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Notes from the Director

“Spiritual considerations and social change cannot be separated... To be truly religious is not to reject society but to work for social justice and change. Religion is at the heart of social change, and social change is the essence of religion”

~ Sulak Sivaraksa

This has been a season of connecting for OneLife Institute. Over the past couple of months I've met with some magnificent folks involved in work that is similar to or synergistic with ours. The conversations have been inspiring and supportive, and have reminded me of the importance of outside perspectives and the value of collegial networks.

One of the people I have been blessed to sit with is our featured guest author for this issue, Dr. Zenju Earthlyn Manuel. She is a long-time activist and educator, artist and writer, and is the recently appointed National Executive Director of the Buddhist Peace Fellowship. BPF is known for its commitment to engaged Buddhism, and the conversation among those of us gathered one afternoon turned toward a deeper reflection on *what exactly are we engaged in?*

It is a question I have continued to sit with. Along with its companion: *how do we engage?* With what quality of heart and spirit do we meet one another as we pass on the street, or as we attend to the business of our daily rounds? I was profoundly touched this week by a five minute encounter with a man working the cash register at the local card shop. His quality of presence – of engagement –

transformed my in-a-hurry-ness to an experience of quiet and authentic connection. In a moment of spiritual aikido he became my precious teacher, reminding me that every encounter is an opportunity... if we accept it.

LET THE HEALING BEGIN

This willingness to see and hear one another, to be fully present with each other, was central to one of my places of engagement this summer, as I served on the facilitation team for “Let the Healing Begin,” a cross-cultural dialogue on racism. This was the pilot for a series of trainings on transforming the ‘-isms’ being developed by the Rev. Deborah Johnson of Inner Light Ministries in Soquel, CA. The model brings the tools and concepts of diversity training into the contextual framework of spiritual oneness. Not using oneness to bypass the difficult confrontation of our woundedness or our trespasses, but instead recognizing that a paradigm of oneness *requires* a commitment to deconstructing oppression and forging new ground in creating truly inclusive communities.

OPPORTUNITIES AT ONELIFE

OneLife Institute is guided by the servant-leadership of a Board of Directors who shape our policy, mission, and programming. Currently four people sit on the Board, but we are actively in the process of recruiting two to three new members. In addition, our Resource Council is a group of individuals who have made a significant

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Our task, in tikkun, is to gather the shards of light – the sparks of the Divine – found in every being, every moment, every situation, and restore the whole.

Repairing the World

As I prepare this newsletter we are in the midst of a sacred convergence. The new moon in September ushered in both the Islamic observance of Ramadan and the ten Days of Awe in Judaism that begin with Rosh Hashanah (the Jewish New Year) and end with Yom Kippur, the day of Atonement. In both traditions it is a period of consecrated reflection, of making amends for trespass and pursuing reconciliation in relationships, of seeking a clean heart and renewed spirit.

In Judaism it is a time of rededication to *tikkun olam* – the repair of the world. This is the work of building the Beloved Community, the kin-dom (to borrow the term from Ada María Isasi-Díaz) of wholeness, justice, peace, and *chesed*, or loving kindness. Estelle Frankel writes, “Jewish mysticism teaches that we participate in this sacred work of healing in two ways: through our acts of *tikkun olam*, healing and fixing the world, and through *tikkun ha’nefesh*, healing and perfecting our own individual souls.” The two are profoundly connected, “for it is not possible to perfect one’s own soul without also becoming deeply committed to the work of healing the planet, and since each individual person is a microcosm of the world, every act of *tikkun ha’nefesh* is of great, if not cosmic, importance.”

The origins of *tikkun* are found in the mystical teachings of the Kabbalah. In the creation of the world, *Ein Sof* (the Divine Infinite One) poured out Its light into vessels, the *sephirot* (representing the expressed qualities of God’s infinite beingness), but the brilliance was so great that the vessels shattered and their light scattered throughout creation. Our task, in *tikkun*, is to gather the shards of light – the sparks of the Divine – found in every being, every moment, every situation, and restore the whole. This is accomplished not only through the works of our hands but also through our prayers and meditations, the mystic-activism of *chesed*.

In Islam, the Holy month of Ramadan commemorates the revelation of the Qu’ran to the Prophet Muhammad. During Ramadan Muslims around the world fast from dawn until dark, abstaining from food and drink as a way of devoting all their attentions toward God. Prayers and good works offered during Ramadan have particular value in advancing the spiritual life of each individual, and deepening communion with the Divine. But Ramadan, too, has both personal and social dimensions; the two cannot be separated.

In his article on the prophetic ethics of fasting, Ibrahim Farajajeh speaks of an embodied spirituality where we strive to remove from our hearts “the idols of low self-esteem, of rugged individualism and lack of knowledge of self, and give birth to the new humanity, a humanity of compassion, solidarity, justice, peace, and hope, a new humanity whose faith is one that liberates, one that strives for fullness of life for all creation.” He notes that the Ramadan fast “reminds us that we do not live in isolation, that our well-being in the world cannot and must not be at the expense of others.”

Sufi master M.R. Bawa Muhaiyaddeen, speaking on the significance of Ramadan, offers this guidance: “Think of all lives as your own life. Love them and help them. Understand the hunger of others as your own hunger and feed them. Think of another’s comfort as your own and give that comfort. You need to acquire love, peacefulness, and tranquility, and you need to show those qualities to others so they can live their lives in unity. You must give them love.”

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What Happened to Kikhiesha Brooks?

By Zenju Earthlyn Manuel, PhD

One day alongside the racket of the BART train going by I walked toward a street shrine with dried up flowers, airless balloons, and unfinished candles. As I approached the silver lamp pole at 59th Street and MLK Way, the eyes of a young chocolate brown girl stared back at me. My stomach jumped as if the girl was standing there, as if the photo I saw was actually her. I was sure she had died by gunfire because there was a street shrine and she was young and black. Plus street shrines were for those whose death was untimely and violent, whose death would go unnoticed if it weren't for the shrine. She would just be another statistic. Number 70-what?

I studied the photo, perhaps too long, as I felt nauseated, thinking she may have been only 16, 17 or so. I began to read the writing on the lamp pole hoping I would discover her name. I was stunned by messages to the girl addressed "Dear B----, signed B----." Even in memorial, every message to her used the derogatory "B" word. With much distress at not knowing her name, I wobbled away feeling somehow as an African American 54-year-old woman that I had been lost inside my own world, afraid of the killing of black youth going on around me. Finally, the murder of someone's daughter haunted me.

Later, a new friend of mine named John, also haunted by the story I revealed, emailed me that he had discovered the name of the young girl through a blog. Even though her face appeared young as a teen, she was 21-year-old Kikhiesha Brooks gunned down on an early afternoon July 22nd, blocks from my house. She was the fourth killing this year in my neighborhood. No, I do not live in East Oakland or West Oakland, I live in North Oakland on the border of the city of Berkeley which is now delineated with so-called artistic signs naming

Oakland as "There" and Berkeley as "Here." I live "There."

I live "There," in a place where there is no running from 80 murders. However, I work "Here," five minutes from "There," in Berkeley as the Executive Director of the Buddhist Peace Fellowship (BPF). Although I had been practicing Buddhism for 19 years, the word "peace" was now part of my everyday life. Could this be why finally I have come to confront my fear and sense of being haunted by the dead faces of young black people? Although there is much talk about the Iraq War, the genocide in Darfur, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, I can't help but feel as I did during the Vietnam War that there is no difference between wars there and here. There can be no peace there without peace here. "There is no there there," says Gertrude Stein. I say, there's no here here either. Somehow Kikhiesha's face has erased any border, any separation between me and the deaths surrounding my everyday life.

Somehow I had managed to sleep my way through the nightmare of living in Oakland, lifting my head only for a moment to see and listen when it all was too loud and too bloody. Was Kikhiesha asleep too? What in her life made it okay for her to be in the danger zone, to not run from it all? Unconsciously did she think it was okay for her to die? The cries in the streets of black mothers have only mixed with the blood of their children, and have gone on as if it were ordinary life.

Murder is not ordinary life. Some might say, as I have many times, that Oakland is not all that bad. There's lots of good here. But I cannot say that any longer without acknowledging that something is out of balance in the city of Oakland, where even the oak trees are dying. How can we regain a balance of life and death among us?

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Zenju Earthlyn Manuel has practiced the Buddha's teachings for 19 years, initially in Nichiren Buddhism and more recently in the Soto Zen tradition. She is currently a candidate for priesthood and in May 2007 was appointed the Executive Director of the national Buddhist Peace Fellowship headquartered in Berkeley, CA.

What would emerge if we were moved by understanding, by the wisdom to end suffering instead of adding to it?

What Happened, continued

People are innately peaceful but when hindered with fear and ideas of superiority and power, the natural appearance of peace is lost. Adding more police on the streets is one of those ideas of superiority and power fueled by our fear. Building more jails and prisons is another idea fueled by fear. What would emerge if we were moved by understanding, by the wisdom to end suffering instead of adding to it? By *understanding* I mean being aware of the suffering conditions of being human, knowing that when one suffers we all do, and that because of impermanence what arises as suffering will pass away.

If we were moved in our lives by understanding instead of fear, I imagine then that the police force would not use guns. With understanding and not fear, the jails and prisons would become intensive educational institutions. Children in public schools would be attended to with the care and nurturing one would give to their own child. The music industry would not fear losing money by ending their support of artists whose work is purely to arouse hate. Fueled by understanding every child would be able to read, every overburdened mother would be given a family caretaker. We would begin to see human life as valuable beyond status and worldly possession. This is the kind of consciousness that surfaces when understanding, and not fear, is the catalyst for our actions.

I learned from an early Zen master named Dogen that each moment is not just a segment of life that one takes passively, but that each continuation of life, which is birth moment after moment, must be creatively and actively engaged. How do we engage? We return to:

Speaking in ways to each other (especially our children) that avoid harsh speech, divisive talk, lying or senseless chatter,

Acting in ways that avoid harmful intent such as killing, stealing, and misuse of our bodies, and

Thinking in ways that do not separate us from each other.

With these actions and intentions solutions to the murders will come from a place of insight and compassion rather than merely trying to protect ourselves with bigger weapons.

We are afraid as a nation. We might even be the most fearful country on this planet and therefore afraid of such a weakness being discovered by all. Fear or not no one can afford to just sit back and accept the death of black youths or the increasing murders in this country. Take time to explore what it is that you understand about anything in your world. Do you support those things that feed into your fear? I am certain that Kikhiesha was afraid simply because she was a human being. Perhaps she was afraid to live a life different from her peers, and maybe even afraid to live the life she did. What kind of understanding do we have of life itself?

At the Buddhist Peace Fellowship I am able to contemplate this question not only rhetorically but also with the intention of taking action. BPF currently has a Youth Program in which we invite teens and young adults to take time out in their lives and learn meditation as a path toward liberation. In addition, youth are engaged in dialogue concerning the social-political climate of their communities. We also have an ex-prisoners' re-entry program that supports those who have been incarcerated with establishing and maintaining a practice of meditation. These are the kinds of programs that can emerge when there is an understanding of the causes and conditions of human life. ❁



Founded in 1978, the Buddhist Peace Fellowship's programs, publications, and practice groups link Buddhist teachings of wisdom & compassion with progressive social change. For more visit www.bpf.org

Opportunities at OneLife Institute, contd.

commitment to supporting the organization with their professional expertise and community associations.

Examples include our bookkeeper, publicist, and business consultant. While they do not vote, and only rarely attend Board meetings, their input and counsel inform organizational decisions and procedures. We created the Resource Council, in part, as a way of developing a pool of potential future Board members through their involvement with the organization over time. If you are interested in serving on either our Board or Resource Council please contact us to discuss the possibilities.

OneLife is also recruiting for a part-time associate who will work under the supervision and mentorship of the Director and guidance of the Board to support organizational operations and communication functions. The ideal candidate has excellent administrative,

communication, and computer skills. She or he understands the vision and mission of OneLife Institute, has a strong personal spiritual foundation and practice, and is committed to compassionate social change. A full description of the position, qualifications, and compensation is available on our website, or we would be glad to send it to you.

And we always welcome the support of volunteers! Short and longer-term projects in a variety of areas are possible, including database set-up, grantwriting, community outreach and networking, help with special events, and more. If you have a particular skill, resource, or expertise that you'd be willing to share, please let us know. There are even ways you can participate from outside the Oakland area. We look forward to hearing from you...

Ramadan Mubarak. Shanah tovah.
Salaam, Shalom, Peace ~
Liza

Opportunities at OneLife Institute

- Board of Directors
- Resource Council
- P/T Associate Position
- Volunteers

Spirit, Sound & Silence Retreat ~ Nov. 3, 2007

Join us for a day of renewal, inspiration and enrichment...

- Replenish your soul in the gentle power of intentional silence
- Open to inner wisdom through a guided visioning process
- Walk the meditation labyrinth
- Savor the healing properties of sound and music
- Be inspired by the words of mystics from diverse faith traditions

Saturday, Nov. 3rd 10:00 AM – 4:00 PM (9:30 AM arrival & registration)

With special guest: Destiny Muhammad, “Harpist from the Hood”

Retreat location: Holy Redeemer Center, 8945 Golf Links Rd., Oakland, CA 94605 ~ This is a wheelchair accessible site.

Tuition: Sliding scale \$35- 100 (more if you can / less if you can't ~ no one turned away for lack of funds) *RSVP requested for planning purposes.*



Upcoming Retreats:
Save the Dates!

November 3, 2007
January 26, 2008
April 26, 2008



OneLife Institute is a nonprofit interfaith organization providing resources for the integration of spirituality and social action. Through classes, retreats, publications, events, counseling and consultation services we seek to support and empower individuals and groups in their commitment to personal and social transformation.

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Visit us on the web at:

www.onelifeinstitute.org

*“Deep inside our integrity sings to us
whether we are listening or not.”*

~ Rachel Naomi Remen

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*Spirituality & Social
Transformation*