

Conclusion

The quest for health and wholeness in the midst of violence, oppression, and evil is a lifelong cooperative process between God and those of us in the world that occurs in teaching-healing communities for the social transformation of the world. The movement of life is constituted by the past, God, and the agency of the world. God offers an ideal vision of justice, survival, and quality of life that is particular and relevant for each of us. Health, wholeness, and justice occur as we embrace these aims of God. The past is a critical resource for this activity. Through rememory and spirit possession, the past is an active participant in calling the present world toward creative transformation. Postmodern womanist theology is a metaphysical and metaphorical proposal that describes salvation as "making a way out of no way." Salvation fits into a unified view of the entire world, and yet it is also gritty, localized, and contextual. It is grounded in the concrete experiences of the world. It must always look, feel, and taste like something.

Postmodern womanist theology is an activity. It is a verb, a gerund. Health and wholeness come through *teaching, healing, remembering, honoring, possessing, adopting, conforming,* and *creatively transforming. Saving. It is making a way.* We are being saved over and over again, feeling God's continual calling toward survival, justice, and quality of life, using each opportunity to become in higher and more intense forms than we did in the last occasion.

We are not saved apart from the communities in which we participate. And yet we do not exist for the salvation of our own particular communities. We accept and reciprocate God's love so that we might love ourselves and our neighbors. We teach others to read, write, and love so that they can go on to teach others as well. We teach and heal so that our communities might be examples for the wider world. We want our actions to creatively transform the world outside of our own local contexts.

Postmodern womanist theology recognizes the leaders of these communities as Saviors. Although Saviors may have different characteristics from the average person, they are not Saviors because of their particular constitutions. There are many people born to drug-addicted mothers who do not lead communities. Some are undermined and made weaker through their experiences in society. Many of us are born into families with particular occupations

and traditions that can improve the world, and yet we do not embrace or imitate them. Many people have mental and physical health challenges and do not use these experiences to testify to God's healing and to encourage others. Saviors use their perceived vulnerabilities and differences to create, strengthen, and creatively transform community.

A Savior is known by what she does. A Savior creatively transforms and draws upon the guidance of the ancestors. She leads a community that makes a way out of no way. Since every such community has a leader, there are multiple Saviors. One community can have different leaders, different Saviors, in different times; and there are often multiple communities with their own Saviors coexisting at the same time as well.

Saviors are often those whom wider society least suspects. Womanist theories of salvation state that Jesus Christ can be seen as a black woman. Postmodern womanist theology argues that a black woman is often Christ. The Savior may be a teenager, a person living with a disability, a lesbian woman. We have yet to see how "the least of these" can lead the way.

Wrestling with evil, loss, and violence is not simple. The quest for health and wholeness can seem difficult on a daily basis. This quest is not a belief. Nor is this path of salvation found in following a particular person. Salvation is participation in a community that "makes a way out of no way." Postmodern womanist theology takes salvation away from the exclusive domain of Jesus, Christianity, and institutions. There is no one-time salvation once and for all. Salvation is the cooperative working together of the divine and creation. A church may be a salvific community, but salvation does not need to occur through an institutional faith community. This community can be found in a dancing circle, a coffee house, a book group, or a nonprofit agency. But salvation is more than ethical social justice activity. Postmodern womanist theological communities acknowledge the ancestors and a higher power. They understand their activity as being co-created by the community and God.

This quest for health and wholeness focuses on social justice in local communities. Salvation is often found in grassroots activism. Postmodern womanist theology generates ethical activity and a normative theology. "Making a way out of no way" produces both concentrated acts of teaching and healing and political stances. "Making a way out of now way" generates a theology that does not conflict with the insights of science, a theology that affirms the symbiotic relationship between God and the world.

Thrust into a world of poverty and crime, an orphaned teenage girl decides to walk north to find a job and clean water. As she walks, she invites other homeless people to join her. She teaches her friends how to read and write, and they teach her how to survive in a dangerous world. She forms her observations about the world into a philosophy that can deal with the pervasive

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change around them. Over time, these travelers form a faith community that
 is committed to helping one another and building a better future.

A minister is condemned by her church for affirming the love of two faith-
 ful members. She uses this rejection to connect with others who have been
 disparaged by religious communities. A ministry begins where she teaches
 individuals to love God, themselves, and all of their neighbors. Together, this
 community shares this love around their city and helps to prevent the spread
 of disease in their midst.

These theological communities affirm salvation as a process of "making a
 way out of no way." In these snapshots, salvation is described as walking the
 way and loving the way. These communities acknowledge the presence of
 God and God's novelty in all of the happenings of the world and in every ele-
 ment of creation. It is a way of living in a dynamic and symbiotic world that
 has the power to create and destroy. It is "making a way out of no way."

The beating of a djembe drum still makes me want to rotate my hips and
 lift my knees high in a dance movement. The drum and dance still reverber-
 ate with Maria's words: "I don't know how this works, but it makes me feel
 whole."

Maria's statement inspires me. I remember each woman in the circle and
 our eclectic way of dressing in white knock-off Keds tennis shoes, 1980s-style
 white jeans, plain T-shirts, and home-sewn skirts with wide sashes. We ignored
 the techniques learned in dance class and surrendered ourselves to a combina-
 tion of natural rhythm and the movement of spirit.

I don't think I gave any response to Maria that day, but I do know what I
 would say now. I would tell her that change is probably the one constant in
 life. That we all change from moment to moment, from day to day. In each
 moment, we have the opportunity to see the world anew and do something
 new. And yet some changes feel bigger than others. When we change, we lose
 something. We're not the same people we once were. Sometimes we lose
 security and stability as we reach out for a promising unknown. Other times,
 change brings a greater sense of safety and family. Sometimes we shake free
 from a past that is holding us back. And isn't that wonderful? Some change is
 the goal we have worked hard for. It's exactly what we hoped would happen.
 And some change just catches us by surprise. Some parts of change we wel-
 come, some we dread . . . but most . . . we just manage. Most of the time, the
 same thing that brings a new opportunity also brings with it new challenges.

So it makes sense to honor and respect how much we change. Oya is a spirit
 who embodies change. She holds our hands as we experience life's changes.
 Sometimes she disrupts our situations in order to bring change. Sometimes
 she is part of the gentle whisper moving us forward. The drums and dance

help us to hear and feel and experience Oya. As we dance, we welcome her, we invite her into our process. We do this because she seems to have more knowledge than we do; she seems to be broader and deeper than we are; we believe that she can help us. We dance because, amid our religious differences, we believe there's something holy and divine about all of this.

If I could talk to Maria today, I would tell her that there is no way to avoid the changes that life brings, but that there are many ways to live creatively into them. The new college graduate could be resentful of her family's poverty. She doesn't have to send a portion of her new salary home. She could choose to distance herself from them. Even Maria could have decided she would not date, let alone marry, someone who already had children. But they made different choices. One of our friends, the new single mother, could draw strength and inspiration from her own mother who had successfully raised her alone. She could also remember how unhealthy her marriage was when she thinks about going back. Our other friend, the mommy-to-be, could happily anticipate her new family by recreating some of her fond memories of growing up, while working to create a society without some of the prejudices she hopes her children will not have to experience.

I would tell Maria it is no accident that we dance in a space that also educates and cares for young children. It is no accident that we dance with women who are teachers and activists, mothers and journalists. We are part of a community of people who want to make a positive impact in this city. And it takes time to make all this happen.

In the meanwhile, we do justice to ourselves. We acknowledge who and where we are; we mourn our losses; we celebrate our victories. This is how we honor our heritage. This is how we maintain health and wholeness in a world that sometimes cares little about our bodies and souls. While we are here in this space, we will honor our lives in the raising of our limbs—by dancing in a circle; yes, by dancing a way out of no way.

That other evening many years ago still echoes with Lisa's questions: "What did I do to deserve this? Why is God letting this happen to me? What am I supposed to do now?"

Lisa's questions still loom large in front of me. I still remember the texture of her hair, the dark brown splotches of her scalp. I recall her shivering as if she is sitting in front of me now. The silent pats and questioning looks of the other women, victims of domestic violence, form a cloud of witnesses that I can never forget.

I can't remember what I said to Lisa then, but I do know what I would say now. I would tell her that what happened to her is terrible and evil. I would tell her that she has not overreacted, but that the violence was real and her

suffering was real, and violence, but in this re the strong, beautiful, fi group.

I would tell her th wants peace and truth did not heed God's cal and this hurts her child himself—although he 1 feels this pain. God no with her. For every tea pain and the pain of w thoroughly undone.

But God wants som ing her to another kind loved ones, and her chil a world that does not k that I know that it's harc she barely feels the beat barely hears the yelling that I understand that s that there are times wh and go to work. But the familiarity of this relatio that she has my support the other women in the will mobilize the comm her employers, talk with calling us to do. Until w

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Ill her that there is no way to avoid the many ways to live creatively into the presence of her family's poverty. She has a salary home. She could choose to have decided she would not have had children. But they made difficult choices. A single mother, could draw strength from having successfully raised her alone. Her marriage was when she thinks her father-in-law, could happily anticipate her fond memories of growing up, and some of the prejudices she hopes

that we dance in a space that also has no accident that we dance with others and journalists. We are part of making a positive impact in this city. And

ourselves. We acknowledge who and celebrate our victories. This is how we live in health and wholeness in a world of bodies and souls. While we are here in the raising of our limbs—by dancing in prayer.

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know, but I do know what I would say to her is terrible and evil. I would say that the violence was real and her

suffering was real, and it is evil. She has lost a lot—not just in this instance of violence, but in this relationship. This relationship is not allowing her to be the strong, beautiful, free-thinking person that I've come to know of her in the group.

I would tell her that this is not what God wants for her life. That God wants peace and truth and justice for her. But someone, namely, her partner, did not heed God's call of peace and justice and beauty. Instead, he hurt her, and this hurts her children and those of us who care about her. He even hurt himself—although he may not recognize it that way. He also hurt God. God feels this pain. God not only *knows* about Lisa's pain, but God *feels* her pain with her. For every tear she cries, God is crying even more. God can feel her pain and the pain of what another one of God's creations did to her. God is thoroughly undone.

But God wants something different for her, something new. God is calling her to another kind of relationship, another way of relating to herself, her loved ones, and her children. God is calling her to do a small part in creating a world that does not know this kind of violence and abuse. I would tell her that I know that it's hard to follow that call. I know that there are times when she barely feels the beatings because she's become so numb; times when she barely hears the yelling because she's tried to block it out. I would tell her that I understand that she is hurting and that her children are hurting, and that there are times when she just has to push it all down so she can get up and go to work. But there is a safe place here where she can break from the familiarity of this relationship, of the way she has been living. I would tell her that she has my support, the support of the organization, the volunteers, and the other women in the group. We will help her in whatever ways we can. We will mobilize the community, go to court, find her a place to stay, talk with her employers, talk with the social workers. Doing that is part of what God is calling us to do. Until we have a world without stories like hers.

In the meanwhile, may Lisa remember the bad things she has experienced and endeavor not to repeat them. Perhaps one day she will have the strength to tell her story from the other side and encourage other women who are in her situation. But today, while we're here in this space—she can cry in this community of the called. And we will answer our calling in small instances of grace—by braiding her hair and fitting her for a wig; yes, by braiding a way out of no way.