mennonite mission church in Chicago. This sister, Alma, was my inspiration for joining the Mennonite church. I used to watch the way she cared for her children, the compassion and sense of security she gave them, as well as the way she took care of other people in the neighborhood where she lived. Alma's house was a lot like Mama Freeney's in that sense, everyone was welcome, and Alma always had an open heart, a good word and good food to share. My sister's example and the nonviolent, reconciliatory witness of the Anabaptist tradition in the Mennonite church were strong attractors for me. And though I have since embraced other religious traditions as well—Sufi Islam, Gnostic and Contemplative Christianity, Tibetan Buddhism and Vipassana meditation, Jewish mysticism and early-Christian Celtic traditions—the foundations of my spiritual values rest in the southern, African American orientation to being that I learned from my family.

I am convinced that this openness, this acceptance of the diversity of God's witness in the world, is a legacy of the wisdom Mama Rye brought with her from Africa. Indigenous African religions are known for the inclusivity of their worldview—most tend to find ways to absorb and adapt new traditions (even those of conquered and conquering peoples) into a fundamentally accepting and essentially flexible whole.[6] The meanings of

religion we learned from Mariah, her ancestors and contemporaries, are one of the great resources African American culture offers to those who seek its discernments. In the insights of womanism, Alice Walker traces this path and leaves her own indelible marks: an ethic of joy and inclusion; a tenacious creativity that is both gentle and fierce; and a love and honoring of all our mothers and all the beauty and nourishment they carve from unsteady ground for us to feed on and grow strong.

NOTES

1. See Charles H. Long, "Perspectives for the Study of African American Religion in the United States," in *African American Religion: Interpretive Essays in History and Culture*, ed. Fulop and Raboteau (New York: Routledge, 1997), and Charles H. Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols and Images in the Interpretation of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986). Also, conversations with and lectures by George H. Bass, African American Studies courses, Brown University, 1983–1990.

2. Alice Walker, "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens," in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), p. 234.

3. Ibid., p. 241.

4. I have changed the names of the friend and her son to protect their family's privacy.

5. Walker, "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens," pp. 232–234.

6. On the inclusivity of African Traditional Religions, see John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Heinemann International, 1990).

Chapter 7

Lessons and Treasures in Our Mothers' Witness

Why I Write about Black Women's Activism

Rosetta E. Ross

Building on the opening provided by Alice Walker's *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, womanist religious thought is providing intellectual space to unearth many treasures[1] long that come from black women's lives. In my own work, this involves uncovering and explicating life-giving norms embedded in black women's moral practices, especially by exploring black women's activism and attending to the pragmatic way many black women activists engage religion. When I look closely at religion in some of these women's lives, I see a complex working out of what it means to be black and Christian, a working out that involves not only engaging the meaning-making power of religion, but also interrogating religious traditions and practices while assessing functional uses of religion for shaping social action. The complexity of these women's religiosity both challenges traditional conceptions about black Christians and black churches and pushes toward transforming traditional practices in black churches and black Christianity.

In this essay, I use black women's activist religiosity to show examples of persons who break rank with the tradition in many black churches of separating reason and spirit. Among black women religious activists are examples of persons who, in the midst of their ordinary lives, use critical analytical and reasoning skills to assess the usefulness of traditional religious conceptions and to construct new ways of making religion functional. My primary argument in this essay is that in the United States, the predominant failure in much "customary black Christianity" to unite critical-analytical and spiritual capacities throughout routine religious