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SACRED BEARINGS

A Journal on Violence and Spiritual Life

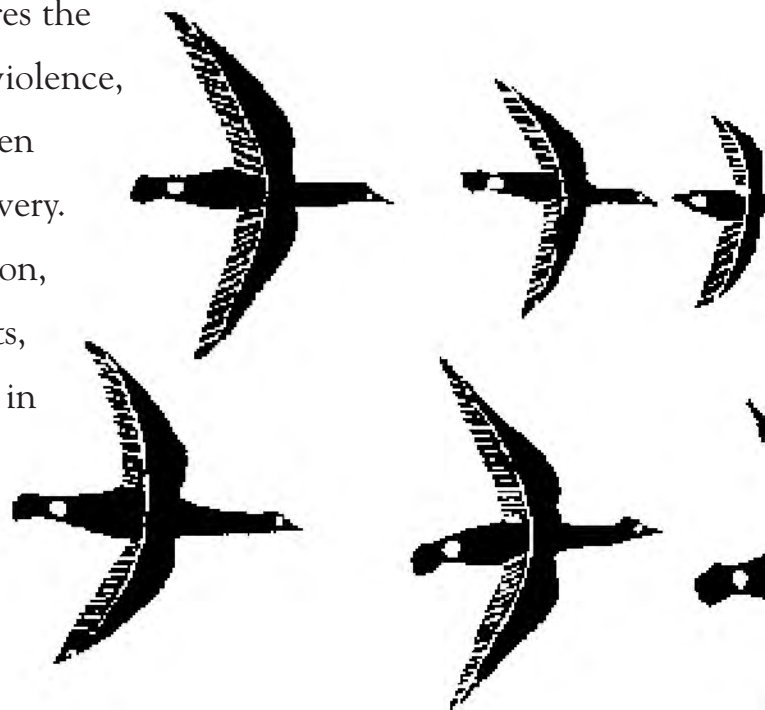
Mission Statement:

Sacred Bearings is a publication of the Institute on Violence and Culture of the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities, in partnership with Horizon Institute for Policy Solutions.

Each issue explores the spiritual lives of survivors of violence, giving words to this often unspoken dimension of survivor recovery.

Through poetry, essays, short fiction, and the visual arts, the writers and artists in

Sacred Bearings help us to better understand the contributions of faith and the sacred to the process of healing from violence.



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The Editorial Board tries to ensure that all contributions are correct and true at the time of publishing.

To All Survivors

who try to live well,
walk gently,
and give fully

– and to those
who find such goals hard
or mysterious
or impossible.



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The Virginia Foundation for the Humanities and its Institute on Violence and Culture apply the humanities – anthropology, literature, history, and religious studies – to modern problems. In a time of sound bites and confrontation, the VFH is a catalyst for serious discussion – because ideas matter.

Because Ideas Matter

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Public Policy for the Real World



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From the Editor

Welcome to *Sacred Bearings*, a quarterly journal devoted to the topic of spiritual healing for survivors of violence.

There are many books, magazines, and workshops on spirituality, spiritual growth, religion, faith, and the sacred. You can also find many publications that approach healing as a spiritual quest as well as a physical or psychological matter. Despite the wealth of such materials, there is not very much available on the ways in which spirituality and healing operate in the life of a survivor of violence.

Violence makes people different. It is a particular – often terrible – form of experience that has no equal. Violence – especially the violence that humans inflict on one another – wounds the body and the mind, neither of which is quickly or easily healed. The effects of violence, long and short term, take unexpected turns that many works on healing and spirituality don't address.

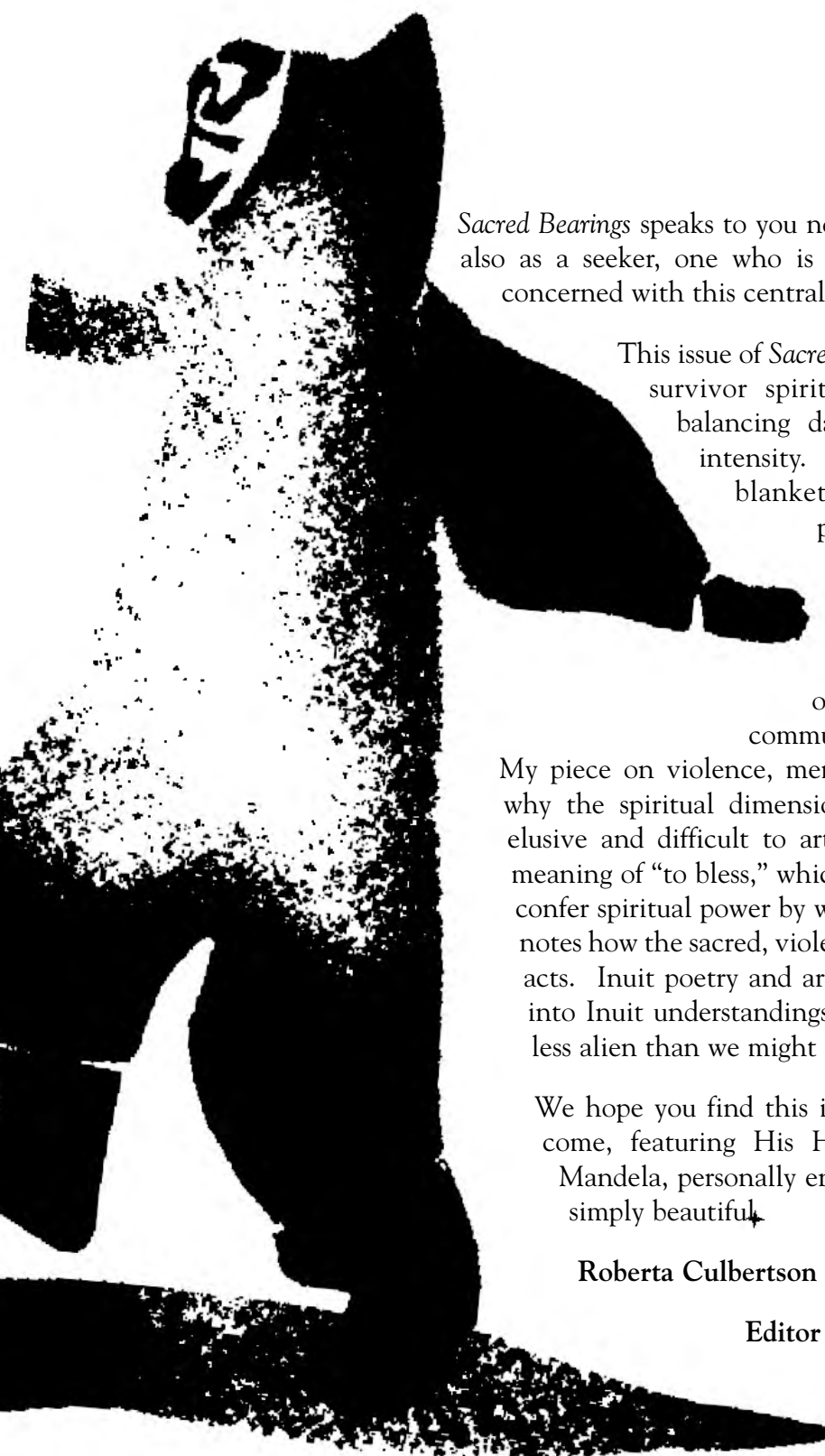
In the last ten years we have grown more psychologically sophisticated about violence, having even developed a diagnostic category – Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder – that describes many of its aftereffects. Medical doctors are coming to understand that chronic digestive problems, headaches, swallowing problems, and other symptoms might well have their origins in violent experiences that their patients themselves fail to report.

Now we are learning from a scientific perspective how violence may produce altered states of consciousness, apparent miracles, Near Death Experiences, and vast, existential horror, experiences that go beyond normal explanatory categories. Survivors also are beginning to discuss dimensions of their wounding that we might call “spiritual” – those aspects that lie at the intersection of mind and body and seem to hover above and below consciousness.

In fact, many survivors of violence, from many different cultures, engage in the spiritual healing of violent wounds and seek spiritual understanding of their conditions. Their approaches are often individual, experiential, and personally powerful. Yet in a therapeutic or medical setting, they seem out of place or irrelevant. There is no good language to talk about such things in many modern contexts.

Sacred Bearings brings these “sacred” dimensions of the violent experience and healing to you. It is designed for survivors of violence, who will see themselves in its pages, and may find here practical ways to move forward. It is designed as well for those who work with survivors – physicians, nurse practitioners, psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers, therapists, journalists, clergy, spiritual directors, counselors, and others.





Sacred Bearings speaks to you not only as a survivor or professional, but also as a seeker, one who is personally developing spirituality or is concerned with this central issue of our times.

This issue of *Sacred Bearings* captures one of the realities of survivor spirituality: it is intense. Healing means balancing darkness with light without sacrificing intensity. Bill Hess's photograph of an Iñupiat blanket toss and Christopher Morris's photographic essay of his extended farm family in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia remind us of the deep beauty and love in human life, even in harsh circumstances. Edith Turner's piece on spiritual healing in an Iñupiat community gives us practical ideas for healing. My piece on violence, memory, and mystical experience explores why the spiritual dimensions of violence and healing are often elusive and difficult to articulate. Greg Orr asks about the dual meaning of "to bless," which means "to wound" in French, and "to confer spiritual power by words or acts" in English. Migael Scherer notes how the sacred, violence, and haunting interweave in violent acts. Inuit poetry and art throughout the journal give a glimpse into Inuit understandings of violence and healing – which seem less alien than we might imagine.

We hope you find this issue of *Sacred Bearings* and the ones to come, featuring His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Nelson Mandela, personally enriching, professionally educational, and simply beautiful.

Roberta Culbertson

Editor



A black and white photograph of a tree trunk with a large, bright, glowing white spot on the bark. The text is overlaid on the image.

Why was I Spared?

*The
Strange
Word
“Blessing”*



In French, the verb “*blesser*” means “to wound.” In English, “to bless” is to confer spiritual power on someone or something by words or gestures. When children are christened or baptized in some Christian churches, the priest or minister blesses them by sprinkling holy water on their faces. The modern English word “bless” comes from the Old English word “*bletsian*” which meant “to sprinkle with blood” and makes you think of ancient forms of religious sacrifice.

To wound, to bless, to sprinkle with blood. There is something about the intersection of these three meanings that seems to me to want to reveal some significant mystery of human experience.

One of the things we survivors know is that it is possible to be so close to violence that you are spattered with the blood of it. And yet, we did not die. It may have even been our own blood; the wound may have been in our own body. Or the body of a loved one we stood so close to that when it happened the blood spattered our face, blinded our eyes.



*...I was
spared.*

*...Why?
For what?*

And yet, we survived. Why? Why? Not for any reason that easily emerges from what we already know; what they taught us in school or even in the holy buildings. Nothing there explains this horrible strangeness we stood so close to. It was almost as if we were it, and yet, when it was over, we were still there in the shocked aftermath, in the silence following the lightning crash.

Why was I spared? Why saved when I stood so near the violence that I was sprinkled with blood? This question, that seems to challenge and overwhelm all meanings we previously believed, rendering them dust or less – this question can become the start of a quest for meaning. A meaning that goes beyond the everyday. Because the fact of our survival goes beyond the everyday. I could have died. It even seems at times that I should have died. In moments when my courage has failed, I have wished I had died when the violence first burst open my life. But I didn't. I was spared. Why? For what? What does it mean, this wounding that did not kill me?

Now that original violent moment has passed, has vanished in the stream of time. But, of course, it has not vanished as other things do. It has entered us as trauma, has scarred our brains as the close flash of lightning scars our sight. The white ghost of the violence, like the lightning stroke, is still there when we shut our eyes – a shape that haunts our sleep and all those moments when we might want to close our eyes and not see, not know.

But we do know. And because we have this terrible knowledge of violence, we have to make it a part of our decision to live. And it is in this way that a further, frightening risk challenges us, asks us to go into the dark place where wound, and blessing and blood twine around each other in the subterranean place where words begin.

No one could or ever should say that the violence that almost destroyed us was a good thing, was any kind of “blessing in disguise.” How then, can we even approach this thought? How can it be possible, in the face of all this, to even consider that this spattering of blood is a blessing?

What if the aftermath of this violence that we inexplicably survived did not allow us to be content with having survived, but instead raised questions about what life

means and what life is? And what if those questions became a quest? What if something insisted that we must seek a new meaning, must somehow try to understand the meaning of the frightening world that is hidden inside or beneath the everyday world in the same way that “wound” and “blood” are hidden inside “blessing?” What if the question, “Why was I spared?” would not let us rest?

And so, in some terrible and terrifying way, it is possible that the wound’s spattered blood is the blessing that sets us on the quest. The quest, like the original question, must come from inside us. It isn’t something others have the right to impose on us. But when the quest surfaces inside us, it can do so with great urgency. We find ourselves in need of meanings capable of taking our experience of violence into account. Meanings that know evil exists. Meanings that are brave enough to make violence a part of the unfolding equation of what it means to live in the world and still want to go on living in the world.

And so, we search the books. We search the faces of those we meet who are willing to speak of these things. And we search the words of people who have also stood so close to violence that they received that red blessing. And we search our own lives. Why was I spared, we wonder? Why was I saved?

There are answers to this question. Sometimes we hear and believe different answers at different times. The answers are terribly important; they help us live. But it is the question itself that is even more important, because the question is the place where the wound can and must become transformed into the difficult blessing. The question is what sets us on the quest. +

Gregory Orr



Gregory Orr

Gregory Orr teaches in the English Department at the University of Virginia. He is the author of six collections of poetry and is at work on a book entitled *The Three Strange Angels: Survival, Healing, and Lyric Poetry*.

*No one...
should say
that the
violence
...was
any kind
of “blessing
in disguise.”*

Joy & Suffering

excerpted from

*The Good Book:
Reading the Bible with Mind and Heart*

by Peter J. Gomes

New York: Avon Books, 1996.

It is for moments such as these that religion was made, and when we confront the unconfontable, or more to the point, when it confronts us, we are at a religious moment, and for a moment at least we are religious. Contrary to the popular misconception, religion is not an escape from reality but rather a genuine effort to make sense of what passes for reality and all that surrounds it.... Religion is not the answer to the unknowable or the unfaceable or the unendurable; religion is what we do and what we are in the face of the unknowable, the unfaceable, and the unendurable. It is a constant exercise in the making of sense first, and then of meaning.



Peter J. Gomes

Suffering, joy, and mystery are those points where the human and the divine come into the most intimate and profound of proximities. They unite all human experience in all ages and beyond all particulars of place and of circumstance. All religions of the world are and always have been concerned with their substance. It is the common ambition of our common humanity to make sense and meaning of these encounters wherever we can. ✦

Peter J. Gomes

Reverend Peter J. Gomes is the Plummer Professor of Christian Morals and Pusey Minister in the Memorial Church of Harvard University. He serves as trustee of the Roxbury Latin School, and is the former past President of The Signet Society, Harvard's oldest literary society.

My Little Raincoat

I've put on my little raincoat, I've pulled it over my little body, my face deep in the hood. I stand quietly upright, and send my soul somewhere else, nobody knows where, not even I, for I don't know, I don't feel, I don't think: I just stand in the rain that falls heavily. I'm lucky: I managed without laughing; had I laughed I would have been slapped hard in the face, beaten all over; so it's just words, a torrent of words. It pours from above, big words I can't understand; fast and loud; questions. And little words I can't answer to: you, you, you and why, why, why. And though I grasp nothing I listen to it like to music or a thunderstorm or praying in church or a dog barking at night. There is a rhythm to it, a cadence. It grows in strength, picks up speed, reaches high points of pitch and volume, collapses, sags off, gasps, stumbles, and then gathers strength again, rises to screeching heights: it must be over now, or maybe this time it will never end.

Its all about what can't be helped: me being bad and dirty and thoroughly a shame for the family, and the grandmother and grandfather and all the cousins and the whole city if not the country, the world, a festering boil on humanity's otherwise perfect face. Dragged dirt in the house, stuck his fingers where he shouldn't and damn well knows he shouldn't, put this in his mouth, broke that, said a word that mustn't be repeated ever under penalties of eternal damnation, sin against the Holy Ghost. He will amount to nothing, nothing but a disgrace for his parents who have sacrificed their wealth, health, happiness, whatever they had, to bring up this little despicable bundle – will go to a home for difficult and violent little boys. He'll end up in the slammer – imagine father's humiliation when he has to lock up his own son – will be court-martialed, demoted in public ceremony – insignia ripped off, sword broken – will be shot for high treason.

My little raincoat is in the corner of my dark room, my soul has come back. It's late at night – it did end after all, sometime, somehow – it has cooled off, the moon shines in my window. It always ends: like the thunderstorms and the prayers at church or dogs barking at night. But it never ends for good: there will be another hot and humid day ending in thunder and lightning, another Sunday, another moonlit night. And it will be like that as long as I'm alive. +

Christoph Leemann

Christoph Leemann is a physicist, internationally known in his special field, and an executive in a research organization. He is Judith Leemann's father, whose work appears on the following pages.

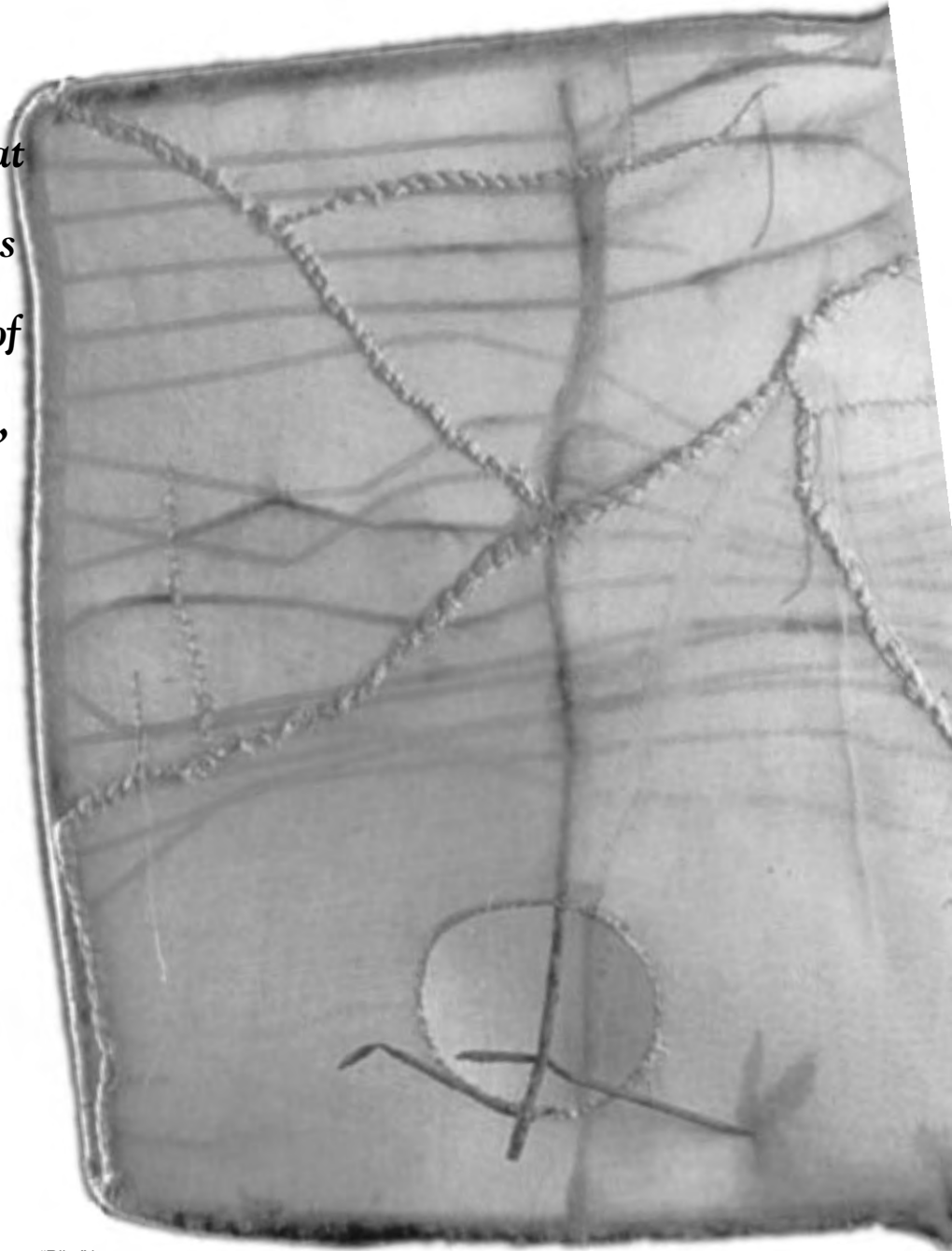


Sam Bailey – © 2000 Michael Bailey Photography

“Ribs”

– a Sculpture

*I repeat
endless
rituals of
wrapping,
re-concealing
found metal
forms in cloth,
leaving rust
clues as to
what lies
beneath.*



*“Ribs” by
Judith Leemann*



Response

Absence is an entirely palpable thing to me. I am undaunted by a solid surface because I know that there are always clues, ways to intuit, sense the underlying structure, the forces that organize a thing internally. I'm used to doing this and maybe I reverse the practice when I repeat endless rituals of wrapping, re-concealing found metal forms in cloth, leaving rust clues as to what lies beneath.

So when my father's voice begins to change at the age of sixty – when his double-edged gift for language reconnects with something softer within him – when reading surfaces becomes less necessary – I am the one at a loss. I am the one sitting next to him on large boulders by a river feeling stiff – unable to reorganize to meet this new incarnation.

And there is this child speaking from his lips who until now was always spoken of, was ever locked in passive voice. I do not mean to say that any of my father's sixty years have been peeled back but rather that something which must have been walking very slowly has finally caught up. And when I read what he now writes and the tears do not stop until I am asleep, I can not distinguish whether they are relief or grief, mine or his. Time does strange things.

How exactly do you unmourn a life come back that you never knew – a life you believed in fervently based on an odd patchwork of evidence and wishing, and which seems in its absence to have shaped you as much as that which was present in its place? Gestures fall short – I make an internal choice. I choose again and again to respond to my father as he is. ✦

Judith Leemann

Judith Leemann is an artist and Alexander Technique teacher in Charlottesville, Virginia.



Judith Leemann

A Moment

By Gregory Orr

The field where my brother died –
I've walked there since.
Weeds and grasses, some chicory
stalks; no trace of the scene
I still can see: a father
and his sons bent above
a deer they'd shot,
then screams and shouts.

Always I arrive too late
to take the rifle
from the boy I was,
too late to warn him
of what he can't imagine:
how quickly people vanish;
how one moment you're standing
shoulder to shoulder,
the next you're alone in a field.



A Litany

By Gregory Orr

I remember him falling beside me,
the dark stain already seeping across his parka hood.
I remember screaming and running the half mile to our house.
I remember hiding in my room.
I remember that it was hard to breathe
and that I kept the door shut in terror that someone would enter.
I remember pressing my knuckles into my eyes.
I remember looking out the window once
at where an ambulance had backed up
over the lawn to the front door.
I remember someone hung from a tree near the barn
the deer we'd killed just before I shot my brother.
I remember toward evening someone came with soup.
I slurped it down, unable to look up.
In the bowl, among the vegetable chunks,
pale shapes of the alphabet bobbed at random
or lay in the shallow spoon.



Raven Woman





Photography by Edith Turner © 2000 Edith Turner



Flight of Geese
Ikseetarkyuk/Kallooar

Raven entered my life through gifts. First there was the sweatshirt, a present from my older sister on my thirty-sixth birthday. Turquoise blue, the color of glacier ice. On the front, a black raven painted in the graceful ovoids and swelling outlines of Alaska Native art: chest out, wings spread, tail fanned, head in profile. Surrounded by a thin black circle, with painted feathers hanging below.

“An eagle!” I said with pleasure when I unwrapped it.

“A raven,” she corrected, pleased that I liked it. “The Tlingit bird.”

I looked at the emblem more closely as my sister traced the soft contours that seemed to flow from one into the other, explaining that an eagle’s beak would be more strongly hooked in Alaska Native art. When I put the shirt on, the raven covered my chest like a shield.

I wanted to save the sweatshirt “for good,” wear it only on occasions that passed for dress-up among us liveaboards in Juneau, but it didn’t take long for it to join my every-day wardrobe. In the photo album of our four years in Alaska, I appear again and again in that sweatshirt. At first, I am cooking, or crowded with friends around the galley table, grinning with them over a platter of salmon steaks. A few pages later, and there I am, kneeling on deck, bending over a bucket-load of Dungeness crab, orange rubber gloves on, ready to kill and clean the whole lot of them.

The first blood to stain the shirt came off Joyce’s halibut. We’d left Paul and Herm behind on *Orca*. Paul had launched the dinghy and was rigging it for a sail. Herm was setting up crab traps. Joyce and I took the inflatable.

We had fishing rods, herring for bait, a small tackle box, a medium-sized net, and a club. Cans of beer rolled around on the floorboards. We motored north about a quarter mile, cut the engine, and dropped the plastic bucket over the side to hold position. Baited our hooks, dropped them to the bottom, reeled up a bit.

And sat. Joyce on one inflated pontoon, I on the other. Beers opened, smiles across our faces. Just us, the blue bowl of sky, the sloping walls of the mountains around a calm sea. To the south, *Orca* floated on a tether of anchor chain; the graceful sheer line of her hull swept up at stern and bow, her masts raked gently aft.

Then, sooner than expected, the tip of Joyce's rod curved down, almost to the water. She scrambled to grip the rod, adjust the reel. I quickly reeled in my own line.

"Feels like a halibut," said Joyce. She was already responding to the resistance of heavy flatness, rather than the darting fight of a salmon. She raised her pole up in a slow pull, then lowered it quickly, reeling in furiously as she did so.

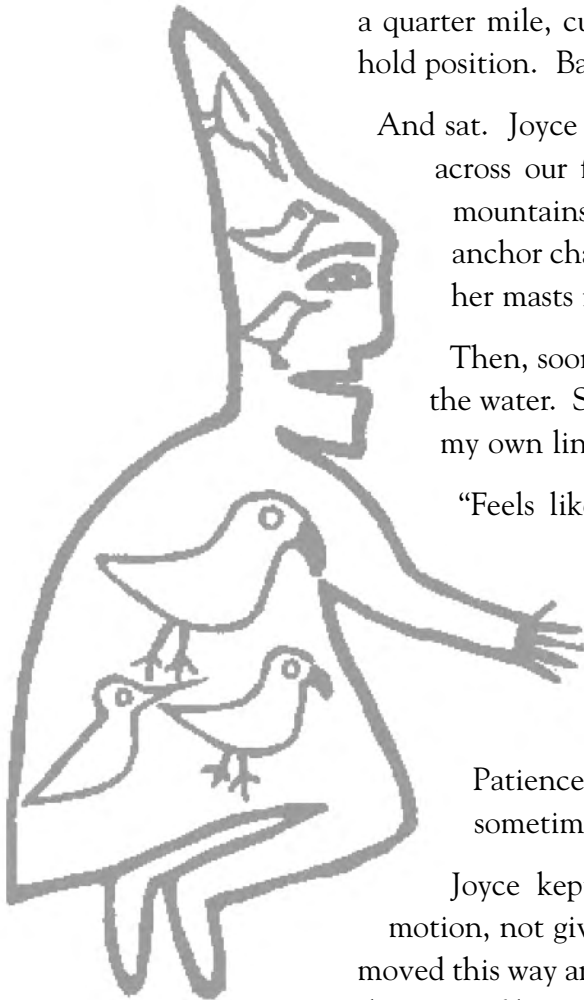
Hauling in a halibut on sport line is often described as raising a barn door: not elegant or tricky, but not easy either. Patience and pacing are as necessary as with any fish, and stamina sometimes as well.

Joyce kept raising and lowering and reeling in, in a steady pumping motion, not giving the fish time to dive. Her line moved in circles as the fish moved this way and that, trying to shake the hook caught in its throat, sawing the thin monofilament with its sharp, fine teeth. Fighting for its life.

On the surface we were hooting and laughing. Our beers had long since tipped and spilled onto the floorboards. Joyce was kneeling, and I sitting, on the wet bottom, oblivious to the cold sea-brew that wicked into our jeans. I yelled unhelpful suggestions: "Keep the tip up! Don't let it take any line!" Joyce grunted and giggled, followed her own instincts, reacted entirely to the halibut, as though receiving signals through the translucent line.

When the ghostly form appeared below, we both gasped. The halibut looked almost as big as the inflatable – much, much larger than we'd expected. Its head alone wouldn't fit in the net we'd brought, let alone the rest of it. We had no gaff to hook it by the gills, no pistol to shoot it.

But we did have a hand-held radio. As Joyce cautiously gave the fish a little line,



The People Within
Oonark/Ikseegah

I called *Orca*. Could someone bring the big net, soon?

It was the kind of challenge any boater would love – an emergency delivery of a large net for a large fish. Paul did it in style, hopping into the dinghy, raising the little sail, and beating his way upwind toward us. The small triangle of white sail, and the wide circle of the aluminum net, grew larger as he approached.

Joyce began to reel in again – the fish had rested, and was resisting mightily. Paul pulled up on the opposite side, passed me the net, held on to the pontoon. I lowered the net into the water away from the struggling fish, then slowly brought it closer.

“Now!” said Joyce, and I swooped the net over and up with all the strength of both my arms. Joyce instantly let go of her rod and grabbed the rim of the net. Together we dragged the thrashing fish over the pontoon and into the boat, all but falling on top of it. Joyce raised the club and brought it down hard. Blood and slime splattered us both. The fish continued to thrash; I unsheathed my knife and plunged it through the halibut’s brain.

We never figured out its exact weight. The best scale we could rig was to hang our stern anchor on the opposite side of the mizzen boom, and the balance seemed about equal – some 60 pounds. By the time we finished gutting and cleaning the fish, my sweatshirt was permanently stained.

In the logic of fishing, the raven sweatshirt was now even more treasured, a good luck charm I wore deliberately whenever I wanted to catch fish or crab. It never failed me.

According to Native Alaskan legend, Raven is power. Not the power that comes from size or strength, but the power that comes from cleverness and trickery. Intelligence and deception are his weapons. Raven always prevails. He helps man, but in an off-handed sort of way, as much from a sense of fun as altruism. He is often pictured with the moon in his beak, a moon he set free by disguising himself as a crying, demanding child. Of all the animals, Raven is the most admired, topping many a carved crest pole.

It’s difficult to describe ravens in terms of nobility or grace. Their blue-black feathers are beautiful, but their walk is almost a waddle, and in flight they sometimes tumble, as if they had suddenly forgotten how to fly. Their cries are complex and harsh: “quorks,” “tocks,” “rracks.” They have a greater variety of calls than any other animal except humans, and are skillful mimics. More than once I was stopped on the dock by what I thought was a baby’s cry or a cat’s whine,

*...Raven
is power.*

Raven

always

prevails.



only to discover a raven, big as a rooster, peering down at me from the rigging with what seemed to be amusement. Like crows, ravens often gather in groups that seem to exist for play as much as work. They have been known to tree cats, taunt small dogs, hunt in groups. One Juneau story – reported with great flair in the local newspaper – describes an Easter egg hunt thwarted by ravens that waited patiently while the colored eggs were hidden; as soon as the humans were preoccupied with registering the children, the ravens swooped in to collect over half of them, a 600-egg bonanza.

*I don't
want to
die!*

What with the sweatshirt and my penchant for these stories, it was no surprise when friends presented me with “Raven Woman” on my fortieth birthday. A signed print of a pen-and-ink drawing by an Angoon artist, it shows a realistic raven in profile, holding a stylized moon in its beak. In front of the raven, obscuring its chest, is the face of a Native Alaskan woman. She stares straight ahead, with a look of complete calm and strength. The peaked band across her forehead is beaded with a raven shape very like the one on my sweatshirt. White feathers curve beneath her chin. Behind her, barely distinguishable from the raven’s feathers, is a tangle of leaves.

*How can
I stop
him?*

The picture was propped up in *Orca*’s main cabin for weeks, then in the forward cabin, finally tucked out of sight. That summer Paul and I cruised south, moving back to Seattle, and Raven Woman was forgotten. But the sweatshirt remained a vital item in my limited wardrobe. Photos of the six-week voyage invariably show me in that bright blue sweatshirt: walking on a boardwalk trail outside Sitka, hopping to a jump rope of kelp on a British Columbia beach, standing watch at the helm on a sunny, downwind run.

The day I surrendered that raven sweatshirt, the blood on it was mine. The blood came from my hands and neck, from wounds inflicted by a knife much like the one I carried in my back pocket while fishing. The knife belonged to a man about my age, a quiet, blondish man who waited patiently in a Seattle laundromat until I was loading wet clothes into the dryers. He attacked in a quick rush, knife to my throat, unmovable left arm like a band across my body. Not all my struggles or words could stop him from dragging me into the narrow room behind the



Flight of Geese
Ikseetarkyuk/Kallooar

dryers, raping and strangling me. He jerked the blue sweatshirt up, trapping my arms and covering my face. I don't remember seeing the shield of the raven then, but I saw the blue – that deep turquoise blue of a glacier crevasse.

I clawed uselessly at his wrists, his hands. I heard each breath as his thumbs pressed in and in – my breath, rasping, then retching. My brain was screaming – *I don't want to die!* – but thinking too, rapidly and clearly – *How can I stop him?* In the furious scramble of my mind I suddenly remembered what I'd been told a thousand times in Alaska: when a bear attacks, play dead. And the moment I remembered – that very instant – I exhaled and went limp.

He unclenched his hands. "You're a lucky woman," he said, releasing me to the floor. I lay motionless, gasping, alive, grateful for air. A rustle of clothing, a slamming door, and he was gone.

So the last photos of me in the raven shirt were taken in the police station. And the last time I saw that shirt was on the witness stand. When I identified it as evidence during the trial, I recalled – just for an instant – halibut, crab, mountains and water and clean, chill air. Then I saw the blood, dry and brown. I smelled the stale, soured sweat. Twenty feet away in that courtroom, the man watched as calmly as he had in the laundromat eight months earlier.

In the days that followed, while the trial continued, I remembered Raven Woman, retrieved her from storage, set her on a seat in the main cabin. The calm face of the woman and the triumphant profile of the raven, holding the prize of the moon in its beak, somehow gave me a sense of peace and hope that I desperately needed. I stared at that picture every morning, of woman and raven, the blackness of feathers and hair almost indistinguishable, her pale face like a shield across its dark chest. It was a kind of prayer, my silence at that picture – through the rest of the trial, through the relief of conviction, through the renewed anxiety of sentencing a month later, and especially through the dark depression that followed and nearly crushed me.



Migael Scherer

It is said that a totem animal chooses you as much as you it, connects through a powerful event, bestows a kind of grace. Thereafter, you are never the same. ✦

Migael Scherer

Migael Scherer teaches for the Journalism and Trauma Program at the University of Washington School of Communications, and is director for the Dart Award for Excellence in Reporting on Victims of Violence. Her first book, *Still Loved by the Sun: A Rape Survivor's Journal*, won a PEN Citation and Pacific Northwest Booksellers Association Award. Her most recent book is *Sailing to Simplicity: Life Lessons Learned at Sea*.

*It is said
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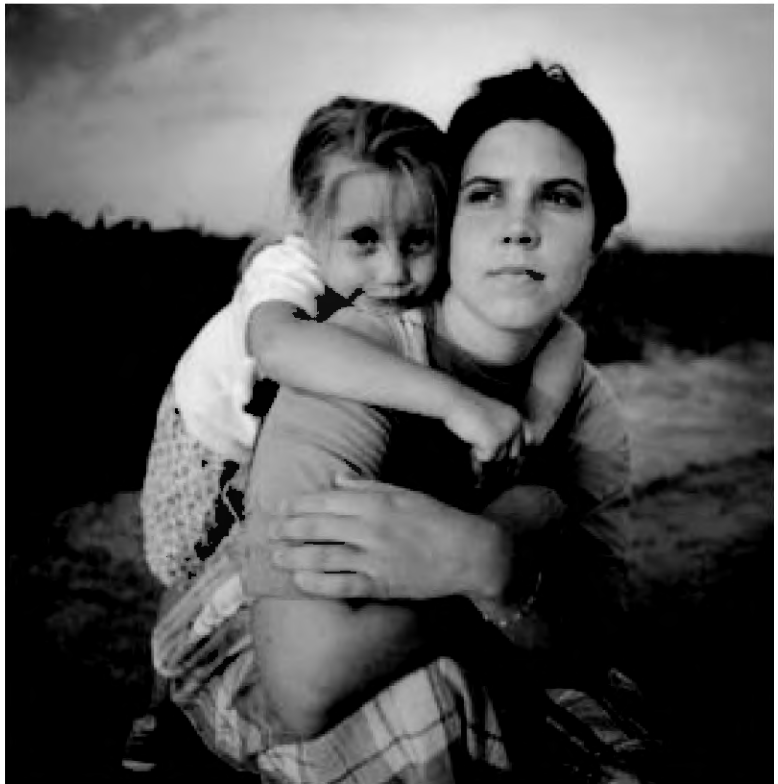
Photo Essay: *Christopher Morris*

Shenandoah Family

These prints have been selected from a photographic essay still in progress.

I began the essay when I returned home to the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia, having completed studies at the New England School of Photography in Boston. After a few years photographing a newborn family member and her surroundings, the influence of photographers like Dorothea Lange, Paul Strand, and Walker Evans became apparent in my work. Black and white was my medium, and this land, its seasons, and its people had become my subject.

My cousin and her immediate family are the common thread weaving through this eighteen year project. With six years to go (I propose to photograph the family until my cousin is eighteen years old), the project is evolving as I am evolving.



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In his poem, “The Gift Outright,” Robert Frost says,
“The land was ours before we were the land’s.”
These images document the relationship of people to one another
– and of people to this land.





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Christopher Morris
lives in the
Shenandoah Valley
and exhibits his work
across the region.
He is published
worldwide.

**Christopher Morris,
Photographer**

Book Review

After Silence: Rape and My Journey Back

By Nancy Venable Raine.

New York: Three Rivers Press, 1998.



Our culture has become almost desensitized to the concept of rape. We've "toned it down," so to speak, by using the term "sexual assault." It is easy to compartmentalize or ignore these crimes (and yes, they are crimes), or pass judgment before the story has been told. We have

come to believe that if we're careful with

alcohol at parties, stay with a group, don't pick up hitchhikers, don't walk alone at night, carry a cell phone, get deadbolts for our doors, and guard our keys – we'll be safe.

Nancy Venable Raine probably thought the same thing one October day in 1985. It wasn't dark – it was the middle of the afternoon, and she stepped out the back door of her Boston apartment to empty the trash. It took less than sixty seconds for her to do this. Nancy Raine will never again empty trash without feeling some element of terror. Sixty seconds. A stranger slipped in her back door and was waiting for her. Sixty seconds. One minute to change an entire past and rip the future from her soul.

Nancy Venable Raine was thirty-nine years old when she was raped at knifepoint in her own apartment by someone she didn't know. The rape itself lasted for several hours, but the aftermath is enough for several lifetimes for Nancy Raine. It would be almost six years before Raine would allow herself to see, process and ultimately begin to heal from that terror. The rapist was never apprehended.

Several months later, Nancy Raine burned the underpants she'd been wearing that day, and decided everything was fine. *After Silence*, her account of her subsequent descent into darkness, shows us she was anything but fine. "The rape is just the beginning," she writes. "Then it's one long drop into hell." She takes us into that hell as she realizes she can never again reclaim the woman who wasn't raped. Her friends tell her to get a job; all are uncomfortable with her invisible wounds. "Other people's embarrassment or discomfort makes me feel as if I were the rapist's co-criminal, an accomplice who is confessing something."

After Silence brings us into the struggle to understand, to create meaning from an incomprehensible act. In fact, the language of rape is unspeakable. Raine makes us feel, along with her, the arid temperatures in a desert where meaningful language doesn't exist. This deficiency of language and understanding breeds a silence that is suffocating. Raine learns that... "silence has the rusty taste of shame." Her silence and isolation are intense. Not only does she separate from her body, her feelings, and her core self, but she isolates herself from the rest of humanity. "It feels as if someone else lived my life while I existed inside a sealed chamber, walled off not only from the world, but from myself as well." She soon discovers that our society exiles her in an attempt to insulate itself from this horrific violation. She must speak if she is to "come back."

**"silence
has the
rusty
taste of
shame."**

– Raine

Raine's riveting account of her rape and its shattering aftereffects takes readers through the maze of terror, shame, confusion and blame that plagues most trauma survivors. Searching for words, she weaves her own story into clinical findings about Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, and she exposes our culture's misunderstanding of and discomfort with the topic of rape and those who have experienced it. Raine's

courageous journey through the roar of silence is a gift for trauma survivors and their loved ones. It is also a powerful teaching tool for those who wish to understand the nature of trauma and recovery.

Raine demonstrates that only when she begins to connect words and language to her experience can she eventually reconnect with herself. "Can language resurrect the murdered soul, reroute the brain's signals? I must believe it can."

We must believe it, too.



Book Reviewer:

Bonny G. Bronson



Bonny G. Bronson

Bonny Bronson is a Licensed Clinical Psychologist in private practice in Charlottesville, Virginia, where she specializes in issues of trauma and abuse.



Shamanism

Ancient Healing – Will it Work for You?

Edith Turner is a well-known anthropologist who with Victor Turner pioneered the “anthropology of experience,” which asks anthropologists to participate in the rituals and communities they study. Edith has lived for some time with an Iñupiat community in northern Alaska, and has learned shamanic technique from Iñupiat shamans. She says, “if you want to research and understand a subject such as shamanism, it is necessary to engage in it.”

Violence, harm to the environment, prejudice: what is the correct way to deal with these problems?

Set up agencies, engage experts, create regulations designed to control the wrongs we see? Isn't that correct?

We may as well set up a committee to abolish the wind, for doing harm has to do with heart and soul as well as science and machinery. Doing or suffering harm is not only a technical question; it is a spiritual one. To address many of the points of suffering in our cultures today, we must regain a sense of our sacred bearings, a sense of coming into alignment with spiritual power.

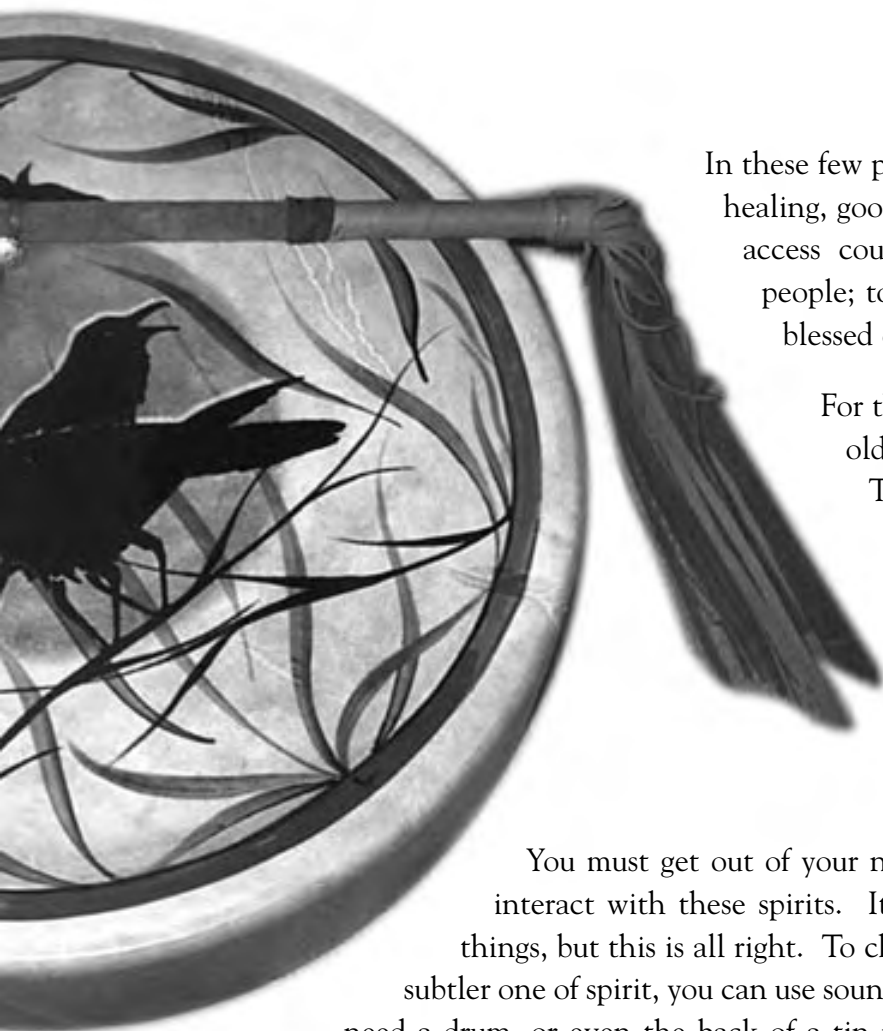
This power is real, and for centuries humans have made use of it. Only in the last two or three hundred years has this knowledge been repressed and ridiculed in the West as “superstition.”

The earliest and still most prevalent way of using spiritual power to aid in healing is called “shamanism.” Shamanism has been known and practiced throughout the world since the beginning. It is the very basis of experience on which the wonders of world religions were originally built. All humans have this endowment, this predisposition to access spiritual power directly, through prayer, song, meditation, or trance.

We have a human predisposition to be sympathetic to our fellow creatures in their troubles and woes. We do so concretely, but we can also do so spiritually. Using this shamanic faculty to call on spiritual help allows us to help in unexpected and powerful ways. Strange to say, it also gives one joy and peace of mind. There are indeed spirits waiting to enliven and assist us. Our generation needs to find them again.

I think we have been starved of this sort of intangible guidance and help – what Native Americans call “power.”





In these few pages I give a simple method to experience joy, healing, good weather, and good hunting if you need it; to access courage; to find your way and lost objects or people; to receive prediction and warning; and to hold blessed conversations with the dead.

For this work you need a spirit helper: God, angels, old or young sages, animals, birds, even a tree. This animal or human figure is a certain being who wants to come and help you. One can get a sense of such spirits, but you have to be open to that sense. The great religions have lately been cutting out the idea of spirit help. “We mustn’t be superstitious,” they say. Yet actual help is available, and it is good.

You must get out of your normal busy, material way of thinking to truly interact with these spirits. It will feel at first that you are just imagining things, but this is all right. To change your mental state from this world to the subtler one of spirit, you can use sound and images. This is called “journeying.” You need a drum, or even the back of a tin pan. Someone beats it in a continuous single steady rhythm while you lie down with your eyes shut. The journey to find a spirit helper can also be done without drumming, and it can be done using a sound cassette of steady drumming. You need to lie still, deliberately visualizing some place leading to below ground – a tunnel, a cave, or under water, or steps. It should be somewhere you know, and that does not frighten you. You should feel safe going into this place. You enter the place, which opens before you. If you feel funny “traveling” underground, you can go above ground. Just imagine yourself walking off in a cardinal direction from the door of your house. Now let your mind take in anything that comes into it. Soon you might sense that you aren’t doing the visualizing – it’s coming on its own. Things will pop into your mind from here and there. They may seem to make no sense, but they do. Somehow the sound of the drum bears you along and there is a sense of coming out at the other end of your underground passage, or at some destination. This is where you can look for your spirit helper, and one may appear, or show a tail, or a wing, or a nose.

The animal is as shy as you are. Follow whatever happens, be amenable to its presence, and be respectful and polite. Interesting things will likely happen. It is fascinating to hear people's stories, how the animal or bird will lead one into some enigmatic situation, flying over a house under repair, out on a cliff edge with a path strewn with symbols, to odd, unexpected places. Your animal or other spirit helper will be with you on subsequent "journeys." Even in one's first experience it's good to find you have "someone" on your side. The drum should quicken to call you back. Then you return and tell your story to the drummer and any other fellow "journeyers."

This ritual gives power to heal and learn the other powers the spirits have to impart. But one has to find one's sacred bearings and apply one's second attention in order to truly key in to the powers. For healing, there are ways to approach the art that are a bit different. If someone is sick or grieving and needs more than regular doctoring, one needs to center down for a moment – get quiet and calm. Call on your spirit helper to assist you and keep you safe. At this point some healers simply "know," as they say, what is wrong with the sufferer. The rest of us apply the hands, gently feeling to the place in the body where the sickness is lodged. You will be drawn to the place. Feel around it. Let the tingling of your hands direct you. This isn't guesswork; it is the speaking of one body to another through the sensitivity of the fingers on the place. One actually feels the misery of the sick tissues, rebellious and sulking, tingling like alarm bells. At this point of deep sympathy your body gives a sign, and so does the patient. It feels right. Then draw out the trouble carefully; it is a spirit object as well as a physical pain for the sufferer. Throw the trouble toward water or to the open air, then wash your hands. It is odd how you get the feeling you are drawing something out and disposing of it. The sufferer says, "The pain has gone away." Everyone smiles.

These little techniques give happiness to the healer and the sick one. I can't say I know why, but the practice constitutes no small help against the horrors and hopelessness of life. One grows to sense the reality of spirits as part and parcel of one's everyday life. It is a stronger reality than the miserable conviction of self as useless that strangles a person in depression. And it is a lot of fun. It can also make for change, powerful and



unexpected. If your intention is good, that change will be for the good.

When I was doing anthropological research in northern Alaska, among the Iñupiat people of the North Slope, I was able, using methods taught to me by Iñupiat and other spiritual masters, to bring spiritual power to help a situation that was very bad. Let me explain. For decades, even centuries, the Iñupiat have found their lands and their self-determination whittled away from them by white settlers and multinational corporations. When oil was found on their land, the oil interests in a parody of compensation set up business corporations in the Native villages and proceeded by various schemes to leach away the monies settled on the Iñupiat in exchange for their oil.

I attended the village corporation shareholders meeting in 1988. The shareholders were Iñupiat; the managers and officials, white. That day, the manager and his associates, sitting above the local people on a platform, were in the process of upbraiding the villagers for reducing their funds to near bankruptcy. Not knowing what else to do, I turned to the Iñupiat's own resource, shamanism. Shamanism is often used as a last resort, and it was the only option I felt I had at the time. Things were getting very ugly; you could feel it in the room. A kindly animal helper, a dog spirit, had sometimes visited me and I called on him now. I shut my eyes and asked my dog to help the Iñupiat in this predicament. As I sat with my closed eyes a tunnel developed before me in my mind's eye, and down it I encountered a strange and loathsome object, prickly-shelled, black, and leggy. I let happen what would happen. The dog arrived on the spot and carried me around the object to safety. We went on. The dog and I coalesced, as often happens in dreams. Shortly after that I was back and watching the meeting. Everything in the corporation hall was highly lit, sharp, and good to see, although I was not wearing my glasses.

Suddenly, just then, the tribe's own Native lawman arose and questioned the men on the platform about some important papers. The papers contained items guaranteeing Iñupiat land rights that might save the Natives' rights in the

*You need
a spirit
helper,
whether
it is
God,
angels,
old or
young
sages,
animals,
birds,
even a
tree.*

*...there are
indeed
spirits
waiting to
enliven us.*

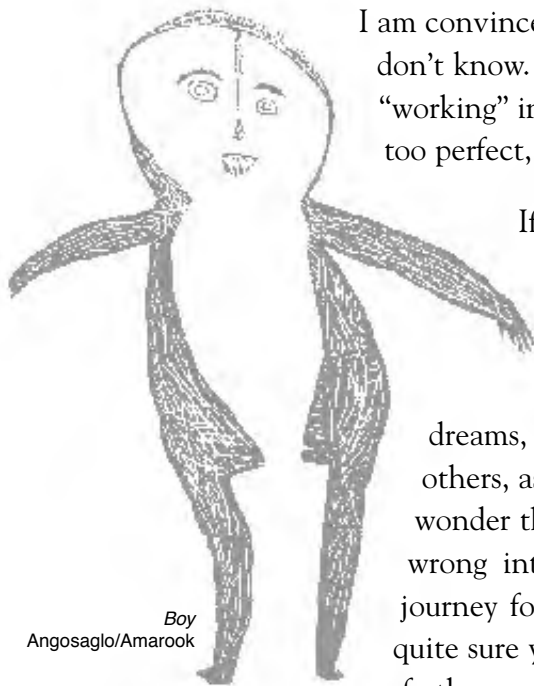
corporation. The lawman knew about these, though the white men had said the papers had “blown away in the wind.” The lawman went on, “I’ll correct this problem. We will get copies of the papers. I’ll give the village my services free.”

At this point many shareholders rose and supported him, saying they repudiated the white manager and his attempts to sabotage their ownership. The entire hall was united there and then to withstand the grabbing of their lands. The meeting moved forward, just as I had gone by the black object.

I was amazed at the sudden and unaccustomed unity among the shareholders, and the sense of firm purpose. There was power and confidence in a room that before had been only tense and sullen. We had but to back our lawman and sack the white manager, which was done; after a period of time our corporation was on top of the market and our village was teaching other villages how to run their corporations.

I am convinced this was spirit help in a political situation. Was it my doing? I don’t know. One never does. Perhaps it was chance? Or were several of us “working” in the same way just then? Whatever it was, the timing to me was too perfect, the results astounding.

If you do shamanic work carefully, asking for help, and with a pure heart, it can only help others. It’s good to begin with the help of a shamanic practitioner, if you can. You needn’t journey alone – get someone to drum, and others to join you in journeying. The stories of journeys should be shared. Like dreams, interpretation can be useful. Use shamanic journeying to help others, as well as yourself. Enjoy the sense of belonging, and the sense of wonder that will come over you. The danger in shamanic work comes of wrong intention, and of not trusting yourself. Resist negative energy; journey for good rather than pure power. Then I am quite sure your journeys will be fulfilling and supportive of others, and you will sense the sacred. ✦



Boy
Angosaglo/Amarook

Edith Turner

Edith Turner teaches in the Anthropology Department at the University of Virginia. She is the author of *The Hands Feel It: Healing and Spirit Presence Among a Northern Alaskan People*, *Experiencing Ritual: A new Interpretation of African Healing*, and other works. Edith believes good anthropology rests on humanism – that is, respect for the ideas and religions of other cultures and, where possible, the willingness to experience through the eyes of others.



Edith Turner



Iñupiat Blanket Toss, Alaska

Photography by Bill Hess © 1992 Bill Hess

Hard to Say

Why Words Fail to Describe Violence

A friend complained to me one day that survivors of violence think no one ever ‘gets it.’ First, they want you to know what happened and how they feel. You listen carefully, painfully. Then, when you say you can imagine it and you are so sorry, they say, “No, you can’t imagine it, and I don’t need your pity!”

From the survivor’s perspective, the situation is equally vexing: “My friends get angry when I tell them that somehow, deep inside, I just can’t *believe* they can feel what I feel. The words I use seem flat or shallow or just plain wrong to *me*, so how could *they* really know what I mean?”

What is this terrible bind that good people find themselves in? Why do survivors of violence – from rape to war – often feel compelled to try to say what they think no one can





understand? Why are listeners frustrated in their efforts to hear?

The answers to these difficult questions lie in the nature of violence itself.

Violence is hard to talk about, for many reasons. One of the difficult facts of being human is that our verbal tools for describing deep emotion and bodily realities are oddly crude and insufficient.

Think of how you say “I love you,” and what you feel. You say, “I really, *really* love you. I love you so much...” Even as we say these words, we know they miss the mark, that we feel so much *more*. So we sing about love, send flowers, do small things to *show* our love.

If we aren’t very articulate about the most wonderful things that happen to us, is it surprising that we aren’t very clear about the worst? And for violence, there are no nice little things to send or give to *show* your complicated feelings, to tell someone you are ashamed, or sorry for your distance, or that today you are so very afraid of even how the wind blows. Sometimes survivors do try to show how it is, but the ways they choose tend to seem violent too – cutting themselves, disappearing for days, banging the wall or throwing plates.

Why do we have such trouble telling about our emotions and the deep feelings of our bodies? I don’t know the answer for

love, but I have an idea about the reasons in the case of violence. I would not be surprised if deep down where human thought begins the reasons are the same for both.

A Prey Species

The first reason has to do with origins. We are a prey species. Our ancestors were subject to attack as much as they attacked. We have survived because our bodies are highly sensitive alarm systems. But this alarm system is more ancient than our faculty of speech and reason. Below our awareness, the eyes and ears and primitive parts of the brain are always scanning for danger, just as a deer or a cat does. Even in sleep, the senses keep watch. Parts of the brain that are very similar to those found in dogs and chimps and rabbits record what has been harmful in the past and store clues from those events – the color of a shirt, the light in the early evening, a door slamming – in snippets of sound and feeling. The body uses these clues to possible danger to test every circumstance at every moment.

These clues are not stored in the part of the brain that works with words. Words are too slow. Thinking with words is an arduous process, too slow to get you away from a charging animal or a knife. The brain stores danger clues in primitive centers that activate not thought but action, in the form of hormone washes that prepare one for fight, flight, or freezing. Think of when you hear a noise in your house at night. First the noise, but almost before you consciously register it, the body is alert. Adrenaline tingles, your heart beats fast, you sit up in bed quickly. Only then do your verbal processes kick in: “What was that?” How do you describe what you heard before you started thinking? If all is quiet, you may even wonder if you heard a noise at all.

So it is with violence – if in fact you awakened to a man standing above your bed, your body would continue its process of acting to get you out of the circumstance one way or another. You might find yourself clawing and screaming, going for the man’s eyes, as an animal does when cornered. You might find yourself going still as a rabbit, playing dead, as you should if attacked by a

*We have
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because
our bodies
are highly
sensitive
alarm
systems.*



bear. You might find that your word-thinking mind is on the ceiling watching your body save itself – not thinking at all. You might find that your body has skills you didn't even know it had – Nancy Raine reports being able to “see” her rapist in another room when she was lying blindfolded on her bed.

Our primal core saves us. Nancy Raine lived to write a book about her rape. (*After Silence* is reviewed in this issue.) But even a writer like Raine admits the inadequacy of words – words don't capture body memories, just as saying “I love you” misses the mark.

So the first reason violence is difficult to talk about is that the experience of violence is stored in the body as clues to “dangerous things to be avoided,” not as words. The recall of violence then is in the body, in actions and feelings, and only when some reminder of the event puts the body on alert.

The survivor experiences a “flashback” when the body reacts as though the event were happening again. He experiences partial flashbacks all the time, though the unaccountable anxiety or mood changes are often passed off as general stress. It takes a lot of focusing to see just what caused you suddenly to get very angry, or to panic at the sight of a pair of pants. And still there may be no adequate words: “Those pants on that man looked like *his*” just doesn't capture it. The feeling indeed is split, separated from the words by a chasm of mind that is ancient and real.

*“flashback”
– when the
body reacts
as though
the event
were
happening
again*

Unwitting Mystics

Shaman
Oonark/Ikseeegah

The second reason violence cannot be easily spoken about is more complicated. It has to do with the part of you that takes your delicate thinking mind to the ceiling, removes it from the fray of pain and fear. It has to do with the part of you that sees around corners when you are blindfolded. This is neither



the thinking mind nor the body, but something else.

Some years ago, there was a great deal of skepticism about a phenomenon that people were reporting anyway: the Near Death Experience. People who had been clinically “dead” and then resuscitated reported seeing a bright light, even Jesus or the Buddha, while “dead.” They reported being taken through gauzy curtains of light to revisit their whole lives. Some scientists explain these visions as hallucinatory activities of the mind brought about by the changes in blood gases characteristic of dying, but the people who report them generally find these explanations irrelevant. They sense that something profound happened.

Sometimes survivors of terrible, life and death violence report similar things, with one difference. Their experience is not about being shown their lives or having questions answered, but about being saved, being held or protected, or, contrarily, almost being overwhelmed and submerged in something total. They report light, perhaps a healing or saving presence, perhaps God or angels, or a wide, dark or warm or bright expanse in which they float unharmed. Or, they report a sense of being disembodied, lost in a black or red void that is beyond pain, though terrible in its own right. These images are seldom spoken about, hard to say. They are too powerful for daily life. Good or bad, they are too much.

For many, not only are these experiences strange and difficult to put into words, they are also difficult to recall because again, everyday words are inadequate. How do you describe a bright light that was so much more than a bright light? Or a sense of deep blackness that was no color at all? In fact, the mind-bending experiences of extreme violence may never come fully to consciousness because they are not worded memories. Instead, strange things bother survivors who have had such experiences. As if that place they had felt and known when in the midst of their horror somehow rested just beyond their everyday consciousness and bumped up against it now and then. Perhaps that blanking out that survivors do, called dissociation by psychologists, is actually a short flight into the altered state of

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consciousness of survival. Then the question becomes, consciousness of what? Do I want to know? No! It feels too close to the horror. As if there were vicious dogs standing at the gates of a vast, unknown kingdom.

Yogis, shamans, saints, and other mystics have experiences that are similar to those of survivors, generally by depriving the senses of stimulus by sitting still or overwhelming them with drumming and dance. Such mystics then report passage to a state of knowing that is beyond seeing, hearing, touching, smelling, and tasting. They describe this knowing as being powerful and convincing, but beyond words and even thought. They use the language some survivors use – light, warmth, a sense of body and mind falling away. Then they speak of peace or a deep knowledge of good and evil.

So perhaps in some ways survivors are unwitting mystics. Without planning to, they accomplish the two feats of the mystic in one terrible experience: their bodies concentrate their energies completely on the task of surviving, and their senses are overwhelmed by pain, sound, and suffering to the point of simply ceasing to take in more information. The mystic would say that this shutting down of the normal routes to consciousness – the messages from the eyes, ears, nose, and skin – allows more subtle forms of awareness to operate, and the self “sees” parts of the universe that it does not normally encounter. If this is so, then like the mystic or the saint, the survivor would likely be drawn back to these experiences, even when they are terrible, because they are powerful and compelling.

So perhaps violence gives some survivors a sense of a wider world – one that haunts them as well as beckons. Maybe a compelling residue of violence is the conviction that life is bigger than it seems. But what happens when you try to go back, try to connect to that odd, magnetic, good/terrible power? It’s awful. Start down the road and there is the violent act (or acts) again. Close your eyes and you feel his hands, hear the gunshot. Who wants to do that? Who can? The awful power of violence often hides the equal reality of survival. So the survivor is stuck. She can’t go back, and yet she is pulled back. She spends years in limbo,

survivors

are

unwitting

mystics



***But the
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it is just
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else that is
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numb or lost. Or he feels as if he isn't all here, as if some part of him is dead and broken off somewhere. In some traditions this is called "soul loss." But the soul isn't lost, I would argue; it is just sojourning somewhere else that is safer, or at least more vast. One can call it back, as many traditions allow, or let everyday life go on without it. But sometimes something else seems called for, too. The mystics might suggest that heeding the soul's call – and finding the place it resides – is to know. Then one can move between worlds, or layers of the world.

Mystics have found ways to do this. A well-founded, traditional, solid meditative or prayerful discipline can take one back along the same route one traveled before, but this time without the unwelcome company of fear and loathing and disgust. That discipline might give sufficient wisdom, support, and guidance to avoid or at least manage those traumatic memories, and re-enter that place in which one's *survival*, rather than one's destruction, actually occurred. By and large, this is a process that cannot, need not, be talked about. It is about body and discipline, not theory and words.

So let's take stock. If there are non-verbal aspects of our memories of violence, we can at minimum recognize them for what they are. We can catch when we have been hijacked by a color or a sound and accept that *that* itself is memory. And conceptualizing our apparently irrational fixation on the event as a sort of call, a certain kind of experience well known to human spiritual traditions, can give us hope. We have things to try, directions to pursue to make use of our terrible knowledge. There are prayer, meditation, exercise, worship, even art and dance, that move beyond the verbal to those faculties of the mind that reach beyond the known senses to the inexplicable, powerful presence of the universe itself.

Roberta Culbertson

Roberta Culbertson directs the Institute on Violence and Culture at the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities. She has a Ph.D. in Anthropology from the University of Virginia and has worked with refugees and other survivors of violence for many years.





After Violence

series

© 2000 Photograph by William Albert Allard

William Albert Allard

Photography

Roberta Culbertson

Poetry

Angela Daniel

Silver Star

Design

The After Violence Series

- Meditations on Sadness
(Meditation for Survivors)
- An Odd Set of Problems
(About PTSD)
- Winter *(About Depression)*
- Telling *(About Anger)*
- Loneliness



After Violence is a series of five small books that address the aftermath of violence: sadness and grief; anger; loneliness, and the odd set of symptoms called Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

Each book in the series can be used by individuals privately, or in support or discussion groups.

The books are available as a set or separately.

Available now in English, the books will be available in Spanish in Fall 2000.



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Please contact the VFH for information on how to obtain copies for yourself or group.

Song

And I thought over again
My small adventures
As with a shore-wind I drifted out
In my kayak
and thought I was in danger

My fears,
Those small ones
That I thought so big
For all the vital things
I had to get and to reach.

And yet, there is only
One great thing,
The only thing:
To live to see in huts and on journeys
The great day that dawns
And the light that fills the world



Traditional Arctic Song
Author Unknown

Inuk Hunter's Dream
Alexis Pameok

vfh

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