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Life-a-lujah! Death-a-lujah!

Thank you Walt.



**AT A CRITICAL MASS BICYCLE RIDE,
WITH SISTER LAURA AND BROTHER QUILTY**

I wonder if our brother of Brooklyn, Walt Whitman, would agree that a person dies with the same message for the world as a person cries out at birth. The unconditional commitment to Life by a baby who comes into that light outside mother might be the same commitment that a peace-worker has at the time of going back into Death. I would like to recall a story now, from my Life, where I stood for awhile after birth and before Death, and tried to listen.

At the time of the 2004 Republican National Convention in New York City I went through a time of Death. Friends, and friends of friends, were passing away. People in their twenties and thirties, or their nineties. Lots of other

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friends were in prison, jailed by Republican-led police who couldn't read, or wouldn't read the Constitution. So we were embarking on a time of slow-motion lawsuits and hushed memorials.

Every day that week of the RNC, I tried to take a long bike ride through the park near my home before going into Manhattan for the puppetry and chanting and die-ins and reenactments of the signing of the Declaration of Independence and performances of long unemployment lines: Peace work. On one of those days, I was peddling through the park and saw that the gate to the Quaker cemetery was left open. Someone was working on the grounds. I had never seen the gate to the war resisters' remains open like this.

I walked in. I found the caretaker down in one of the centuries-old families of bodies, below the gate in a dark swale. The trees here are primeval. It is said that this is the original forest, never logged, one of the few in New York City. The white oaks with their great operatic branches go up and up. I got the generous hand-wave: Yes, I could walk around, and I wheeled my bike up toward higher forests and meadows filled with sunlight.

At the fork in the road, where it divided to go in a circle around the forest and around the graves, I stopped again. Tiered back into the hill were many dead, whose presence was now becoming the fact of my visit, that unmistakable

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ruling stillness. Then I noticed a sign, about as tall as me—really a thick totem-pole kind of thing—painted white. Vertical black letters made words down the sides of the pole, and I saw that on the faceted surface of this pole, as I walked around it, were messages in English, French, German, Chinese, Spanish, Hebrew, Indian, and Russian.

“Let Peace prevail on this Earth.” That is what it said, with the “Let” on the high end and the “Earth” down near the grass. Then I looked up the hill at the graves, the separate small cemeteries from different “Friends’ meetings” in the city, and from different times in history. Hundreds of them up there, old bodies and child’s bodies. I became aware of my status in my upright body, steadying my bike with one living hand, this extraordinary living body on loan from some mysterious source.

These people under the grass of this beautiful hill had worked for Peace. They are Friends. They are Quakers. This pole with the eight hopeful prayers came from the authority of all that work. I could feel the hope for Peace down in the minutes of their lives, in each heartbeat, now steadied in the late summer heartbeat of this lovely park. The eight Peace prayers kept repeating as I walked by the names and the years and days.

Then a new feeling swept through me from all this, an unmistakable feeling that this would—I sensed this right

away—this would always be here for me to remember. All the Deaths around my community and family in recent weeks had somehow conspired to give the feeling of something terribly wrong in the world. From the Sudan and Chechnya to my neighbors and friends—it all felt that way. And the hopelessness was not exactly the worst of it. There was something darker than your usual hopelessness. There was the feeling that Life actively did not make sense. It was not so much the absence of hope but the presence of good peoples' Deaths in a pattern of directed confusion. We were being beaten by Life, surrounded by a reawakened Death, a Death that didn't fit at the end of the Life. These last weeks I'd felt the presence of the demons I never believed in.

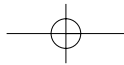
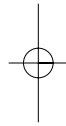
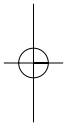
But the feeling I had that day—there at the strange language pole on the road through the graves—came from this phrase that these people had agreed to repeat as one-by-one they passed into the hill. Let There Be Peace On This Earth. The dead Friends were saying this to me in unison. The leafy shadows and pops of sunlight moved back and forth across the grave stones. I could hear them talking, looking up from all their work. Let There Be Peace On This Earth.

It was one of those thoughts that was waiting a long time. It came through me like a physical aftermath. The peace message is spoken by the dead here and also by the living who painted the pole and know that they will go into the

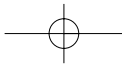
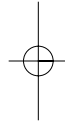
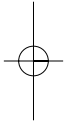
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earth here soon. They both speak “Let Peace come” at once. It’s an intralife chorus. The faith is: When you Live your Life making more Life, Death fits in it, because you didn’t cheat Life by making bullets and bombs. Life making Life. The Peaceful Dead have their fully wrought lives continuing in the world, as they rest. They have sent Life out beyond themselves. The living are reading this script, the words looping in and out of the ground.

We can leave this simple wish up in the sun for the living to understand while they pass by. Up here with my bike, I feel the belief in Peace coming up into me. I hear the Friends saying these words. I will say these words, too.



**START YOUR OWN CHURCH—
THE REV SITS AND THINKS**





**OVERCOME BY THE SPIRIT,
BUOYED UP BY THE FAITHFUL**

I HAVE LETTERS on my old wooden desk from people with the brave and Oddly Holy hope of starting Stop Shopping churches in their own communities. In a special little stack are three such letters, from Ingemar S in Atlanta, Vic P in Seattle, and Maryam in Los Angeles.

Ingemar says his town “cannot stop shopping . . . Atlanta needs a spiritual revival.” Maryam says, “I’d like to open a branch of the church in Los Angeles, or see if there is one already here . . . tell me how, please!” Vic P asks, “Have you started your own Bible College?”

I have had conversations like this with people in New York, Ohio, Minnesota, Arkansas, California, Melbourne, Hong Kong, Finland, Sao Paulo . . . Consumerism is everywhere. Alas, there’s a Big Box hovering over every healthy neighborhood, and we all want to do something about it. And why wouldn’t I want to expand our project? I’m an American, after all: YES! I LOVE THIS! EXPAND! EXPAND! EXPAND! A democratic and international uprising with a sense of humor! Radical gospel singers and doppelbillys marching into supermalls around the globe. It’s a

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funny coup de grace for the big banks' cruel joke of an economy, and it would be wonderfully confusing to the right-wing televangelists who keep the consumers praying. Nonsense, of course. We aren't franchisable, I hope. I mean, we need to study the theater of Sojourner Truth, Crazy Horse, the Greenpeace canoe headed for the side of the factory ship, the Yes Men and the Red Revues of Brecht's early days—and maybe we should study the Church of Stop Shopping, too. We have our innovations. Just as long as the gentle reader knows that we regard no activism as the “best” or others as “incorrect.” We need to fight in many ways, from computer hacking to unpermitted parading to pie-throwing to gourmet shoplifting for the poor (thinking of the Robin Hoods in Hamburg) to the large-scale beyond-the-Rockettes synchronized antiglobalization performances by the workers in Korea to the songs of Victor Jarra We believe that we all help each other, even if we don't seem to be on the same stage.

Laurie Anderson said once that “[m]ost artists have about three secrets.” Well, ours would be: Spiritual power comes every which way—and certainly not just from organized religion—a right-wing Evil character like my reverse mentor Jimmy Swaggart can be appropriated and redeployed as a spirit catcher that is also comic—Hey, Rush Limbaugh steals lefty stuff at the drop of a hat . . . why not turn the tables on

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him? And that joyous gospel and salsa music is portable. It can make you see the light in nonplaces that are officially dehumanized, freedom-deleted, paved-over, and killed. Like half of our country. And the spirited life can be not only post religious, it can also be funny, sexy, and have a conscience in a way that is creatively conscientious right now, not from a moral rectitude of centuries ago, but responding to bullets, wrecking balls, dollars, and nonsense coming into our communities at this moment. Well, Amen!

Say that Ingemar and Maryam and Vic start “churches” in their three cities. These three efforts could be entirely different from one another and at the same time all be very powerful. And why is that? Well, these are three different cultures. A shout in one town might be a whisper in the next. Voices carry and visions appear in different ways in different places. And, of course, what kind of public expressors will the three of you array around you? Ingemar might gather dancers whose specialty disorients planning commissions, and Maryam may be ready to invent some yogic meditation against which mall security has no resistance and Vic (of the Bible College) might start a writers’ reading series that supports independent bookstores.

How different we may be from one another is clear, but how do we also learn from one another? Many activists are

heard of only on the grapevines of the housing projects and gatherings around garden plots in vacant lots, or the spotty local press of the supermallized suburbs, or underground Indy media. We do need more local revolutions to show us their tricks. For instance, more than 200 communities have successfully thrown back Wal-Mart invasions, but apart from Inglewood, California's heroic neighborhood/church/labor struggle, which was filmed in Rob Greenwald's movie, *Wal-Mart: The High Cost of Low Prices*, we really don't know much about these remarkable citizen uprisings. I've heard enough of the folk stories coming out of these pitched battles to know that many people stepped out of their usual boundaries and into sidewalk passion plays, trickster phone campaigns, smart mobs, or runs for office that seemed vaudevillian and sometimes succeeded.

As we hear these Struggle Stories, floating back through the resistance culture, it sounds to us like some of the campaigns had what we would call Fabulous Worship in them: power prayers and neohootenannies and weird contact improv out in front of City Hall, i.e. going to the CEO's frontyard, contacting shareholders directly, ambushing Planning Commission meetings. Others sound like they went straight at the Lake of Hellfire at the POP (Point of Purchase). Don't misunderstand me, those 200 triumphs had days and nights of boring meetings that you could hardly call

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song and dance—just long toughing-it-out, sitting at tables with lawyers.

But we know that you Maryam, Ingemar, and Vic—and you the reader sitting there in your pew—you have some world-changing tricks up your pant-leg. We know that you are geniuses who offer a spectrum of performances and prayers that the Devil Fortress Mall simply cannot stop. How many times have I been confronted by a suspicious person in a uniform, eyes squinting, “What are you doing?” to which I reply, “Me? I’m shopping,” while I look across the fluorescent Big Box and see dozens of elite antishopping commandos. To store security they are indistinguishable from browsing customers. But listen carefully. They are whispering about how they miss the neighborhood that this Big Box destroyed. They are asking nearby shoppers “Do you know where these things were made?” “Let me tell you what was here on this spot ten years ago!” or “This item is for sale down the street and it’s the same price and its Fair Trade. Want me to take you there?”

WE ARE SHOPPING—FOR LOST SHOPPERS!

**THE ULTIMATE RETAIL INTERVENTION:
COMMUNITY**

Communities cannot be planned, as Celebration, Florida—the Disney Company’s failed prefab town—proved. But the

good news is that there is a long history of remarkable communities that have risen from political action work. A resistance community has so many superheated gatherings to look to as guides, from the Boston Tea Party crazies to Chief Joseph's Nez Perce to ACT UP to the worldwide community that opposes trade agreements like NAFTA. The social groups created in resistance often become the model for—or are an influential presence on—larger, stable communities that evolve later. The coffee cooperatives in Chiapas, who have some of the spirit of the Zapatistas, resist Starbucks the way that Subcommandante Marcos resists the Mexican ruling class. Another example is the kinds of culture-making that can radiate from the experience of Critical Mass bicycle rides. Here in New York the Critical Mass improvisatory ride/parades are monthly, and out of that bonding (and police-hounding) have come rich networks of intimate cooperation . . . gardens, living communities, art-making, and skill-sharing—i. e., a new economy. Thus, a single brave ritual is the seed of a society that would create a transportation alternative—and a whole lot more.

In the Stop Shopping Gospel Choir, we live together when we are touring, sharing motel rooms and buses and vans. Most of the year we are with one another several times in the course of the week, like the (post-religious) church group that we are. We share the email, the song design meet-

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ings, and miles of subway benches. There's the roller-derby-ing, gardening, partying. Life passages with one of us will impact all of us: a birth, illness, birthday, adventurous vacation, loss of a loved one. This "real Life" comes up into the Fabulous Worships in all sorts of ways that we cannot anticipate.

The evolution of our community has been guided by the like-minded friends who invite us to resistance hotspots around the world. We might be picked up at the airport or met at the train station to be led to a supermall construction site. Three or four people will be excitedly downloading the whole resistance story, all talking at once, the narrative tumbling out as we drive and walk toward the site—the five- or seven-year struggle to defend the community is always a hair-raising adventure. Meanwhile, we find that over the course of that struggle our hosts have come to know each other well. A resistance community has taken root. There is nothing like a fierce band of brothers and sisters who have been standing down a Wal-Mart.

We have noticed something surprising—and like I say, unplanned—in our coming together as a performance community. The animating principle of the Church of Stop Shopping—as stated from the beginning when I was alone preaching on the sidewalks of Times Square—was "community defense." Now, ten years later, as so many neighbor-