

CHAPTER SIX:LUISAH TEISHNeo-Yoruba Priestess..Community Activist, Artist

Being a person of conscience living in the USA we have the problem of being unwilling participants in the oppression of other people while we ourselves are here being oppressed. So it is like being the callous on the toe of the monster that's crushing others. And what can you do as that callous except that when that foot is put down try to use yourself as a cushion between the foot and the person who is being crushed and also to become a nagging callous to the foot of the monster?!. So that it is a real precarious position...

I met Luisah Teish, an active, progressive black woman in the Bay-Area community, when, through a series of circumstances, I happened to be present at her initiation ceremony. At the time of our first interview, in 1989, she was referred to me as a recognized local figure in the new emerging planetary transformation, social activism and in women's spirituality in particular. Teish has--in her words-- "an activist mentality," and her long history of socio-political and community involvement substantiates that claim. She is also an actress, a dancer, a story teller, and a writer.

I talked with Teish several uninterrupted hours, in her Oakland-home's kitchen. She has a powerful presence, and comes out as very wise, outspoken, witty, sharp woman, very involved and caring about people and social affairs and circumstances. She talks in strings of words, stressing each and every sound in her warm and deep voice, sometimes half-closing her eyes, almost like reciting a poem, truly telling a story. I therefore chose to present her story in the first person. The following story is mostly based both on my interview with her and on her first book, *Jambalaya The Natural Woman's Book*.

When the incident happened at Chernobyl, I had a real sense of frustration. I had children living in this house. Babies that I loved. I became very paranoid about where the milk in the store was coming from, O.K.? I had my garden out there, strawberries growing out there. The kids would come in from school in the evening and would head straight for my strawberries, right? And I got paranoid about whether or not the strawberries were poisoned, you know. And a sister started calling me and saying "Teish, what are we gonna do, they say that whether or not this country gets polluted depends upon whether the wind blows," O.K.?. Now, it was really tough because as a priestess they are saying to me, "You have to influence the wind goddess". She is the hardest one to influence, that element, because she go where she want to go and she do what she want to do. And at the same time I started thinking, O.K. if I am one of those people who knows how to talk to the wind, if I can humble myself enough to get tuned in and win her graces, where then do I ask her to blow it? Where?! Do I tell her to blow it back over the people in Chernobyl? There are women and children in Chernobyl and I have no interest in burning them. Some woman out there has little kids and eats strawberries out of the garden, just like mine. Where do I tell her to send it, even if I've got that power? You know, it hurt, it really hurt. And I said, O.K. Teish, maybe what you need to say is send it through a black hole in space. And the next minute after I thought that, I said, "And pray that there is a place over there whose transformative power is so strong that it is gonna take the stuff and turn it into beautiful green trees". You know, but the magnitude of it, the magnitude can overwhelm you even if you know yourself to be a powerful person.. That messed with my head, it messed with my head for months, you know, it really messed with my head for months. I don't know. That was the example of a lifetime, you know...[crying]

Something else that Chernobyl brought in, just to show you how much that worked with my mind, when people started talking, "Well, what do the people do who have been exposed?" one of the things that came up was sea kelp. Sea kelp will help you to resist that stuff...Here's Teish who has had it in her mind that what I can leave to the descendents of my community is good books, beautiful plays, music, poetry, wonderful thoughts, important stories, O.K? This is what I had envisioned leaving for them, this is my gift as an ancestor of the future, O.K.? That incident made me think, "Teish, what you need to leave to your descendents is sea kelp." Now, we are talking about sea kelp that was collected before Chernobyl, so what's the shelf life of sea kelp? How do you store it, make sure that there are instructions for how to use it, and make sure now that there is a consciousness that your grandchildren and your great grandchildren are going to use it? I mean, it can throw you into total absurdity! I mean, it really messed with my head... Like sea kelp and crystals is what I shall be leaving them? It is just amazing, it is just amazing that you are really thinking about these things. It can rattle your cage, really rattle your cage. It blew my mind. That incident blew my mind. You know, and some people thought that I was a little strange in the grocery store when I would ask, "Where is this milk from?" I wanted to know because somebody had told me that milk that was coming from the Pacific Northwest might be polluted, and so at that time the only thing I would buy was Berkeley Farms. You know what I'm saying? It is a trip. How can you protect yourself?

I am a priestess of the Lukumi branch of the Yoruba religion. The Yoruba religion comes out of Nigeria, West Africa. And it came over with the slaves. It has been mixed in some places with Catholicism and with native American worship in Brazil, the Caribbean islands and in the southern USA. I grew up in New Orleans with whispers of Haitian voodoo. I do not use catholic images anymore on my own altars but it is basically a tradition of ancestor reverence and nature worship and we have a large pantheon of

deities who are personifications of the forces of nature. We do song, dance, invocation, placation, and the reenactment of the myth as our forms of worship and basically believe that everything in the universe has a form of life and that we can interact. It is built on a strong sense of community and kinship across spiritual lines. When I got the first reading by this priest he said that I was gonna become initiated. I doubted it because at that time my primary interest was being a performer. It took me eight years after I was told that I would be initiated until I actually did it. And, understand, we are not a seminary tradition in the sense that you go to the school and you read "X" number of books and do "X" number of papers. We are more a mystic and shamanic tradition in that things have to happen to you. You have to make internal changes that manifest themselves in certain ways externally before you are really initiated. It is a tradition of transformation. And so it took me eight years of rebalancing my center to understand that this is my primary work and in fact now that I am in that position I understand better than I did--in just an academic way in college--that theater is born out of spirituality. Present-day writing is born out of the oral tradition so that I was being groomed to be a better priestess, so that now spiritual consciousness can permeate everything that I do. I was initiated in June of '82. And I find the work difficult, painful sometimes, but very rewarding, exuberating, exciting.

I was born in the city of voodoo--New Orleans, Louisiana during the "baby boom", in 1948. Looking back, I feel that I have always really been a southern country girl in various kinds of clothing. My immediate family lived on the west bank of the river in various little towns--one, especially, called Harvey, where I spent my formative years. Now I consider myself fortunate in a lot of ways to have been born there and to have lived there. It was a double-edged sword because on the one hand we had schools that were typically underfunded--no great facilities. It was the segregated South, and the people in my community were often laid off from work. I grew up having

to drink from a separate fountain, and I could not sit in a certain place on the bus. But I was also very fortunate in the sense that the people in my community maintained gardens so that when they were laid off from work we could eat. They went hunting, they had a kind a simple country joy. All kinds of things--going and sitting down on the levy and having a picnic on bread and wild flowers. People were tuned to a kind of spirituality where folks knew that their dreams were important. As a child I listened to the older women interpret each other's dreams and watched them take precautions against the predictions. And when a woman in the neighborhood had a baby all the other women in the neighborhood cooked dinner for her and cleaned the house for the first two weeks.

I remember being very, very young and noticing that there were fights in my household over food. It seems that nobody could get enough to eat.

In Harvey I could say that I had three or four mothers on every block--which meant I could not get away with nothing but also if I fell down sick somebody was gonna take care of me. And there is a kind of country giving, a sense of reciprocity, a sense of extended family, an ability to laugh in the midst of sorrow, that I was happy in the later years that I was exposed to. I am sorry to say that my home area is becoming more urbanized and is losing a lot of its culture, its way of being. But you know, I grew up with that sense of "we all got to take care of each other" which evolved into a sense of global politics. I grew up with a sense that the spirits are all around--which grew into my becoming a priestess in an African tradition--and I grew up with the importance of proverbs and story telling that developed into my becoming a performer. The thing that brought me to a lot of cross roads and brought me a lot of gifts was a love of reading, a love of mythology, a love of performing, especially dance, curiosity, and a sense of resilience "It's always darkest before the dawn, baby!. You only gonna be down so long! I am so glad trouble don't last always." That sense of optimism was there. I spent a lot of time wandering through bookstores, reading mythology and folklore as a kid, and picking

up little books on voodoo-- a lot of it not good--wondering what all the whispering was about...

Then, my mother began to say that I was Catholic. I was chased away across the highway by white boys with sticks and stones when I was one of the first little black girls to integrate the mass at St. Rosalie Church, only for white folks. I went most of the time to the local Sanctified church, headed by a powerful black man. Wondrous things happened in this church. They played tambourines and sang heart-rending songs. People would get "possessed by the Holy Spirit" and talk in tongues. There were prayer meetings almost every night and candlelight processions at least once a year.

My momma, whose father had been a slave as a child, did curious things, like cleaning her house with holy water taken from the Catholic Church. She would use home remedies for a wide variety of physical ailments. She was also always talking to the elements and to animals. But, as was typical of child-rearing practices in the old black South, nobody taught me anything about these mysteries. As a child, I was most interested in my mother's stories about her family, trying to reconstruct the history of a family torn apart by slavery and poverty.

I was christened and made my first communion and confirmation, all within a few weeks' time. But some things about being Catholic disturbed me, such as the concept of sin and the lack of reward for self-discipline—"Just do whatever you wanna do, then go confess." At age fourteen I moved to California with my aunt. It was a welcomed move, driving from Louisiana to Palm Springs to California. Teish was seeing the world!.

In high school, in Los Angeles I met a teacher who inspired me to write. She was my first white woman friend-sister. Before that I had only been a maid, cook, or baby-sitter to them. My dance teacher also took interest in me. I became very involved. I was editor of the school newspaper and was pushing for various rights such as more power in the school community review board and more jobs for high schoolers. At the same time, I had my "secret studies": voodoo and magic, mythology and sex. I graduated from high

school in 1966. This was the post-Watts-riots Los Angeles and, by then, I was very much aware that large numbers of people had to really move on things--the "Martin Luther King approach."

I got a scholarship and went to college in Oregon, to a campus where there were very few Black students on scholarships--trying their best not to be too conspicuous. Temporarily, I dropped my occult studies and tried to become an "intellectual." It did not work. One evening, as I was on my way to a local theater, some white men in a truck shot at me. Out of sheer rage, I became a political activist again. From my perspective I was very active in the 1960s. In Los Angeles I had marched in local civil rights demonstrations. When Martin Luther King Jr. was killed, I made the trek to Washington D.C. for the Poor People's Campaign. Then I became a Black Power advocate. I transferred to Reed College in Portland, lived off campus in the Albino ghetto area, joined the Black Student Union, and fought for Black Studies as a member of the negotiating team. I supported Pan-Africanism by studying and teaching in the community "Freedom Schools". We went through anti war work...

Now the rhetoric about the black woman's "rightful place" began pouring down on me. The "brothers" decided who black women were to become. We were to be "warriors" by day, Cleopatra by night, workers and teachers in between. They decided that our most important job was to have babies and teach those babies African culture. But the sisters were busy playing homage to a Goddess. I and several other women I knew constructed small altars in our bedrooms consecrated to the worship of the birth control pill.¹ My male peers decided that belief in spiritual things was their second biggest problem and the black woman was their first. I was both. Those were the times of "God is dead," "The church is corrupt," and "Do not mess with anybody over thirty, they are gonna sell you out!" For me, there was missing a sense of the place of spirituality.

In 1969 I got a scholarship to study dance under the direction of Madame Katherine Dunham at the Performing Arts Training Center (PATC) in East St. Louis,

Illinois, and I had now the experience of the real joy of performing around a spiritual theme. And the love of the dance of Africa, the Caribbean islands, and South America took me into places where I met people who were actively involved in the tradition that I am now a priestess in. At first I was kind of content to do the dances and have my little altars at home. But it was not until the mid 1970s that I started to get serious about taking a look at this tradition.

I watched the 1960s, which really ended in the 1970s. I watched people burn out then--and now. It is very hard for people of conscience to make a living in this society. We have to have a mechanism for taking care of each other so that we can continue the work. I also watched this wave of the feminist movement growing. I edited the newsletter for the coalition for the medical rights of women, I worked with women against violence and pornography--monitoring media images, and I have been involved in breakfast programs for children. At this point, I am active in the National Black Woman's Health project which is monitoring the health of black women taking a look at what are the facts working against them, and doing original research, looking for cures for certain conditions. Right now I am involved in a play on the life of Zora Neal Hurston, which I really see as a "healing salve" against some of the negative media images that were discussed in some movies that really exploit the image of black traditions. I am also a member of the Woman Earth Institute, which is a network for spirituality, ecology and peace that works globally. We have a conference about every two years to take a look at political issues.

Then in 1974 I tried to kill myself. I had three demons coming down on me: racism, sexism and classism. This society invalidates the kind of intelligence that does not have a string of letters behind your name. This society does not want to hear much from a woman, and doesn't want to hear anything from a Black woman. So I was up against those demons. I had a string of bad personal relationships. And I had had a baby that passed, due to the sickness of Western medicine. So I decided that I was going to trip

out of here, to leave my body and go on, because I didn't have to be here. When I tried to pull that, instead of dying, a miracle happened. I floated out of my body and sat on the ceiling. I had a long conversation with myself, explaining that life wasn't about escaping or tripping out; it was strictly about accepting who I was and what I had to do, and building enough muscle to handle it.

This experience led me to go to a priest to get my first reading with the *dilloggun*, the cowry shell. It was as if the priest who read me turned a knob that opened twelve doors: "Get rid of the inhibition stuff. Start teaching what you know. Stop hiding. You have the power to heal. Yes, you belong in this tradition. One day you're going to be a priestess." At that point, I laughed, because I was counting on being a great actress and winning an Oscar. The picture of myself as a priestess really didn't register.

Prior to that, I had kept altars for years, I had done healing circles, I was divining with cards, I was experimenting with ritual, but I considered myself a closeted practitioner.²

My motto is "think globally, act locally, be spiritually centered". My activism comes from selfish reasons: I want to participate in the creation of the world I want to live in. As part of this, I do story telling in the schools. This I consider to be cultural education because there I try to give the children a sense of worth and an explanation of what is going on in the universe and in politics around them.

My spirituality also grew with the women's movement, which has worked to reclaim women's knowledge and power. This quest has led to a rejection of patriarchal religion and the rebirth of a nature-centered Woman-Spirit movement."³ Somewhere, two thousand years ago, somehow the balance of power swung so in favor of materialism that the spiritual and creative power of woman got oppressed. The idea of the machine, the idea of property, the idea of superiority and inferiority took such a strong hold on key places in the world that woman with her qualities of mystery, her relationship to

the moon, her intuition, her emotion, got pressed down, and another way of being took hold. It is essential that women create, recreate, and bring forth their positive ways: power, compassion, celebration, nurturing, and embracing--and not by patriarchy in drag. We need to not emulate the oppressor. We need to sanctify that which has been considered womanly qualities. And we need to teach that to women and men and make that the standard. We should know enough defense to protect but never become aggressors in that sense. Woman's quality or nurturing, for example, is essential for the survival of the planet and life as we know it. All children are our children. Greed is killing off plant species by the day, killing off people by the day. We need to start thinking of all of us as the children of Earth and her as our aging mother--And we are gonna take care of her. It is really hard sometimes... Is it not a phenomenon? At a time when you can get half-way around the world in a day there is still this idea of "us and them," of separation, of being "over." So there is a lot of interior work, people have to work on their insides so that when that energy moves outside and affects other people that it moves with healing touch. The healing touch of woman is what has got to happen globally. Got to happen, somehow.

In the 1970s, I watched the "me generation"--people who have burnt out on Vietnam, burnt out on civil rights, burnt out on transformations, saying, "O.K., now I am going to take care of me." And then, in the late 1970s I start to witness the inclusion of spirituality. I fear the people who swing in the polar opposites of the "political" 1960s who say that "spirituality is what is happening, and politics is not." We have got to come into the 1980s, and in the 1990s to a spirituality and politics that includes taking care of *us*, meaning our individual selves, our local community, our nation, and the world. We have to grow up in our perspective, and it bothers me because what I see now is children of the 1960s consciousness group who feel they can not be "yuppies" because their parents were demonstrators--because they look at us--broke, burned out--and say, "I don't want to be like that!"

Spirituality, for me, is a recognition that everything material is imbued with an invisible force that is responsive to humanity. Spirituality is a recognition of the interconnectedness between all people and all things. Even though I am in a tradition where we personify the forces and say the river is Oshun and the sky is Obatala and so on, I do not have an image of a man with a beard sitting on a star somewhere playing chess, you know... For me, God is a natural consciousness, an invisible whatever that set things in motion for the big bang. Each and everyone of us, human, plant, animal, vegetable, mineral, are cells in the body of that consciousness. And I think that spirituality is, more than anything else, life-preserving practices. Earth, air, fire and water, in all their diverse forms, is all that there is. And having a correct relationship to those forces whether it is embodied in the river or embodied in the woman sitting across from the table is what spirituality is to me. I had enough experiences to know that when somebody passes away, when the earth of your body passes away, the air of your spirit continues. And we need to really become conscious of that and be responsible in how we interact with that.

We know that racism is there...[in the "New Age"]. We know it by exclusion. That movement, in most places is white and upper class. And I mean to take nothing from individuals and small groups within that movement who are making the effort to include people. But I am bothered by things such as "harmonic convergence". There were a lot of things going on around it that I felt had a racist attitude. First of all the language. I was told by a young man that was involved in the convergence that everything dark was going to fall from the planet and I had to ask him how he felt saying it in my black face. And I saw information passed about gatherings by white middle class people and nobody was saying where the money goes. And it is my opinion that if you are talking about harmony in the world some of that money has to go toward harmony in the world. I felt that there was some exploitation of the Mayan calendar. If this holiday comes out of the

Mayan calendar then focus should be put on the conditions of the Mayan people. I am disgusted when I got to places when a little bit of Native American spirituality has been pinched, a little bit of South American spirituality has been pinched, a little bit of African has been pinched, no real respect is being given to the overall philosophy theology and practice of the people. The people who are running things, the people of color are not represented there. Sometimes low-income whites are not represented there. Money is raised, it goes in the pockets of a few people and you don't see it go anywhere to help anywhere. This is racist, elitist behavior. And I don't think that I can see us casting a fate of more racism and elitism for the next 2,000 years. This can not be a priority.

In my own work, the contract that I put out when I go to do a workshop states that there needs to be a sliding scale for people of color and low income people and I want a number of scholarships reserved because it is very disheartening to go to a spirituality conference or something and find no people of color in the conference. We cannot do this. This does not strike me as a spirituality of encompassing or preservation. So we want to be careful about spirituality becoming an economic fad. It is what I call the 'celebrity witch syndrome' in which "I am the best witch because I can afford the best costume". So you get people coming in their velvet robes and their silver wigs with their brass candle-holders and taking an elitist attitude towards other people. This is not spirituality, this is conspicuous consumption again. And I see a lot of that sometimes in groups that call themselves "New Age" and I think if they really want to be about a new age then they won't repeat crap from the old age.

But we can't indulge ourselves, there are certain segments of the new age movement that I have to take serious issue with. Like sometime ago I was at a book party where the question came up when we talked about world peace, and the forces of oppression are out there, how do you resist the forces of oppression. And one of the speakers said "no, you don't resist. You meditate". And I have to take issue on that, this

is my thing, because it is good to sit in front of your altar and meditate and pray on world peace, O.K, if you are doing what you should be doing then you are sending out an energy that should travel about the universe and find a place where there's other kindred energies. But for me, when you get up from that altar, if you yourself go and feed the hungry or house the homeless or push against that resistance then you can believe that your prayers are having an effect because they are having an effect on you. And you are having an effect on others. And so you put into motion in the physical that which you have put into motion on the spiritual.. But if you can't do that then you have no material basis for believing in the invisible energy that you have put out there. You see what I'm saying? If you are the center you move first, and you cause something to happen. It is important that people keep that in mind because if you don't that person is gonna find himself sitting in front of their altars in a circle of rubble. Things would have fallen around them and they are still sitting at it, you know. We can't indulge ourselves , it is an upper class mentality that thinks that all you have to do is sitting at the altar, because there is nothing that that person is asking for that he/she cannot just go out and buy, you see. So if the are sitting there saying that they are asking for world peace, to them it may mean pulling up their charge cards and going a week at club med, where they are on the beach by themselves somewhere and they got peace. But what's happening in the communities around you?

We want to be careful of partial teachings in spirituality. There is one that really plucks, my nerves which is this idea that "you create your own reality". Let me be real clear about this. I personally feel that in spirit form I chose to be born a black woman. But that does not mean that I chose a spirit that loves to be oppressed, in no shape does it mean that. It means that I chose to honor life in a dark body with breasts. And when I hear people say things like that what I want to say to them is 'yes, I can sit here, in my room and invoke my spirits for a new dress. But another human being will be the person who brings me that dress, therefore I am affecting two people's reality.

And when I do that then I have to take a look at that dress and find out was it made in some sweat shop, does it have the blood of a dying woman on it, and if it does then I have to give something back to that woman, you see. But people get it blown away out of proportion, they don't look at it. They start looking at entire nations of people. So inferior spirits all decided to incarnate in this country? That's a crock, you know what I am saying?

I have an activist mentality. So that any time, any neighborhood that I move in to I find out what are the priorities in that area and put my energy in there. I have to believe in the ripple effect. I have to believe that if I reach one person that person is gonna reach two people. Those two are going to reach four more each and that will continue. because if you don't believe that it paralyzes you and you are afraid to do anything and you are visited by a sense of futility. At the same time survival itself it is made so difficult for those of us who have consciousness and we need to increase our number seriously, you know. When you get ready to do battle with things like health care, you have to have a room full of minds that will cast their vote in favor of making. For example a care for Aids should be a national priority. The information, the knowledge that could come from concentrating on that one condition could give birth to cures for a half dozen things. But there's been this division, and the fear...

Humanity is as old as dust and aids just popped up? or is it that now our immune systems are down because the air is filthy, the food is dead, the water is polluted and everything that is supposed to sustain us against conditions, if the medicine is poisoned then the only thing that can happen is decay. It really makes me irate when I think about how the big picture is not being looked at. So when somebody says to me 'the people that are dying of aids are dying of spiritual decadence' I have to scream bullshit! Come on, give me a break...

There is a moral majority mentality of separation and superiority that makes real easy for some people to look at the aids victim as an 'other', non human. And that sense of otherness is so fake! It reminds me when cycle-cell-anemia was first going around there was not much attention paid to it because it was a 'black' disease. When you start finding out that not only blacks suffer from it, then some attention gets paid. The same way with drugs. As long as the blacks, or the Porto-Ricans, or the people in Chinatown or the poor whites, then is not a national concern. But when the yuppies start snorting too much coke, when your businessmen start shooting too much scag then it becomes our problem?

One of the things that we are taught is that safety comes in running away, and that is not true. There is no where to run because the water, the air, the food are polluted. If Aids don't take you out something else will. the idea is that we, the planet and the people are being debilitated, you know. The thing with the homeless drives me crazy too. We have to do something about that not just not at Christmas. It is criminal that with all the resources that there are for the earth that people are homeless?! May be if there is a policy that trees that were cut down in the Amazon, seeds were planted in their place and houses were built for low income people, I could support it. But I cannot support wiping out the Amazon so that you can get a god dam hamburger cheap! . That is a national global mentality of consume, consume, consume and take/take/take and the ancient wisdom that has sustained humanity to this point says "sacrifice. if you take from the earth, get back to the earth. If you take from your elders give back to the elders, if you take from the community, give back to the community." We have lost that. And don't take more than what you need... {waste. Oh, waste....You know, why is it that creative thinkers are not running the government, why? It seems that a panel of people with their minds and their hearts set on solving a problem can find workable solutions. But the concentration is not on furthering existence, it's on greed. And if you keep consuming and keep consuming and keep consuming, not only are you gonna eat anything

up but eventually you are gonna vomit....I don't know whom to talk to, who in positions of power will listen.}

The other thing is this mentality of scarcity. We have lost, and I really worry about this...the concept of money has totally messed up the concept of fertility and abundance, you know. Since we've got this paper money a mentality of scarcity which leads to a mentality of greed and grab is there, you see? I am sure that the earth, if treated properly, could provide enough food for everybody...The forest, if treated properly could provide decent housing for everybody. But how can she sustain us when you've got two people living in a twenty two room castle in one place, and eight people living in a one bedroom apartment in another and in the streets? The very weight of where those people are causes an imbalance. You know what I am saying? it is insane.

And the only thing that I can see at this point is to continue to challenge governments, to continue to raise consciousness around this stuff, to continue to put out energy in the form of prayer and continue to take care of each other and the earth as much as possible.

There was a time when humans thought it was impossible for humans to fly. We'll never fly the way the birds do but we have airplanes. Right now it looks like it would be impossible for us to not blow up the planet. But I say that there is a way that it can be done if enough minds concentrate on it and are willing to back it up with work. But we have to think globally, act locally, and keep ourselves spiritually centered.

Commentary

Teish poignantly draws our attention to the fact that the contemporary "spiritual movement" is representative of mostly white-middle or upper class people. It does not fully address fundamental issues of race, class and gender in our society and among its rank as well. The words "race, class, and gender" are often heard among these groups as

though the words constitute a single, general term for the issue of discrimination. Yet, among the many individuals I observed or interviewed, with some outstanding exceptions like herself, race and class were barely mentioned, if at all, and never discussed, while feminism, sexism and the various issues related to gender were familiar to all and readily discussed in most of my interviews. One reason for this may be that, among the white middle-class group I have described, issues of race and class are "outside" issues while issues of gender discrimination exist among them. One may wonder whether there will come a time when all the *interconnected* races and classes and all the various practices and strategies can truly work together to eliminate the barriers of separation and inequality, and the oppression--in all its many manifestations--that can be said to be at the root of all social problems.

As an activist, Teish models the grassroots approach-- an approach not simply *focused on* but actually, and actively, *carried out within* the family and community in the streets and in the schools. Grassroots activism, I believe, begins with serving the well-being of others. Teish has been active in projects directly addressing issues of health, AIDS, medical rights of women. She was involved in breakfast programs for children. Beyond her direct involvement in these projects, Teish expresses deep concern for circumstances both local and global that affect the health of all people and all of life. She was involved in the anti-war movement. She has been concerned about radiation and pollution and even where the milk comes from: "It is a trip. How can you protect yourself?".

Teish was an active participant in the Civil Rights movement. In a way, she continues to be active in what could be called the ongoing Civil Rights movement. She has lived all her life within the circumstances that were ground to the response that impelled the movement. Her grandfather was a slave. She was born in New Orleans and spent her "formative years" in a little town in Louisiana where segregation was still the

rule. In a sense, she is still part of the social situation that the Civil Rights movement was meant to address.

When Teish speaks of the Civil Rights movement she speaks of *empathy*-- and she uses the word to apply also to those individuals who were not a part of (at least did not come out of) the struggle that led to the Civil Rights movement. Some of my other white interviewees had been involved in the Civil Rights movement as well. For many this has been an experience of empathy with black people, which could then be generalized or transferred over other arenas of social life. In its most fundamental aspect, this empathy was inspired in the spiritual leadership of Dr Martin Luther King and his universal vision. In that sense, we can see a common thread between the more contemporary "spiritual movement": and the Civil Rights movement.

Yet, as the split between the races followed the original common endeavor, particularly after the fatal shooting of Dr King, many of the civil right supporters who were not black were able to turn away from universal human rights issues. Some favored pursuing the personal enhancement that "New Age Spirituality" was claiming to offer. Others translated their newly gained insights into "human potentials" areas, into "feminism" and other of the "consciousness movements" of the time. And while they fostered valid causes, and articulated relevant social issues, they inadvertently left behind the active solidarity with the struggle of blacks and the fight against fundamental classist and racist issues of our society. Empathy became, at least for a while, more particularistic and circumscribed to the boundaries of one's own group of identification.

But Teish is not without empathy: empathy moves her life and her work. She was equally concerned, when I spoke with her, with the circumstances of all people everywhere. Even with the women and the children in Chernobyl who eat strawberries out of a garden "just like mine".

She is concerned with the planet in the same way that she is concerned with people, with her community, and with her children-- meaning *all* children. Her

grassroots involvement, implemented locally, will add up, in my opinion, to the most realistic and most significant global impact.

Luisah Teish is also a model for what I should like to call *grassroots spirituality*-- a vital example of a creative, participatory spirituality that has a presence and an impact at a grassroots level. I cannot define, or even conceive of, any sort of spirituality totally removed from caring or from acting in the world upon that caring. It is interesting to witness the split between spirituality and activism-- the supposed dichotomy between local and global activism and the pursuit of "inner" benefits in contrast to her life and work. She is a priestess in the lineage of her own ancestors, and that is her source of strength. From such center she relates to the same Divinity in *all* people and in *all* of life, in a way that is very much connected to worldly life circumstances.

Her spirituality is, in her words, "nature-centered", and, "more than anything else, life- preserving practices." Teish follows a religion (Yoruba) that comes out of Africa and "is built on a strong sense of community and kinship across spiritual lines." Says she: "We have got to come into...a spirituality and politics that includes taking care of us." Furthermore, hers is a grassroots spirituality because she remains rooted in the community and among the people. She has not joined the ranks of--or placed herself among-- the spiritual elite. She has not removed herself from her people to enjoy the affluent surroundings that her talents and leadership would no doubt allow. She lives, in rather humble surroundings, among her people in her neighborhood.

Contemporarily, given the popularity of "New Age" phenomena-- of healers and psychics and portrayers of exotic traditions and techniques-- it is possible to make a *career* (and quite a lucrative one) out of being "spiritual" and "esoteric". It may be this attraction that has caused some potentially effective people to abandon the more practical causes of civil rights and social justice to claim that "spirituality is where it's at." But Teish cannot and will not abandon her grassroots, "hands-on", involvement with issues

of human rights and well being-- particularly among the oppressed and disenfranchised population with which she still identifies. "It is very hard for people of conscience to make a living in this society," she says, and I have seen this to be a fact. Many, if not most of my activist interviewees have demonstrated this, living amidst a considerable degree of financial hardship. Teish speaks to the need for a "mechanism for taking care of each other so that we can continue the work." To some extent she has already experienced such an arrangement during her formative years. To some extent she works for this in her present surroundings and endeavors (so that it may become, perhaps, more as it was many years in that little town of Harvey). Teish is a model for what is important for the movement and the transformation--for what will make it work-- because to the extent that such mechanism can be encouraged, she manages to do so, and to the extent that it is lacking, she manages to "continue the work"- hard though it may be-- "So that now spiritual consciousness can permeate everything I do."

¹ Luisah Teish, *Jambalaya. The Natural Woman's Book of Personal Charms and Practical Rituals*. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1985). p.29.

² The last three paragraphs are from an interview of Teish, "Luisah Teish Daughter of Oshun" by Timothy White, *Shaman's Drum: A Journal of Experiential Shamanism*, (Spring, 1986), Number 4, p.44.

³ Teish, 1985, op. cit., p. ix.