

Thursday, December 1, 2011

THE LONG SHADOW OF BOOKER T. WASHINGTON

"We are all already contaminated by each other." Kwame Anthony Appiah, *In My Father's House*.

E. Ethelbert Millers asks: "Please respond to this statement made by Booker T. Washington in 1895. "In all things that are purely social we can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress."



This is one of the single most important statements in American history. Few declarations have had its far-reaching consequences for life in the United States. After 244 years of slavery, after the Civil War when white Americans were struggling with the question of what to *do* with all the freed slaves in their midst (Send them back to Africa? Give them 40 acres and a mule? Live with them as equals?), Booker T. Washington presented a metaphor that was widely embraced by whites as the solution they were looking for. His speech was delivered on September 18, 1895 at the Cotton States and International Exposition in Atlanta. It stressed the virtue of "casting down one's buckets" ("No race can prosper till it learns that there is as much dignity in tilling a field as in writing a poem. It is at the bottom of life we must begin, and not at the top"), the value of hard work, self-reliance, and the loyalty of Negroes to their fellow white countrymen ("You can be sure in the future, as in the past, that you and your families will be surrounded by the most patient, faithful, law-abiding, and unresentful people that the world has seen").

In effect, Booker, who would become the most powerful and influential black man in America between the 1890s and 1920s, told white Americans that they didn't have to worry anymore about newly freed black men and woman---Negroes would keep themselves separate, offering whites no competition as the young nation recovered from civil war and, as the so-called second Industrial Revolution began around 1850, provided whites during the era of racial segregation with a clear field of opportunities for creating wealth and financial dynasties that have lasted into the 21st century. By contrast, the majority of blacks in the decades following Booker's declaration remained mired in poverty.

His opponents, like Du Bois, would refer to this declaration as the "Atlanta Compromise," a sequestering of the Negro for roughly three generations, "shelving" black people, one might say, putting them "out of play" until the Civil Rights Movement began. These opponents understood that "separate" was seldom (if ever) "equal" in the distribution of wealth, resources, and opportunity. And while Booker's educational model at Tuskegee was imitated widely throughout

the south, the so-called practical agricultural and industrial skills his program offered were based on his understanding of agriculture and economics during his youth during the final days of slavery, that is, these skills were fast becoming obsolete at the dawn of the 20th century.

One of my most popular PBS docu-dramas, "Booker," which I co-wrote with John Allman (and which received a 1985 Writers Guild Award in the category of television children's shows, as well as several other prizes), highlighted Booker's important role---his vision---for providing education for freed slaves (and native Americans). We can admire, I think, Booker's clear sense that what blacks achingly needed for their advancement after centuries of slavery (when some southern states made it illegal for slave-owners to teach blacks to read) was education and skills. Marcus Garvey stated that Booker had been his inspiration, and we know Elijah Muhammad and his Nation of Islam picked up the torch of racial separatism and self-reliance after Garvey's Back to Africa movement failed. While this separatist strain still appeals to some black Americans (and also white supremacists, who often point approvingly to Booker), the more integrationist vision of Du Bois, one of the founding members of the NAACP, which was carried forward by Martin Luther King Jr., politically carried the day, as is indicated by the election of Barack Obama as the first black president of the United States.

As a black American, I've always found the positive dimensions of the black self-reliance and economic empowerment argument to be very persuasive, and even a matter of urgency for black people; but, as a Buddhist and at the end of the day, I obviously see the world in terms of interdependence, *i.e.*, an ontological position in which all things are intertwined, inter-penetrate, and are all *already* integrated. And these two ways of seeing are *not* disjunctive. One can be mindful of the historical disenfranchisement of black America and work toward improving our economic lives *and*, as the Bodhissattva vow urges us, work to increase happiness and freedom from suffering for all sentient beings with whom our lives are intertwined.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at [3:17 AM](#)

<http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/12/long-shadow-of-booker-t-washington.html>

Thursday, December 1, 2011

THE CRISIS NEXT TIME?

E. Ethelbert Miller asks: "Harold Cruse published his very important book, *THE CRISIS OF THE NEGRO INTELLECTUAL* in the late sixties. Do black intellectuals find themselves in a "crisis" today? What is the current state of black intellectual thought? Is our thinking advancing or are we still asking the same old questions?"



HAROLD CRUSE

To be perfectly honest, I think we are asking the same old questions. And I think we are encouraged by blacks and whites alike in America to think within (and not outside) the same box, using an all too familiar and tired grammar and vocabulary that is at least 100- years-old now. Remember: the quality of the answers we get in this life is based on the quality of the questions we ask. Black "intellectuals" (I put sneer quotes around that word because, like Bertrand Russell, I think it is a pejorative term and I prefer to use the word scholar instead) often seem unable to think outside the parameters of the political. I daresay that every experience in life is not political. The belief that everything is reducible to the political is a form of cliched thinking that has cramped and constricted black intellectual and imaginative life for a century. As I see it, politics is but the skin of our social life.

Pushing this a little bit farther, let me say that, as "intellectuals," many people seem unable to see beyond the little cultural fishbowl of the white Western world; like fish, they have little sense that beyond the borders of that fishbowl there is, metaphorically, an ocean of human experience and history beyond what we encounter in the West. Consider for just a moment the special, inspiring vision that Martin Luther King Jr. brought to the black liberation struggle by allowing it to be cross-pollinated by Gandhi's approach of *satyagraha*, the same ingenuity that Rev. James Lawson Jr. brought to the Freedom Riders after studying Gandhi's principles for civil disobedience in India. During the Montgomery bus boycott, King said, "Christ gave us the goals and Mahatma Gandhi the tactics." The simplicity of this statement conceals its profundity, for methods and techniques like *satyagraha*, far from being neutral tools devoid of cultural and

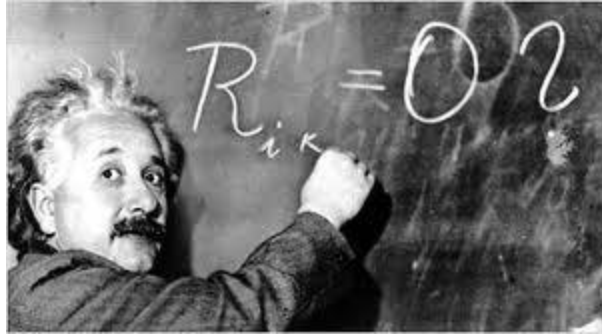
spiritual values, contain within themselves a precise, challenging blueprint for leading the moral life, for actions that go far beyond the goal of integrating buses in the South. It was during his seven-year campaign in South Africa that Gandhi coined the term *satyagraha* by combining the Sanskrit word *sat* (truth) with the verbal root *grah* (to seize, hold, or grasp). "Its root meaning," said Gandhi, "is holding onto truth, hence truth-force. I have also called it love force or soul force."

Satyagraha is based on the yogic value of *ahimsa*, the "non-harming" of sentient beings in either word or deed. It is love in action. If he "holds truth," a *satyagrahi* never seeks to defeat or humiliate his opponent, because he and the other are understood to be one. He endeavors to respect and retain him as a friend, and provide him with a way to save face during their encounter, maintain his dignity, and join the ranks of the enlightened.

Never before, not with Nat Turner, Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. Du Bois, Booker T. Washington, Marcus Garvey, or Elijah Muhammad, had the black struggle for freedom been cast in such a non-dualistic manner. This was a paradigm shift. This was a revolution from top to bottom, involving change from outside (toward the Other) and from inside (toward oneself). This cross-pollination of ideas---between black America and India in 1955---brought something uniquely redemptive to the 300-year-old, bloody struggle for black liberation in America and made the Civil Rights Movement morally superior to those who opposed it.

But not only do too few of our "intellectuals" look beyond the Western fishbowl for inspiration, but they also fail, in my view, to factor into their thinking the profound transformations happening in the world, week after week, in the fields of science and technology. (Black thought tends to fall not into the area of hard sciences like physics, math and chemistry but rather the softer ones of sociology, history, ethnology and psychology, which are less empirical and more open to disputation and conflicting interpretations). We live in a world of literal clones and chimeras, 3-D printing of physical objects, advances in medical science after the sequencing of the genome that will affect aging and the treatment of heredity afflictions, a world where earth-like planets in the "Goldilocks" zone from the stars they orbit (not too close, not too far away) have been discovered. Intellectually, this is a very exciting time to be alive. A time when old paradigms are perishing, requiring the almost daily revision of our understanding of not only the universe but life on the 4.54 billion-year-old planet we inhabit.

So is this a crisis for black "intellectual" thought? I won't say that black thought today is in a crisis but, to paraphrase Frank Zappa, I will say that sometimes it sure smells funny. So much of it has worn out its shelf-life and expiration date. So much of black thought today suffers from a poverty of ideas. To achieve freshness it needs to open itself to cross-fertilization, for that historically has been the way that cultures escape from calcification, from becoming in-bred, and from sterility. And as I stated in my essay "The End of the Black American Narrative," I sincerely *do* believe that our black thinkers in America in 2011 need a new language, a new vocabulary and grammar, new metaphors and paradigms to work with. If something as fundamental to science as Einstein's belief that nothing can travel faster than the speed of light can be challenged by new measurements of neutrinos (a matter that is still being discussed and subjected to experiments), if Pluto can be demoted from the status of being a planet, then surely black thought should be open to new information and radical transformation. We should remove as best we can our egos and cherished agendas from the process of intellectual investigations. And we should never be content with what we think we know.



ALBERT EINSTEIN

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at [9:23 PM](#)
<http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/12/crisis-next-time.html>

Saturday, December 3, 2011

THE RACE AND THE RHINOCEROS

E. Ethelbert Miller asks: "Please respond to this famous statement by W.E.B. Du Bois: 'The Negro race, like all races, is going to be saved by its exceptional men. The problem of education, then, among Negroes must first of all deal with the Talented Tenth; it is the problem of developing the Best of this race that they may guide the Mass away from the contamination and death of the Worst, in their own and other races.'



W.E.B. Du BOIS

Before I respond to this famous and sometimes controversial statement by W.E.B. Du Bois, I would like to first quote a few verses from the oldest sutra in the Pali canon of Buddhism. This is the *Khaggavisana Sutra*. The term means "a rhinoceros horn," so the sutra is generally called *Rhinoceros Sutra*. When I say it is the oldest sutra we have I mean that we have these verses on palm leaves discovered not long ago in a jar in the town of Hadda, near the Khyber Pass in present-day eastern Afghanistan. They were written around 30 A.D. In other words, the original Gandhāra scroll fragments (the Kharoṣṭhī Fragments) were written when Jesus was still walking the Earth and teaching. This version is kept in the British Library, and was translated by my colleague Richard Salomon and his team in the Department of Asian Languages and Literature at the University of Washington. The verses I wish to share are as follows:

If you gain a mature companion,
a fellow traveler, right-living and wise,
overcoming all dangers
go with him, gratified,
mindful.

If you don't gain a mature companion,
a fellow traveler, right-living and wise,
wander alone
like a king renouncing his kingdom,
like the elephant in the Matanga wilds,
his herd.

We praise companionship
-- yes!
Those on a par, or better,
should be chosen as friends.
If they are not to be found,
living faultlessly,
wander alone
like a rhinoceros.

Avoid the evil companion
disregarding the goal,
intent on the out-of-tune way.
Don't take as a friend
someone heedless and hankering.
wander alone
like a rhinoceros.

Consort with one who is learned,
who maintains the Dhamma,
a great and quick-witted friend.

People follow and associate
for a motive.
Friends without a motive these days
are rare.
They are shrewd for their own ends, and impure.
Wander alone
like a rhinoceros.

The *Rhinoceros Sutra* is said to refer to the value of living a solitary life like that of the forest monks in Southeast Asia, and it describes as well the Pratyeka-buddha ("solitary awakened one"), the man or woman who, not associated with a sangha or community, achieves awakening on his (or her) own. Shakyamuni Buddha himself may be regarded as a Pratyeka-buddha. So now we come to the question: Why have I begun my response to Du Bois with these verses?

Du Bois speaks of a Talented Tenth, the "best" among black Americans, and of the "Worst in their own race and other races." He also identifies education as crucial for our understanding of "exceptional men." When he speaks of education, I believe Du Bois means more than an academic education. He also means *moral* education. We've all seen educated people, black white and otherwise, with Ph.Ds in the various sciences and humanities commit crimes, lie, steal, cheat, engage in sexual misconduct, abuse alcohol and drugs, and even commit murder. While well-educated in a secular sense, it is clear such people lack a moral (or spiritual) education, or at least one that has significantly shaped their character.

And what Du Bois is also describing here with his Talented Tenth idea is just that, *i.e.*, black people of good *character*. Two thousand years ago, the *Rhinoceros Sutra* urged followers of the dharma to walk alone if they could not find "a mature companion, a fellow traveler, right-living

and wise," one who "maintains the Dhamma, a great and quick-witted friend." But they should walk alone if all they encounter are people who were "heedless and hankering," who have a selfish motive behind their being friendly, people who are "shrewd for their own ends, and impure." I take Du Bois to mean such folks are the "Worst in their own race and other races."

The Talented Tenth, then, are both educated and moral. Du Bois was, of course, not interested in seeing them walk alone. Most likely this was, in part, his reason for establishing more than one hundred years ago Sigma Pi Phi fraternity, the professional organization for black men: a kind of secular sangha (with local chapters all over America) for black Americans during the era of segregation who were devoted to "uplifting" the race in all ways---as educators, lawyers, businessmen, artists, ministers, political activists, etc. One purpose of the Boulé was to provide these race leaders with like-minded company, credentialed learned and moral, that would give them support in their efforts to improve the conditions of our people.

But do the "exceptional" amount to only ten percent of black people (or any people)? We can argue about this percentage, and during the 1960s young militants did, in fact, criticize Du Bois for being elitist, glibly saying "Why not a Talented One Hundred Percent"? This complaint comes, I suspect, from an egalitarian impulse, the democratic ideal shifted from politics to personal performance, or the sentimental desire to believe that all people are equal in all ways (or should be). Unfortunately, as so many have pointed out, among them John Rawls in *A Theory of Justice*, that thesis is not supported by evidence. In the Lebenswelt (or Lifeworld) as well as in what we traditionally call Nature, difference and/or inequality is an *eidōs*, a structure or invariant meaning. (And all our lives we practice discrimination in ways big and small on the basis of this difference and inequality, choosing this potential spouse over that one, this college over another, this meal over another, etc.)

Whether we like it or not (and as I wrote in *Dreamer*, page 47), "Not only was the distribution of wealth in society grossly uneven...but so was God-given talent. Beauty, Imagination, Luck. And the blessing of loving parents. They were the products of the arbitrariness of fortune. You could not say they were deserved." For example, I have a suite of skills and talents. But, believe me, I will never play chess like Garry Kasparov. Sing like Luther Vandross. Box like Muhammad Ali. Preach like M.L. King Jr. Solve problems in physics like Murray Gell-man, who gave us the word "quark" for a quantum entity. Play a guitar like Jimi Hendrix. Shoot hoops like Michael Jordan. Read eleven lines at a time like Wallace Thurman (according to Langston Hughes in *The Big Sea*). Or, like the reclusive Russian mathematician Grisha Perelman in 2003, provide a proof for the Poincaré Conjecture, which had eluded mathematicians for more than a century (Perelman rejected the \$1 million prize offered by the Clay Mathematics Institute for creating that proof). Such intellectually and physically exceptional individuals---prodigies and geniuses---obviously account for *less* than one percent of the human species.

Therefore, there are only two possible places I know of where equality between men and women exists: before the law and in the eyes of the Almighty. But despite this inherent inequality and difference that we find in things, men and women, as Rawls reminded us, can choose in a democracy to share one another's fate. (Something I found fascinating when lecturing abroad in the '80s and '90s for first the U.S. Information Agency, then the State Department, was that American embassy workers were issued *exactly* the same furniture for the places they stayed in

other countries. The same number and kind of furniture items so that no one had more than anyone else. Or so I was informed by a member of the U.S. embassy personnel.)

So when Du Bois selects ten percent for Negroes who have "talent," perhaps he is being generous. If there are 308,000,000 Americans (according to the 2010 census) with 40,040,000 of these being black people (about 13% or 12.6%), the Talented Tenth account for 4,000,000 individuals, enough to fill the city of Los Angeles. If you find that number interesting, consider the statement in Linda Selzer's critical study *Charles Johnson in Context*, that "A 1974 report published in *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*...found that only thirty-five blacks with the terminal degree in philosophy could be identified nationwide: 'one black Ph.D. in philosophy for every million black citizens'." (I suspect this number is now at least in the 40s or 50s, perhaps even higher.)

Given the difference in access to education in Du Bois's time a century ago and the post-civil right era, ten percent is likely too low a percentage. (And I daresay the efflorescence of talent does requires nurturing and much education.) Perhaps we now have a Talented Twentieth. Or a Talented Thirtieth. I won't speculate on what a better percentage would be. But I will say that if we believe in meritocracy, then I see Du Bois's statement as being heuristic, and still worth thinking about---and perhaps even working with---in 2011 and beyond.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at [7:13 AM](#)
<http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/12/race-and-rhinoceros.html>

Saturday, December 3, 2011

IMAGINATIVE RECONSTRUCTION

E. Ethelbert Miller asks: "In the 'Afterword' to *THE EMERGENCE OF BUDDHIST AMERICAN LITERATURE* edited by John Whalen-Bridge and Gary Storhoff you use the term "imaginative reconstruction." Could you elaborate on what you mean by this? When does memory get in the way of erasure?"



I had to re-read the Afterword in *The Emergence of Buddhist American Literature*, edited by John Whalen-Bridge and Gary Storhoff (SUNY Press, 2009) to understand what Ethelbert meant by "imaginative reconstruction," because I didn't write those words. This Afterword was originally an address I delivered, the Solomon Katz Distinguished Lecture in the Humanities at the University of Washington on February 1, 2007. The original title was "Whole Sight: The Intersection of Culture, Faith, and the Imagination." This version appeared in *Boston Review* (July/August, 2007). When literary scholar John Whalen-Bridge (JWB) at the National University of Singapore read the original lecture, he decided to use it as the Afterword for the book he and the late Dr. Storhoff were preparing for SUNY Press. JWB did some editing, *i.e.*, he added his own sentences and thoughts in order to tailor the Afterword specifically to the needs of *The Emergence of Buddhist American Literature*. I approved all his interpolations, which are sprinkled throughout the version Ethelbert is asking a question about.

Let me quote the passage that begins a paragraph on page 236 that gave rise to today's question. I've indicated in bold-face the interpolated sentences by JWB:

"Against the common misunderstanding on which Buddhism is a nihilistic erasure of the social world, we might consider that Buddhism is a religion dedicated to creative reconstruction. In Michael Ondaatje's fine novel *Amil's Ghost*, the war-ravaged stone-worker Ananda restores a broken Buddha, and perhaps one day the broken Buddhas of Bamiyan will be reassembled correctly. The essays in *The Emergence of Buddhist American Literature* do not celebrate the rejection of a social world but rather its reconstruction, a reordering of its parts in line with the best potentialities. At this point, I must add that every young black artist in America and or the 1960s (or the 1860s or the 1760s) necessarily faced a world in need of imaginative reconstruction. African /American artists in the decades since have insistently pointed out just how much of the history and experience of their families and ancestors have been erased, elided, or rendered "invisible" by the dominant

society; they also came to understand, on the deepest levels of their lives, that as artists they had an important, personal duty to fulfill. To make visible the invisible."

As you can see JWB wrote a lot for that paragraph---12 lines---and the phrase "imaginative (or creative) reconstruction" is entirely his, the product of his intellect, not mine. To a degree, JWB is rejecting the erroneous notion that Buddhism is nihilistic, a charge sometimes made against Buddhism by people who fail to understand it, indeed, the Buddha himself addressed this himself through his advocacy of the Middle Way, which avoids nihilism. We can say, as JWB does, that Buddhism deconstructs the world of our naive experience, then puts that same world back together in a fashion that makes our experience intelligible. Nothing is lost on the path of Dharma. Everything that existed before awakening is there, but transformed by a light that penetrates into the being of all that is.

I could attempt to further explain what Dr. Whalen-Bridge meant by "imaginative reconstruction." But in order to understand his meaning in its fullness, I recommend getting JWB himself to discuss this provocative phrase.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at [7:49 AM](#)

<http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/12/imaginative-reconstruction.html>

Saturday, December 3, 2011

DUNBAR'S MASK

E. Ethelbert Miller asks: "Below is the first stanza of Dunbar's "We Wear The Mask." What do these lines of poetry mean to you?"

*We wear the mask that grins and lies,
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes, -
This debt we pay to human guile;
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,
And mouth with myriad subtleties*



I think it might be helpful for readers unfamiliar with this famous poem if we present "We Wear the Mask" in its entirety.

*Why should the world be otherwise,
In counting all our tears and sighs?
Nay, let them only see us, while
We wear the mask.*

*We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries
To thee from tortured souls arise.
We sing, but oh the clay is vile
Beneath our feet, and long the mile;
But let the world dream otherwise,
We wear the mask!*

Whenever I think of this poem I recall the period of time in which Paul Laurence Dunbar lived (1872-1906). It was during Reconstruction when white Americans were steadily at work producing hideous minstrel images of black people, ones that some white Americans today still seem to enjoy. (Think of some of the racially stereotyping images of Obama during and after

his campaign for the presidency.) And Dunbar himself fell unintentionally into a trap with the popular dialect verse he wrote, poetry influenced by writers in the racist plantation tradition such as Joel Chandler Harris, Thomas Nelson Page, and Irwin Russell---writers who depicted Negroes as being happy serving their masters during the antebellum period.



But let us not forget that WASP America has long had a love affair with demeaning racial stereotypes for *all* non-white people, whether these be Sambos, drunken Irishmen, money-lending Jews, or Chinamen in pigtales. One ancient cartoon I remember reading that was published in a popular newspaper in the early 20th century was entitled, "He Saw Him First." It portrayed three Jewish merchants, all with bulbous noses, one wearing a yarmulke, and offered this caption: *Einstein*: "Cohen caught a burglar in his shtore last night und turned him over to der police." *Isaacs*: "Vat a fool! Vy didn't he rob him himself?" And clownish Irishmen appeared in one cartoon titled, "Saving His Strength," a panel in which two Irishmen sit drinking and smoking cigars. *Casey*: "Did ye go over t'see Kelly lasht night?" *Costigan*: "Oi did not. After Oi'd walked two-thirds av th' way Oi was too toired t'go a shtep further, so Oi turned around an' walked back home again." On and on for decades, in books, movies, magazines, everyday products and everywhere in pop culture this kind of material saturated the national consciousness and seeped deep into the American psyche. (And that reminds me of another poem: "Must I shoot the white man dead/ To kill the nigger in his head?")

In Dunbar's case, his career was given a boost when he was praised in a review by William Dean Howells for his book *Majors and Minors* (1895). Howells felt Dunbar was the first black poet "to feel the Negro life aesthetically and express it lyrically." But Richard Barksdale and Keneth Kinnamon point out in *Black Writers of America: A Comprehensive Anthology* (MacMillan Pub. Co., 1972) that "Howells' judgment was more of a social reaction than a literary evaluation. To white America in the 1890s and early 1900s a Black poet could only be fully acceptable if he presented lyrical pictures of contented ex-slaves written in what appeared to be the gentle folk accents and speech patterns of ex-slaves. Indeed, Dunbar's portraits of a dancing, contented Black people, living a rural life free of hunger, illness and privation, comforted white America and eased its guilty conscience."

In other words, Dunbar's most popular work (among whites) contributed to one of the worst caricatures of American black people. With "We Wear the Mask," I think Dunbar attempted to

undo some of the damage inadvertently caused by his dialect verse and set the record straight with realism.

Beneath that social mask that the white world sees, says Dunbar, there are "torn and bleeding hearts," "tears and sighs," and "tortured souls." His poem reminds me of another one of merely four lines that I've never forgotten. I cannot remember the author of these words (if any E-Channel readers can identify the poet, I will be thankful and in their debt), but they fall on the page as follows:

Got one face
For white folks to see,
Got another one
That's really me.

This, sadly, is the psychology of the oppressed, yesterday and today. In a racially hostile world, one must be Janus-faced, even deceitful and duplicitous, never allowing one's oppressor to know how one truly feels if one is powerless to change that oppression. In other words, this is a strategy for survival. In such a situation, candor and truthfulness across racial lines is a liability. Trust is a liability. You never let the oppressor know what you are really thinking and feeling. You wear the mask. In Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, the protagonist's grandfather adopts the same strategy of keeping his real feelings hidden or invisible and "Yes sir-ing" white people, telling them exactly what they want to hear, especially if that is a lie that will lead eventually to their own destruction and one's own liberation.

Soon enough, though, the iconography of the plantation tradition writers was extensively challenged and corrected by works from the Harlem Renaissance writers (and certainly by Richard Wright), and the genuine elements of genius in Dunbar's non-dialect work---the way he helped pave the way and prepare for the Renaissance---was acknowledged.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at [6:00 PM](#)
<http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/12/dunbars-mask.html>

Sunday, December 4, 2011

IF WE MUST DIE

E. Ethelbert Miller asks: "One of Claude McKay's best known poems is the sonnet "If We Must Die." This poem seems to inspire every generation when they read it or hear it recited. Does this poem have a special place in your heart? If so, why?"



CLAUDE MCKAY

I think it would be appropriate to let readers see the poem before I comment on it.

If we must die, let it not be like hogs
Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,
While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,
Making their mock at our accursed lot.
If we must die, O let us nobly die,
So that our precious blood may not be shed
In vain; then even the monsters we defy
Shall be constrained to honor us though dead!
O kinsmen! we must meet the common foe!
Though far outnumbered let us show us brave,
And for their thousand blows deal one deathblow!
What though before us lies the open grave?
Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack,

Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!

I believe Ethelbert is right about the response of each generation to McKay's famous poem. It was published in 1919 in the June issue of *The Liberator*, and I imagine it was a spirited, martial response to lynchings and other atrocities committed against black Americans. (See his poem entitled "The Lynching.") If I remember correctly, Winston Churchill read this poem on the radio during the Nazi blitz of London. That speaks well about its universality.

When I first encountered the poem it was in the 1960s so naturally my reading of it was textured by the Civil Rights, then Black Power Movements, and the feeling shared by many young black males, myself among them, that it was better to die fighting white racism than to submit in any way to it.

So, yes, "If We Must Die" has held a special place in my heart for my entire adult life. In my opinion, every black American in particular needs to know it the way they know "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing," and every American in general should know it the way they know William Ernest Henley's poem "Invictus."

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at [7:24 AM](http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/12/if-we-must-die.html)
<http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/12/if-we-must-die.html>

Monday, December 5, 2011

SELF EXAMINATION: Charles Johnson talks about Charles Johnson

E. Ethelbert Miller asks: "What mistakes did you make in your literary career that you would hope younger writers might avoid? What do you think would have prepared you better to be a writer?"

As a Buddhist, I do not like bragging. (That would violate one of the Precepts or formal vows that I took as a layman or *upasaka*.) But neither do I like false modesty. I prefer simple, objective statements of fact.

So in response to today's question, I have to say that I don't believe I ever made any "mistakes" in my literary career, partly because something I don't have is a "careerist" attitude toward writing. I write prodigiously, but I have no image of myself as a "writer." I don't conceptualize myself that way. As I've said a million times, being a "writer" was not my chosen profession. In my youth, I was a professional cartoonist/illustrator, journalist, and passionate student of philosophy. So I've always had a certain psychic distance from the activity of writing. And especially from the "book world." My ego isn't tied up in it. But once it became clear to me in the early 1970s that it was my personal *duty* (given my background) to create certain works to enrich American literature, I carefully studied the lives and works of American writers before me, especially the black ones, in order to learn from their mistakes. I did the same thing with John Gardner, who was arguably the best teacher of creative writing in our time. In high school, college, and graduate school I studied then later taught American (and world) literature to determine what was not there, what I felt needed to be there (a vigorous interface between philosophy Eastern and Western and fiction, and a respectful portrayal of the life of the spirit), then I worked steadily, systematically, year in year out, for 40 years to fill those gaps, and stretch those intellectual and aesthetic boundaries.

For the specific kind of writer I am---a philosophical one---I think I prepared myself fully. In other words, earning the Ph.D. in philosophy gave me the credentials I needed as a Western philosopher. I was tested and retested at two schools on Western intellectual history from the pre-Socratics to 20th century thinkers, and had to accumulate over time competency in Spanish, reading French and, on my own for the past 13 years, some facility with Sanskrit and Pali. I studied all 20th century methodological approaches in philosophy and immersed myself in one: phenomenology. I also worked harder than many of my fellow students in philosophy by, for example, studying philosophical works that were not required for the doctorate. Not taught by the faculty during my time in graduate school. So, for example, when I write about my passion, Eastern philosophy, I do so with Western rigor, not in the fuzzy-wuzzy, touchy-feely way that characterized too much popular writing about the East in the 1960s and early '70s.

And I think the artistic and intellectual range and depth of my body of work has no parallel in American literature. Certainly not in black American literature. As Dr. Richard Hart writes in "Charles Johnson: Philosopher, Writer, Friend" in *Charles Johnson: Embracing the World*, "A challenge to any possible skeptic---do a serious read and re-read of any handful of Johnson stories, think about them deeply, and then, after careful reflection, tell us who does it better? Who has a richer, more complex network of ideas and concepts and arguments permeating every

page of the text? Who does a better job of making his reader think about the toughest, perennial questions of life and its meaning, of history and culture, of moral responsibility and the value of human experience? Johnson...(is) the creator of the most refined and challenging philosophical literary art our country has likely ever known."

I accept Dr. Hart's judgment humbly, of course, because I did not choose my particular literary mission. It chose me. I just surrendered to it as a form of service, and once a work is done I do my best to avoid the literary spotlight, to quietly return to the demands of family life and the daily creative regimen I've maintained for decades. The literary fusion of the black American experience with Western and Eastern philosophy was the specific work I always knew was my particular province. (And, to be frank, I had to listen over the decades to many people, black and white, who were in opposition to what they felt was such an unusual literary project; many had a hard time comprehending it, some even seemed threatened by it.) Therefore, I've never felt in competition with any other writer, because they have their specific missions (or so I assume) and I have mine. Yet, it was also necessary for this *oeuvre* to expansively move outward to include many different forms of writing---the novel, the short story, the essay, literary journalism, documents on the craft of writing (theory to accompany practice), screen-and-teleplay writing, literary criticism, public addresses, reviewing, serving as an editor and judge for national prizes, *i.e.*, everything that "men of letters" and journeymen writers have traditionally been expected to do in the Western world. In this regard, I feel that since I began publishing in 1965, I have left no stone unturned. But I always returned to my primary and preferred focus, philosophical fiction and the philosophical essay. That is home base. That is the root for all the rest.

So, no, I don't think I made any "mistakes" given my particular, individual mission as an American writer/artist/philosopher/educator. I worked mindfully over four decades not to do that.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at [1:25 AM](#)
<http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/12/self-examination-charles-johnson-talks.html>

Tuesday, December 6, 2011

OCCUPYING PROSE: THE PROTEST NOVEL

"If an American negro finds that he has a vocation as a writer, he discovers his subject at the same time. He is the man who sees the whites from the outside, who assimilates the white culture from the outside, and each of his books will show the alienation of the black race within American society." Jean-Paul Sartre, *Literature and Existentialism*.

E. Ethelbert Miller asks: "Whatever happened to the term "protest" novel? This was once a label quickly placed on many books written by black authors. Has the black writer stopped protesting? Is this one of those terms that clashes with post-blackness? Did the protest novel have specific elements in its text? Has the world of Richard Wright disappeared?"

Thinking about Ethelbert's question, and Sartre's statement in the above epigraph, I'm reminded in 2011 of (1) Just how dated are Sartre's general ruminations on black American writers in the 1940s (and they were wrong back then in the '40s, too); and (2) Of how far black American literature has progressed in the last forty years beyond the "protest novel" and its aesthetic and intellectual limitations.

You can blame the Civil Rights Movement for making the black protest novel more or less obsolete by bringing the wide-spread policy of racial segregation to an end. (It's basically of historical interest now, I guess, like the slave narrative.) Now, the Movement did *not* end racism. We know better than to say that. But it did take some of the wind out of the sails of traditional, black protest fiction, which even James Baldwin complained about in his 1949 essay "Everybody's Protest Novel." Nevertheless, I rather suspect that many members of my generation (and older) have a difficult time adjusting to black fiction that isn't protesting or complaining about something---in other words, some people have a hard time "processing" a joyful (even playful) fiction by black writers that celebrates the beauty and mystery of life. As with Sartre, that just doesn't "compute" in the minds of some white as well as black readers. How, they wonder, can it be that black people love and enjoy life? And wouldn't want to be white? How can black American life be *good*? For many people I've met that's an oxymoron. Black equals bad. Black equals unhappiness. Black equals misery. Why would any sane person want to *be* black? (My wife and my best friend and I have laughed for many hours over that popular, supposedly "sympathetic" and "sensitive" understanding of black people.) The fact that such people are so stuck in the past (and know so little about black people), and are attached to a pre-1970s image and understanding of black America, is simply tragic. (Not long ago, rapper Snoop Dogg said, "When I started to star in films I used to say, 'I dream of becoming the black version of Tom Cruise.' Today I think it's the other way round, 'Tom Cruise could dream of becoming the white version of Snoop Dogg'.")

It's tragic because black people and the world have moved on, as well they should have. Busy, creative and constructive people really don't have any time to waste at a Pity Party. They have work to do (especially for the benefit of their loved ones and others) and they are about the business, each and every day, of doing it.

However, I see no reason why the protest novel per se or in general should vanish. I can imagine powerful works of fiction that dramatize many things that are wrong with the world, such as futile and self-destructive wars, global warming, violations of human rights, poverty and global hunger, the exploitation of women and sexual abuse of children, our treatment of animals, Wall Street greed, the abuse of the environment, organized crime, and the Mexican drug cartels. On and on, there is no end to the subjects a writer can protest, because the world is---and probably will always be---a cauldron of problems. As one of my former writing students once said to me in the '80s, "It's *easy* to be despairingly effective," and his statement suggested by implication that it's hard to convince contemporary readers of the beauty and rewarding aspects of life. Or of the goodness of our fellow men and women. Or of the sense that things turn out well. So there's always room in America for *some* kind of protest novel. For we will never see an end to worldly problems that are ripe for protesting. But it's a little late now to protest legal Jim Crow as a current problem.

But think about this: across America the Occupy Movement is engaged in protesting a rather long (and probably growing) list of problems. Its participants are engaged in many forms of protest, rather than sitting at home and reading fictitious events in a protest novel. They are in the streets, in parks, in foreclosed homes, on college campuses. They are moving their savings from banks to credit unions. Which approach do you think is more effective---the actions of the Occupy Movement or reading a protest novel---for changing the world? (Ahem, all you high school teachers and those teaching Freshman Composition out there reading E-Channel can lift that last sentence for an essay question for your students, if you wish.)

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at [8:32 PM](#)
<http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/12/occupying-prose-protest-novel.html>

Saturday, December 10, 2011

JOHNSON ON PHILOSOPHY AND THE HUMANITIES

E. Ethelbert Miller asks: "These are difficult times for the humanities. Are you concerned about fewer students seeking a degree in philosophy? Are educators downplaying the importance of this discipline? What are the implications of this?"

I recently had a very pleasant dinner at Serafina restaurant in Seattle with two of my colleagues in the Philosophy Department at the University of Washington (last April we did a special event together on philosophy and literature, which can be viewed at [Moral Imagination: A discussion of literature and moral awareness on Vimeo](#)), and two of their Ph.D. students, one white, one black. It pleases me to say that UW's Philosophy Department is doing well, attracting undergraduates, graduate students, and has a strong faculty of men and women who are passionate teachers. In fact, we seem to be witnessing a renaissance of interest in philosophy right now, perhaps because when times are difficult men and women more deeply question the world they live in (We should remember that the golden era of ancient Greek philosophy begins *after* Athens experiences its devastating defeat during the Peloponnesian War.)

However, during our dinner conversation I was surprised to learn that this department is eliminating its language requirement for the doctorate. Some years ago the language requirement was also dropped from the MFA in UW's Creative Writing Program, a move that baffled me insofar as anyone living in the increasingly knowledge-based, global economy of the 21st century---a world that has grown smaller---is at a cultural disadvantage if they don't know at least one foreign language. Writers especially should know one or more foreign languages in order to better understand their first language, the one they are born into.

So if I'm concerned about anything, it is the relaxing of a demanding curriculum in the humanities. Our students want that. They want to be challenged. Consider an opinion piece written by Ian Engelbeck, a senior at Skyline High School in Sammamish, Wa. It was published on December 8, 2011 in *The Seattle Times*. And this young man begins by addressing the budget cuts in education:

"WE are the future," he writes. "It's a phrase that gets thrown around a lot as students once again speak out against budget cuts to our education system. The powers-that-be must invest in 'the future,' they say....Cuts must be made, they allow, but not from the education system! The future must be protected, and cared for and coddled. It's in the hands of the politicians to keep the future alive and bright."

But in his next paragraph, Mr. Engelbeck says, "Well, there's one problem right there. Another problem is that these students seem to forget whose future it is. It isn't the future of the politicians. It's ours. So why are we letting the politicians do what they want with it? It's our future, and we need to take direct responsibility for it." He then launches into a rather eloquent discussion of what today's students need to do:

"Like any student, I've had good teachers and bad teachers. Our schools are never going to be filled with only good teachers, but there is one lesson best taught by a bad teacher: The responsibility for one's education can only be one's own.

"It's an often-quoted fact that one of the greatest scientific and political minds this continent has produced only had two years of formal education. This trivia about Benjamin Franklin is sometimes used to point out his unique genius. However, Franklin's genius is not unique. Why did one of 17 children of a candle and soap maker become so successful? As a child, Franklin quickly learned that nobody was going to do anything for him, and this was certainly true of his education. So he read. Franklin was self-educated and self-motivated and every student can be, too. Whether you go to a top-rated school or not, the value of your education is always going to be proportional to the effort you put into it. Students today can learn a lot by Franklin's example.

"Our state and our country are struggling. What is it about students that make us a special class of citizens who cannot be asked to make sacrifices? It is true that young people are the future of our nation, but we limit and paralyze ourselves when we expect to learn exclusively from teachers and professors, especially as we live in a time when information is more accessible than ever.

"Steve Jobs, Bill Gates, Albert Einstein, Walt Disney and Thomas Edison all dropped out of school at some time or other. Yet they are some of the people who pushed the limits of human knowledge and experience. The purpose of our education system is to mass-produce general knowledge. It is not designed to turn out new Edisons or Einsteins. Students have a choice: How would we like our education? Mass produced? Or made just for us? Surely the answer is "made just for us," for the same reason that the quality of a product handmade by a craftsman outstrips things that come off a production line.

"But craftsmen must be paid for their individual attention. The state cannot make an affordable education system based on that model. But students can. Every student is the craftsman of their own education, whether they realize it or not. We as students must dismiss the idea that we are entitled to a good education. We are not. Good education is not our country's duty to us, but our duty to our country and to ourselves. We cannot forget Kennedy's words: 'Ask not what your country can do for you — ask what you can do for your country.' We are the future, with all the responsibility that brings. We are citizens, with all the obligations of a citizen. We must shoulder these responsibilities; we must ensure for ourselves that we are well-educated. Nobody, not teachers or politicians, can do it for us."

I admire very much the wisdom that young Mr. Engelbeck has learned at such a young age. When he goes off to college next year he will be an ideal student, a delight for his professors, and most likely he will be a life-time learner never satisfied with the portion of knowledge he has at any given moment. Perhaps even if the academic department he studies in drops its foreign language requirement, he will pursue language study on his own in recognition that every curriculum by its very nature cannot be complete, and that it isn't true that "one size fits all." His op-ed opinion piece reminds of what I said in a Freshman Convocation address, "Four Years of Adventure," that I delivered at the University of Washington on September 29, 1996, which is reprinted in *Charles Johnson: Embracing the World* (Authorspress, India, 2011.) In that keynote

address, I said:

You cannot hold the university responsible for your intellectual life. The only person ultimately responsible for the diversity of your skills and the depth of your knowledge is *you*. You must bring the curiosity. You must bring the passion to--as the Greeks put it--"now thyself." The only thing your teachers can provide is a strong yet flexible foundation for learning, one that we expect you will build upon for the remainder of your days on this earth. I think educator Mortimer Adler sums this up very well when he says:

"What is the real end of learning? What is the ultimate goal toward which every part of schooling or education is directed? I think you all know the word that describes it. It is wisdom. We would all like to be a little wiser than we are--to have a little more understanding, a little more insight, a little more comprehension of the human situation, of the conditions of our lives, of the world in which we live; to know better the difference between good and evil. But how long does it take to become wise? The answer is, a lifetime. Certainly we all know that we cannot become wise in youth. Nothing would be more preposterous than the supposition that a boy or girl graduating from college could be wise.

"Nor can you ever have enough wisdom, or too much. No matter how wise we become little by little in the course of a lifetime, we are always less than perfectly wise, nor are we ever as wise as we can be. Hence, if wisdom is the ultimate goal of the whole process of learning, then that process must go on for a lifetime. For any of us to attain even the little wisdom we can acquire in the course of our whole life, there is no stopping short. We can never become wise enough to say 'Now I can stop learning or thinking.' Wisdom is hard to come by and is slowly won..."

As the old saying goes, education is not "filling a bucket," but rather "lighting a fire" in our students so that they can go beyond what we as educators and the schools at any given time can offer them, and even challenge and correct us in the future, for all knowledge is provisional and must be constantly refined and revised.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at [9:01 PM](#)

<http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/12/johnson-on-philosophy-and-humanities.html>

Saturday, December 10, 2011

WHEN THE BUDDHIST IS A BLACK MAN OR A BLACK WOMAN

E. Ethelbert Miller asks: "Many of the black writers who are Buddhists and write about Buddhism seem to be women. Where are the black men? You seem to be the exception. Does this really matter? Are there other black men writing about Buddhism but not receiving attention in the popular Buddhist's publications?"

After writer Rebecca Walker read the forum discussion "Why Is American Buddhism So White?" in the current issue of *Buddhadharma* magazine, she asked me an important question in an email: "I wonder why my husband wasn't invited to participate in this important discussion."

She was right to wonder why. Her husband is Vajrayana Lama Choyin Rangdröl. She interviewed him in the 2003 "Black Dharma" issue of *Turning Wheel: The Journal of Socially Engaged Buddhism*. They met at the first black American Buddhist retreat in 2002 at Spirit Rock in Woodacre, California. During that interview, she asked him, "What led to your decision to bring the Dharma to African Americans?" And he replied, "When I discovered that it was possible to avoid becoming ensnared in the mentality of an angry black man by applying Buddhism, I felt I had found a great treasure not just for me but also for resonance in millions of black people's minds."

Clearly, Lama Rangdröl could have enriched the *Buddhadharma* forum, for he is a pioneer in bringing dharma teachings to black Americans. However, in all fairness to that publication, when I passed Rebecca's remark along to my editor (I wrote the introduction for that forum), she replied that they simple hadn't acquainted themselves enough with Lama Rangdröl's work but intended to do so soon. My guess is that they will arrange at some point to publish an interview with him.

Another black male Buddhist teacher who deserves more recognition is George Mumford, who was interviewed in a 2003 issue of *Tricycle*. He is a sports psychologist who teaches *vipassana* meditation to the Chicago Bulls and Los Angeles Lakers, and who overcame years of drug and alcohol addiction. "I came to Buddhist practice because I had *dukkha, dukkha, dukkha*," said Mumford. "Excuse my language, but my ass was on fire. My life depended on meditation practice...I got into Twelve Step recovery and lo and behold, I had pain, I had to deal with a lot of chronic pain---migraines, headaches, back aches. And emotional pain and spiritual pain..."

Mumford then discovered *vipassana*, the practice taught world-wide with such success by Satya Narayan Goenke, and which the Buddha recommended to his followers at the end of the *Mahāsatipatthāna Sutta* (Great Discourse on the Establishing of Awareness). Mumford reports that, "I learned that I could control my mind. No matter what happened to me, I could choose my response to it. I had lived in fantasy all my life. Once I started getting involved in meditation, I realized that I did have an alternative. It was the first time I had a sense of control in my life..."

"I think the main benefit of meditation for inner-city African Americans," he added, "is impulse control. The inner city is a pressure cooker, full of tension and anxiety. It's easy to go off or to

reach for something to ease the pain. Meditation helps people understand the operation of their minds and emotions. It teaches us how to detach ourselves from outside provocation and from our habitual patterns of reaction. Now, I'm not suggesting that we should take abuse and racism and all that other stuff, and just breathe in, breath out. That's something else. But the first thing we have to do is have control of ourselves, and then we can choose with a clear mind."

Just in passing, I think it's important to say that Mumford states that all his uncles were alcoholics and died at a young age, His father was an alcoholic, too, and violent toward his family. Mumford confesses that, "I knew the taste of beer before I could walk. At fifteen or sixteen, I started snorting heroin." The dilemma he faced is one that is not uncommon for many at-risk young black men, the ones who succumb in adolescence (or pre-adolescence) to the group pressure of gangs, substance abuse, and criminal behavior. But Mumford discovered *vipassana*, a tool for analyzing and rebuilding his world at its source: the mind.

There are many Asian, white, black, male and female teachers who work daily at turning the Wheel of Dharma, but the general public is unaware of them because they do not publish books and articles or appear in the few mass market Buddhist magazines. Three black women do, and so they have become icons of "Black Dharma."

One is Dr. Jan Willis, who has been identified as the first black American scholar-practitioner of Tibetan Buddhism. She is a Sanskritist, an esteemed scholar of Religion and East Asian Studies at Wesleyan, where she has taught for thirty years, and is the author of a moving memoir entitled *Dreaming Me: From Baptist to Buddhist, One Woman's Spiritual Journey*. In 2009, she received the "Outstanding Woman in Buddhism" award for her work on behalf of Buddhist nuns, specifically her co-founding in 1995 a nunnery that houses 50 Buddhist nuns ages 42 to 83 in India. "People of color," said Willis in an interview, "because of our experience of the great and wrenching historical dramas of slavery, colonization, and segregation, understand suffering in a way that our white brothers and sisters do not." That understanding, she said, provides a kind of "head start" in comprehending essential elements in Buddhist philosophy. In the current issue of *Buddhadharma* she does not participate in the aforementioned forum, but has an article entitled, "Yes, We're Buddhists, too!"

The second publishing black woman Buddhist who is becoming increasingly well-known is Angel Kyoto Williams, author of *Being Black: Zen and the Art of Living With Fearlessness and Grace* (Viking Compass, 2000). And the third is Buddhist nun Zenju Earthlyn Manuel, who just published *Tell Me Something About Buddhism* (Hampton Roads, 2011).

When I think about black American Buddhists who are writers, I'm always reminded of two things. The first is something that was said to me by Helen Tworikov, the founder of and force behind *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*. She said, "A lot of people who publish in our magazine are good meditators, but not quite as good as writers." I believe that is a fair statement. Why should they be people who have devoted their lifetimes to writing? Their primary concern, first and foremost, is teaching others. For a few Buddhist teachers this leads to expressing what they have learned and experienced in a book or an essay. But, like mendicant monk Claude AnShin Thomas, author of *At Hell's Gate: A Soldier's Journey From War to Peace* (Shambhala, 2004), their daily work is in the trenches, helping others to overcome suffering. (For example,

Thomas spends 300 days a year on the road in America, South America and Europe, working with veterans on both sides of wars, with former child soldiers, and prisoners.)

The second thing that I'm reminded of is that, as a black male Buddhist writer, I'm probably an anomaly. Unlike the dharma teachers I've mentioned in this post, my adult life has been devoted to storytelling, comic art, and teaching the craft of writing for over three decades. As a footnote here, I should mention that my first publications with the folks at *Tricycle* were not essays or articles. They were 7 drawings (from my unpublished, 1970s cartoon manuscript, *It's Lonely at the Top*) in *Buddha Laughing: A Tricycle Book of Cartoons* (Bell Tower, 1999), a wonderfully hilarious little book of dharma humor. After that, Helen Tworikov asked me to write an article on the history of black Americans in Buddhism, which became "A Sangha By Another Name," the first piece in a popular Buddhist magazine on this subject. (And before leaving *Tricycle* to serve on its board of directors, one of Tworikov's last acts was to add me to the list of "contributing editors" on the magazine's masthead.)

So to sum up my response to today's question: There *are* black males out there teaching Buddhism and meditation (like Rangdröl and Mumford), but I'm more publicly visible (and not by any means a teacher, only a member of the laity, although the Puget Sound Zen Center does sell a handsomely produced tape of my September 17, 2006 talk "What is Freedom?," delivered at the 3rd Vashon Island Buddhist Seminar), because so much of my literary art is Buddhist oriented.



Posted by Ethelbert Miller at [9:20 PM](#)

<http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/12/when-buddhist-is-black-man-or-black.html>

Monday, December 12, 2011

BEING, RACE AND BROAD CELEBRATION

"This idea suits me down to the ground, the possibility that our art can be dangerous and wickedly diverse, enslaved to no single idea of Being, capable if necessary of unraveling, like Penelope, all that was spun the night before and creating from entirely new social and scientific premises if need be, or adjusting the seminal work of the past to address issues relevant to this age." From *Being and Race: Black Writing Since 1970*.



E. Ethelbert Millers asks: "Michael Boccia once wrote that *Being and Race: Black Writing Since 1970* is required reading for anyone interested in better understanding the thinking of Charles Johnson. Is this still true? Are writers best defined by their early work?"

Did Michael Boccia really say that? If so, then he's right. This work, my dissertation for which I received my Ph.D. in Philosophy, is something of an unusual hybrid: a phenomenological literary manifesto and a critical survey of black fiction between 1970 and 1988.

Being and Race: Black Writing Since 1970 was composed during a heightened period in the Culture Wars of the 1980s, and I spent a year and half writing it. I recall that you, Ethelbert, said to me that if I'd lived where you do in Washington D.C., people (you didn't say who exactly) would not have allowed me to publish it. I've always remembered that remark because it captured so well the challenge that non-ideological, independent black writers faced from the early 1970s well into the 1980s (and probably still face to a certain extent today). They faced censorship and suppression---that within a democracy that prides itself on its First Amendment.

It was published two years before I received the National Book Award in fiction for *Middle Passage* and the same year as Henry Louis Gates's *The Signifying Monkey*, a work that somehow managed to discuss many black writers Dr. Gates apparently liked, but made no mention whatsoever of my work (not one word), although by 1988 I had published a great deal to excellent reviews (*Faith and the Good Thing*, *Oxherding Tale*, the story collection, *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*, which was a finalist for the PEN/Faulkner; and, of course, two collections of comic art and much work during my time as a professional cartoonist as well as "Booker," an award-winning PBS docu-drama). I was also identified in the 1980s as one of the 10 best short story writers working then in a survey conducted by a university in California.

This was a period in American literary history when, during a reading I gave in Detroit, my white host remarked that he saw novelist David Bradley (*The Chaneyville Incident*) and myself

as being the "pariahs" of black American literature; when writer Tony Ardizzone once said he saw me as a "transitional figure" in black literature. One should ask, "Transition from *what*?" The answer: from decades of black American fiction locked within the confines of poorly conceived, highly politicized, race-based "aesthetic" notions popularized during the Black Arts Movement (and black Cultural Nationalism) of the 1960s. Thirty years ago I moved---and move still---outside ideological frameworks for the creation of art, and *Being and Race* was the philosophical and theoretical document I published to create a path for that "transition." For myself and others who needed a refuge from political correctness. And the dumbing down of black thought. Its intention was the same as that of John Locke when he wrote *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, i.e., that of "clearing the ground a little, and removing some of the rubbish that lies in the way of knowledge." To *my* knowledge, it is the only book-length, philosophical manifesto of literary aesthetics in black American literature by a creative writer.

So, yes, Boccia is right. The first section of this book, titled "First Philosophy" (which means a laying down of foundational ideas and principles) consists of three chapters, their titles being "Being and Race," "Being and Fiction," and "Being and Form." I stand by every word written in those chapters twenty-three years ago. And since its publication, I have only sought to deepen and refine (or build upon) the meditation in the opening three chapters of that first section. I'm still so fond of that book that I will conclude this post with the way *Being and Race* came to rest in 1988:

"Everyone," Schopenhauer wrote in *The World as Will and Representation*, "must stand before a picture as before a prince, waiting to see whether it will speak and what it will say to him; and, as with the prince, so he himself must not address it, for then he would hear only himself." And so it is for both the critic and the creator of fiction. Such egoless listening is the precondition for the species of black American fiction I see taking form on the horizon of contemporary practice, one that enables us as a people---as a culture---to move from narrow complaint to broad celebration.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at [8:18 AM](#)

<http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/12/being-race-and-broad-celebration.html>

Tuesday, December 13, 2011

THE JOHNSON LIST OF PHILOSOPHICAL QUESTIONS

E. Ethelbert Miller asks: " Might you be able to develop a short list of philosophical questions that could guide our society? I'm thinking of the "big ideas" that politicians, teachers and business people need to be thinking about. For example, what ethical questions should a police officer always be aware of?

Okay, I'm willing to take a stab at this question. I offer 12 questions for E-Channel readers, politicians, teachers, and business people to think about.

1. (For a police officer): Is the "thin blue line" of which I am a part the last defense between civilization on the one side, and barbarism and chaos on the other? If not us as unionized, public servants (like teachers), then who will prevent crime and the unraveling of civil society?
2. (Let's add one for a soldier, especially those in special ops): Am I one of the "rough men" George Orwell spoke of when he said, "People sleep peaceably in their beds at night only because rough men stand ready to do violence on their behalf"?" (Yes, it's OK to think of this in terms of the recent killing of Osama bin Laden.)
- 3). Thinking of JFK's statement, "Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country," what as an American are my personal, daily responsibilities in regard to perpetuating civilization---and hard-won civilized and moral values in the Western world---from one generation to the next?
4. What does it mean for someone to be truly civilized?
5. Where do I end and you begin?
6. What counts as "knowledge"? What does it mean to truly "know" something or someone? What are the rigorous, empirical requirements for "knowing" something? Can we "know" anything (outside of tautologies) with absolute certainty?
7. As a teacher, am I personally responsible if a student mistakes what I say in class and uses my words to commit a crime or some immoral action? (See my short story "The Education of Mingo.") As a parent, if my child grows up to become a serial killer, am I responsible?
8. As a writer (especially a screenwriter) or public figure, am I responsible if what I create or say leads someone to do an act we would consider to be evil? (Movies has often turned up in court as the defending lawyer's justification for a person's actions.)
9. How do we define "the good life"? Depending on your definition, is a society (or government) able to deliver this? Or is its realization in the hands of the individual?

10. If, as Hobbes stated in *Leviathan*, men and women give up the freedom they have in the dangerous "state of Nature" in order to live more comfortably and safely by a "social contract" with others, what are the specific terms of that "social contract"? When has society failed to hold up its end? When have citizens failed to hold up theirs? What is the American social contract?

11. Should societies have a collective goal? If so, what should that be?

12. If, as writer John Gardner once said, the tension in society is always between order and permissiveness, how do we find a middle ground between these extremes? When does the impulse toward order turn into fascism and permissiveness turn into the breakdown of shared values? Was Freud on to something when he said in *Civilization and its Discontents* that the id or sexual impulses must be restrained for the sake of social order---or was he just an old-fangled fuddy-duddy?

This is just a short list. I could go on and on.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at [11:39 AM](#)

<http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/12/johnson-list-of-philosophical-questions.html>

Wednesday, December 14, 2011

THE 4TH CONTEXT

E. Ethelbert Miller asks: "In her book *Charles Johnson In Context* Linda Selzer looks at your work in relationship to "the critical issues raised by the emergence of three black intellectual and cultural formations in the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first centuries: black philosophers, black Buddhists, and "new"black public intellectuals." Might one conclude that with the election of Obama and intellectual discussions turning to post-blackness we are seeing the birth of a 4th context by which to view your work?"

Quietly, and almost too subtly for most of us to consciously recognize, Barack Obama's first term in office has, I think, made the question of his "race" irrelevant to intelligent Americans in their political and cultural discussions. Love him or hate him, the matters of importance discussed for the last three years have been those that are about his daily performance as POTUS, that is, the same questions about individual performance that we would talk about for his predecessors in the White House. How well or poorly has he been responding to America's economic problems? Do we approve or disapprove of his handling of America's interests in international affairs? Has he been good or bad as a post-9/11 defender of this nation? We, the public, have been judging him strictly in terms of the policies he promotes and those he opposes. It's interesting to note, too, that before his campaign to become the GOP's presidential candidate was derailed by accusations of sexual misbehaving, Herman Cain was primarily talked about in terms of whether his 9-9-9 plan was a good or bad idea, and if he knew enough about international affairs to be qualified to sit in the Oval office---exactly the same questions the public had about Rick Perry's competence in that area. The "race" of either Cain or Perry (or Obama) was as unimportant for these deliberations as their weight or the size of their waist-lines.

This is how progress often incrementally happens. Not dramatically, but rather in terms of what people once obsessed over in the past simply falling away from their consciousness, like skin from a snake, or is forgotten. Or the matter suddenly strikes us as being very shop-worn and very boring. One day we wake up and suddenly realize, "Hey, we haven't talked about Obama or Cain being black guys in a long time," and no sooner than the words leave our lips, it's clear to us and everybody else in the room that these two being "black guys" (whatever that is supposed to mean) is not only unimportant---it's downright uninteresting. To be honest, "identity politics" has always been uninteresting and wrong-headed. Is it really important that this administration's Secretary of State (as well as that for the last administration) is a woman? We all know the answer to that is, no. First we cheer and celebrate the historical racial or gender breakthrough, as we should. Then it fast becomes old news and joins the ranks of the Been There and Done That.

True enough, there are still Americans who cling to essentialistic notions of "blackness" and "whiteness," and to some vague feelings about "race." They are fast becoming dinosaurs in 21st century America. In today's world, people who talk in those terms just sound *odd*. Like they're stuck in the past or a time warp. Their eventual extinction is something we should welcome as social evolution and greater social enlightenment leaves them behind, consigned to the dust bin of history (like my tragic character George Hawkins in *Oxherding Tale*.). Our children---those twenty-somethings---and our grand-children in the post-civil rights era seem not weighted down

by the historical baggage of race-consciousness that even some aging Baby Boomers born at the end of the era of segregation still carry to a certain degree. Is that the meaning of the phrase "post-blackness"? If it means that most Americans today see notions of "race" as being as silly, cumbersome and unnecessary to carry around in their heads as the medieval belief in angels or devils, or the 19th century search by scientists for phlogiston, then I would say: hallelujah, we are witnessing some small but significant measure of progress for our species.

In 1974, when *Faith and the Good Thing* was published, one enthusiastic reviewer referred to it as being "raceless." In other words, what was important in that story was not the fact that Faith Cross was black, but instead her Candide-like journey through 2,000 years of ethical ideas about the Good was the novel's focus. So it has been with my other novels, and so many of my short stories, some of which do not even identify the race of their main characters ("Kwoon," "Moving Pictures," some of the stories in *Dr. King's Refrigerator and Other Bedtime Stories*). Why have I always approached my characters that way? The answer: because whatever we call their "race" is one fact among many about them, and not even the most interesting fact about them. My stories are not *blind* to their racial history and background, but neither are the characters *bound* by that history or background. And what my best stories are about are conflicts of a philosophical kind that have (or so I hope) universal application across what we call the human condition. It is fair, then, yes, to see my literary art in terms of "post-blackness."

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at [8:30 AM](#)
<http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/12/4th-context.html>

Thursday, December 15, 2011

WHAT DOES THE E STAND FOR?

E. Ethelbert Miller asks: "What new things about your life might critics and readers learn by going to the e-channel? What questions (sent to you) were questions you didn't want to answer? Why?"



As this year-long E-Channel project draws to a close, Ethelbert's question today is appropriate in terms of our summing up this unique literary project. E-Channel is the most intimate, candid, and revealing record (or transcript) of a writer's life, heart and mind that you will find outside of an official biography, or an autobiography. I have a very fat folder of his questions, and I counted them last night. By my ballpark estimate, he asked me 403 questions, and of those I've so far responded to 214. For those who have kindly followed these posts for a year, it's probably clear by now that the off-stage, "invisible" person asking these questions---"probes," as he once called them---brings a rich and nonpareil background to his queries. Indeed, he should be on the receiving end of a year's worth of questions himself. So let me take a moment to reflect upon this very special poet and activist for the arts who conceived and sustained the E-channel adventure for a year.

It is difficult to find someone who has not been influenced by Ethelbert Miller's unselfish contributions to American literary culture since the late 1960s. A *Washington Post* feature on Ethelbert once referred to him as "Mr. 411," the man who you contact if you have a question about literary artists in this country. That nickname is appropriate because he is a walking Rolodex. For two generations now, he has devoted himself, year in and year out, to the support of other writers, young and old, even lobbying for them to receive jobs. In the literary world, he is as ubiquitous as air. It is extremely difficult to find someone in literary America today who has

not met or heard of him, or received his help and generous support at one time or another. Because of all that he has done for so many of us in the arts, I often call him "Mr. Wizard." At other times, I just call him "BrerBert." (And as of this year, I've been calling him "BuddhaBert.") Listen: he is the reason I and eleven other black writers appear on stamps issued in Ghana and Uganda and, of course, Ethelbert never thought of including *himself* among the writers he selected for this honor. That is not his Way. And it is shocking (even alarming) to me when I think about the fact that he does not keep an updated curriculum vitae.

The general public may not know all that Ethelbert Miller has done (his karma is vast, wide, and deep; the professional hats he wears are numerous), but I suspect that the Almighty does and keeps this poet's c.v. updated for him. If kept properly, it would probably run for hundreds of single-spaced pages, for he is always on the road to deliver another speech or reading, teach another class, appear on another television program as a public intellectual, or lend his support to yet another arts event. He has a heart as big as all outdoors. Unlike so many writers I've met since the 1970s, who were self-absorbed, narcissistic, vain, egotistical and always self-promoting (and uninterested in the work of others), Ethelbert unfailingly puts others first. For him art is spirit-work. He is always imagining ways to honor his kinsmen and kinswomen in the arts. In the era of Hip Hop, he is an Old School black man, one steeped in (black) American history, one who works to realize the "beloved community," here and abroad, that Martin Luther King Jr. spoke of so eloquently. I think he is also much influenced by the emphasis that James Baldwin placed on the importance of bringing love to race relations. He channels Langston Hughes and Coltrane's "A Love Supreme." He works as indefatigably as W.E.B. Du Bois or ML King Jr., and his work is always in support of social justice and bringing to the community of literary artists on this continent (and other continents) a spirit of cooperation, not competition; compassion, not indifference; and idealism, not cynicism. He understands human suffering. He *cares* about everyone.

Since 1974, he has directed the African American Resource Center at Howard University. He chairs the board of the Institute of Policy Studies, a liberal think tank in Washington, D.C. A poet, memoirist, prose writer, editor, and arts ambassador-at-large, he should have long ago received, in my humble opinion, a MacArthur fellowship (I'd wager that he would use that money to financially help other writers and small presses.) In point of fact, he is deserving of a National Medal of Honor for the countless ways he has enriched literary culture, and for the *way* he has done this which, to my knowledge, has no parallel in American literary history.

Ethelbert's intention with E-channel was to help students, readers, and scholars better understand my life and work. Here, one should find information about my childhood and family, the theory and practice of my art, my individual passions, my career as a professional cartoonist/illustrator and journalist, my 20 years of work as a screen-and-teleplay writer, 33 years as a college professor, my life as a trained philosopher (and life-long martial artist), my commitment to Buddhism, and even personal anecdotes that I previously have never shared with others in print. So this project he created makes visible aspects of my life's journey that were most likely "invisible" before. But one consequence of this year-long project for me is that, even though we first met in the 1980s, I believe I understand Ethelbert Miller with somewhat greater clarity now. And that is a blessing for which I am thankful. Without seeking reward or recognition, he works daily for the betterment of not only our literary culture, but also for the betterment of our social

lives in general. Thus, it was inevitable that while he asked me a remarkable range of questions, many of those 403 queries focused on matters of race and politics. To the best of my ability, I tried to respond to questions on those subjects. But generally I gravitated to the questions about subjects that I have studied for a lifetime, or the ones where I could speak from direct experience. For readers curious about the questions I never got around to answering, here is a sampling:

1. You will become a grandfather in 2012. How does this compare to your literary career? What types of dreams and hopes do you have for your grandchildren? Will you encourage him/her to follow the path? What first lessons will you teach?

2. As a prominent writer how often are you asked to sign political petitions? Is this something you would rather not do? If so, why?

3. We know you like dogs. Are you a strong advocate of animal rights? Can animal rights ever come before human rights?

4. Would you donate your sperm to a lesbian couple that wanted to have children? What new moral and ethical questions might this raise regarding sex and family?

5. As a writer, do you think paper is dead?

6. I'm reading your chapbook about libraries and was curious as to whether you had the same feeling about bookstores. Recently Borders closed its doors. Do you think a way of life might die if bookstores continue to vanish? Do you have any favorite bookstores? I guess I will always be in love with City Lights in San Francisco.

7. You were recently one of the National Book Award judges (for fiction). did you notice any trends in contemporary fiction? Were you disappointed or excited by the many books you read?

8. Do you believe there might be life on other planets? How might the discovery of this other life form redefine what man is?

9. How should writers use libraries?

10. Can a good fiction writer be a poor script writer? If so, why?

11. Are there stages to human love?

12. When and why might a writer change publishers, editors or agents?
13. Herbert Marcuse had a significant influence on the philosophy student Angela Davis. What is your opinion of Marcuse's intellectual work? Did the Angela Davis case affect you back in the 1970s?
14. How important is a good cup of coffee on a writing day? Do you have a special brand?
15. How do you feel Obama has been treated or presented in political cartoons?
16. Do you feel color is still an issue within the Black community? Can we move beyond it?
17. As a philosopher what advice would you give to people in the Middle East pursuing democracy in their countries? What are the elements of democracy? Is there a Western or Eastern approach to (or view of) democracy? What role should (or can) religion play in helping man govern his society better?
18. I often read about the historical relationship between Christianity and Islam. What about the historical relationship between Buddhism and Islam? Have you spent time studying the Quran?
19. What is your opinion of memoir writing? Is it something you feel you could teach even though you've not written a memoir?
20. During my college years everyone was reading Albert Camus. Should we return to our Camus? What might this writer teach a young generation?

Anyone can see that Ethelbert invested a remarkable amount of time and energy in formulating questions for me to answer over twelve months. Really, this was a daunting challenge. He had to go through my novels, stories, essays, public addresses, comic art, the volumes of literary scholarship published about my work, and much more in order to individuate the questions he sent to me. Just for the record, I have to say that we never had a serious argument during this year-long journey. Nothing fatal, at least. And I rather suspect the reason for the ease with which the E-channel project happened can be traced to the fact that we, as black men and artists, have made much the same cultural and existential odyssey across the racial landscape of America from the end of World War II to the dawn of a new century. We speak the same language. We know the same things, and so we could talk the way the late August Wilson and I did for 15 years here in Seattle.

Ethelbert, thank you for these twelve months of spirited conversation about Everything.

P.S. Ethelbert should use his own photo as an illustration for this post, but how much do you want to bet that, in his modesty, he won't?

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at [2:01 PM](#)

<http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/12/what-does-e-stand-for.html>

Friday, December 16, 2011

JOHNSON & SELZER AT THE MLA

E. Ethelbert Miller asks: "What are you and Linda Selzer going to be doing on January 7th at the MLA Conference in Seattle? What new forms of intellectual inquiry might one look forward to?"

Today's answer will be brief. Less a regular post or a brief essay than a kind of public service announcement.

The Modern Language Association selects different cities for its annual meeting. And in each city MLA features a conversation by a local writer and a literary scholar familiar with his or her work. This year English professors will descend upon Seattle from January 5 through 8.

On Saturday the 7th from 5:15 to 6:30 PM, literary scholar Linda Furgerson Selzer, a professor at The Pennsylvania State University and author of *Charles Johnson in Context* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2009), will join me for a session titled "A Creative Conversation with Charles Johnson." Ours is session number 584 and is scheduled to take place in room 6A at the Washington State Convention Center.

It wouldn't be fair to Dr. Selzer for me to reveal too much about what she has planned for our session. So I'll offer no specific details. But I can generally say that earlier this week I received from her a very exciting outline for all that she would like to cover during our session at MLA. Really, it's a rich outline, touching on as many aspects of my life and work as she covers in her superb critical book. Her outline almost resembles a well-crafted script that will feature fiction reading and film, lively conversation and Q&A with the audience, and a tour through philosophical fiction, Western and Eastern. Dr. Selzer has planned this carefully, like a good director. Steven Spielberg couldn't have done it better. Judging from what I see in her outline, there will not be a dull moment during session 584.

So, if you plan on attending MLA in Seattle next month, please drop by room 6A at 5:15 PM. Dr. Selzer and I will do our best to entertain, please, and enlighten.



Posted by Ethelbert Miller at [8:23 AM](#)

<http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/12/johnson-selzer-at-mla.html>

Saturday, December 17, 2011

KAMADHATU: A MODERN SUTRA

E. Ethelbert Miller: "In "Kamadhatu, A Modern Sutra" we are introduced to Cynthia Tucker. She seems to renounce the academic life at the end of your story. Did your spiritual development ever make you want to consider doing something like that? Is Tucker a character that might appear again in a future story?"

I think it might be helpful if I unpack and explain a little of the complex personal and professional history behind the creation of "Kamadhatu: A Modern Sutra." There is often so much beneath and behind the genesis of a particular story that sometimes it is helpful if a writer explains in detail how a particular work came to be. The following explanation will be timely, I hope, because "Kamadhatu" will be published in the next issue of *Shambhala Sun*. It will be that popular Buddhist magazine's second feature in the issue soon to reach newsstands. (Giving a work of fiction such a high profile is something rare for their publication, though its editors previously have reprinted two of my other stories, "Dr. King's Refrigerator" and "Prince of the Ascetics.")

In my first story collection, *The Sorcerer's Apprentice: Tales and Conjurations* (Atheneum, 1986) there is a second-person story titled "Moving Pictures." This story was first published in *North American Review* in 1985, and reprinted in *Sudden Fiction: American Short-Short Stories*, edited by Robert Shapard and James Thomas (Peregrine Smith Books, 1986), with a statement that I wrote on this (at the time) new literary form, often called these days "flash fiction" or "blasters." It was reprinted again in *Fictions*, edited by Joseph Trimmer and C. Wade Jennings (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1989). Here is what I wrote about the short-short story as a form in the volume by Shapard and Thomas:

"The likely father of the unusual form called the contemporary short-short story is, I'd wager, Edgar Allan Poe who, in his classic essay called "On the Aim and Technique of the Short Story" (1842), emphasized for modern fiction the virtues of brevity, priority of 'effect,' and the unity achieved by a work short enough to be read in a single sitting. Of course, the blame for fathering this form can't be placed on Poe alone. Editors like it because it means we can publish several titles in a single issue, thereby creating diversity. (Note: when I wrote this I was serving as fiction editor of *The Seattle Review*, a position I held from 1978 to 1998). Readers, who are doubtlessly the real culprits here, can digest the short-short in a few minutes as they sit in the bathroom, ride the bus, or wait in the checkout line at Safeway---if nothing else, the short-short is symptomatic of an Age where speed is everything, the Concorde is admired because it saves time, and where our rhythms have been conditioned by sitcoms that stop at twelve-minute intervals for commercial breaks; an Age of "digests" that churn out three-minute videos for adolescents with short attention spans, fast-food restaurants, and the 24-hour divorce. Can anyone doubt that for a tired, time-harried reader, who has dozens of things competing for his or her attention, the short-short is fiction's version of the quick-fix?

"Yet, it can be a powerful fix, like poetry which it resembles because the short-short

demands compression and economy. It usually relies on narration (dramatic scenes classically structured on Aristotelian lines take too long), a bewitching voice and, given its brevity, it often achieves the lasting wallop carried by Japanese haiku and koans, as in the fiction of Jim Heynen and Barry Lopez. It is strangely pure. And all of a piece. Moreover, it is protean, assuming any shape---the sketch, fable, parable, a transcript of dialogue, a list---and, adding to its appeal, it gives writers a vehicle for expressing all those scraps of experience that are fascinating but too thin for a traditional 'rising-conflict-to-resolution' story or novella. Only a fool would rigidly define the short-short because, above all else, it must be an innovative, attention-grabbing exploration of that perennial mystery that is the origin and end of expression itself: language."

So the above statement was how in 1986 I saw the way we experienced the *form* of "short-short" fictions like "Moving Pictures." On the surface, that story is about an unhappy novelist-turned screen-writer who sits in a Seattle movie theater, the Neptune Theater, watching a film he wrote the script for. His life is a modern mess. His wife is divorcing him, he "sold out" his artistic dreams for the lure of doing profitable hack-work in Hollywood, etc. Clearly, when I wrote this I was being somewhat cynical about some of my experiences based on the script-writing I did for PBS in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The unnamed, second-person protagonist (the "you") is watching a film he wrote, a silly Western, and he remembers seeing what the film looked like on reels in the editing room. It is at this point that the story draws upon Buddhist epistemology to dramatize how the Dharma describes our acts of perception, *i.e.*, Buddhist writers have often metaphorically compared the blank screen in a movie theater to the mind upon which is projected all manner of perceptions and passions and events yet the blank movie screen (consciousness, or one's original mind "before one's parents were born," as one Zen koan puts it) remains pure and untouched by this eruption of perceptual experience. The mind remains as unsullied as the fabled Lotus flower that rises up from muck and mud. But the story's protagonist never realizes that (if he did, he would be led to awakening and liberation); he never sees that, ironically, he is "a triple-threat talent...producer, star, and director in the longest, most fabulous show of all." In other words, his life and all things he experiences are products of his own mind.

Over the years when visiting different colleges and universities, I met two professors who taught "Moving Pictures" because, I guess, the use of a film world setting appealed to them (or they thought it would appeal to their students). But they completely missed the philosophical level of Buddhist epistemology or theory of perception at the story's center. They only saw the "surface" of this story. That always disappointed me. But then the late scholar Gary Storhoff, my friend and a Buddhist, published a reading of "Moving Pictures" that explained its meaning perfectly. I always felt indebted to Dr. Storhoff for this explication of the text. And indebted, too, when at one of the meetings for the Charles Johnson Society at the American Literature Association (Storhoff was one of the Society's officers; see my E-Channel tribute to him dated November 14, 2011), he again stunned his audience (and me) with another Buddhist reading of one of my fictions, "Executive Decision." At that meeting, I swore to him that he had inspired me to take another shot at dramatizing Buddhist epistemology, this time in a story that might be more accessible to general readers. That story is "Kamadhatu: A Modern Sutra."

It was written in 2004 as one of my (now 13) stories created for the annual Bedtime Stories fundraiser sponsored by Humanities Washington (the theme we were given to write about that year was "dreamland"). The story is dedicated to Martin Hughes, and that is an important detail. In

the 1990s, I had a black student in one of my creative writing classes who was a friend of Hughes, a young, white Buddhist monk who grew up in the northwest and began Zen training in Japan when he was 18-years-old. That student introduced us. Over the years, Martin Hughes and I became friends. He worked out at the "Twin Tigers" Choy Li Fut kung-fu studio I co-directed with Gray Cassidy in Seattle. He showed me his poetry and prose, and a manuscript (still unpublished) he wrote about his experiences training in the Rinzai Zen tradition, which I gave him some editorial advice on. Our friendship was deeply rewarding for me, and I learned much about his unique life in Japan as a (white) monk.

Martin Hughes became a Rinzai Zen abbot and priest, one of only two white abbots in Japan. With that "promotion," he was able to apply for and receive his own temple in Osaka, one of many old, abandoned temples in a Japan that today does little to sustain its rich Buddhist history. Hughes named his temple Daigo-ji Temple (Anraku-ji). Downstairs, just inside the entrance at my front door, there is a framed, 100-year-old scroll written in delicate calligraphy on rice paper in Japanese (a Buddhist prayer or *gatha*), one of several Hughes unearthed when he began repairing and cleaning his temple, and which he sent to me as a gift. He drew up a list of international names (his friends and associates) who he wished to have as the first members at Diago-ji. Cassidy and I were among the first 20 or so people he registered as members. Then, suddenly, we stopped receiving messages from Martin Hughes. Time went by---a few years---and still we heard nothing until one of our martial arts students who grew up in Osaka, a young Japanese woman, said she would look into where Hughes was when she made a visit home. We learned that Martin Hughes was dead. He had volunteered to do social work helping young street kids in the Philippines. There, he ate something not properly cooked or sanitary, fell into a coma, and died at a too young age.

Even as I write these words, my heart is heavy. I still have manuscripts of his writing (prose and poetry) that he sent me. Some years ago, I was able to convince an editor at *Manoa*, a literary journal in Hawaii, with whom I sometimes correspond, to publish some of Hughes's writing in one of their special issues. What I know about the everyday practice of Buddhism in contemporary Japan is largely what I learned from my friendship with Martin Hughes, and so "Kamadhatu" is dedicated to him.

(By the way, there is a special sadness---and responsibility---that falls to someone when they are entrusted with the work of a writer friend who has passed away. Here at my house, I also have two boxes of writing by my high school creative writing teacher, Marie Claire Davis. She published three of my youthful stories---"short-shorts"---in 1965 when I took one of her writing classes. At the time, her claim to fame was publishing a few stories in *The Saturday Evening Post*. At Evanston Township High School in the 1990s, I funded an award in her name, "The Marie Claire Davis Award," that is given each spring to a senior for the best portfolio of writing. The English professors at E.T.H.S. select the winner each year and send me a copy of his or her work. Even after she retired from teaching and lived in Florida with her husband, Marie Claire Davis would travel back to Evanston, Illinois in the spring to shake the hand of the winner of the award named after her---she once wrote me that she felt this award vindicated the years she spent struggling to write, always juggling the demands of teaching with her desire to create fiction. A couple of years ago, Marie Claire died. Her husband just couldn't bear to have her writing around as a reminder of his lost loved one, so he asked me if I would take this material. I

did. Two boxes. In those boxes are diaries and workbooks dating back to the 1930s when Marie Claire was a teenager and dreamed of becoming a writer. My hands almost tremble when I handle these workbooks, letters, drafts of her fiction, and diaries: they are a special portal into her life, a time machine that takes me back to the Great Depression. And I know, like the writing of Martin Hughes, that this work must be preserved for posterity. Whenever I give my "papers" to some university---two or three have requested them---you will find among those papers two boxes of writing by Marie Claire Davis and material from Martin Hughes.)

The protagonist of the story "Kamadhatu" is Toshiro Ogama, a young Japanese abbot who, like Martin Hughes, acquires and restores a very old temple, where he lives alone. He has a tragic past and doesn't wish to see visitors. To make a little money, he translates American books for Hayakawa Shobo (my Japanese publisher for *Middle Passage*). One day a visitor *does* appear at his temple---a young black American Buddhist named Cynthia Tucker. She comes to visit him because he is translating one of her books on the Dharma. Tucker is very much based on black American Buddhist writers such as Jan Willis and Angel Kyoto Williams. She volunteers to help him clean some store rooms at his temple. There, she finds an old movie projector and canisters of film that record life at this temple in the 1950s. Toshiro's encounter with Tucker and this film footage, which I will let readers experience for themselves, leads to my second attempt to dramatize Buddhist epistemology using the metaphor of movies. Perhaps one day I will compose another story featuring Cynthia Tucker since black women practitioners of the Dharma are seldom portrayed in our fiction.

When I finished this story, and read it at Bedtime Stories, I was so emotionally drained that I didn't even bother to send it to my literary agent. I just stuck it in one of my filing cabinets of writing (there are 4 full ones here in my study). But later, Indian scholar, Nibir Ghosh, who spent the 2003-04 academic year at the University of Washington on a Senior Fulbright Fellowship to study black American literature in general, and my work in particular, wrote me after he returned to Agra College (where he chairs the Department of English Studies and Research) and requested a story for *Re-Markings*, the journal of scholarly articles, stories, and poems that he publishes. So "Kamadhatu" first appeared in a publication in India, Vol. 6, No 1, March 2007 of *Re-Markings*. When Ethelbert Miller and Dr. Ghosh published *Charles Johnson: Embracing the World* (Authorspress in India, 2011) Ghosh included "Kamadhatu" in this festschrift volume. When I read it again after so many years, I realized I should give the publisher at *Shambhala Sun* the opportunity to read it. So I sent him a copy. He responded with great enthusiasm, bless him, and so after seven years this story will finally be available to American readers.

This, then, is the history behind the eight-page story titled "Kamadhatu: A Modern Sutra."

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at [7:09 AM](#)
<http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/12/kamadhatu-modern-sutra.html>

Sunday, December 18, 2011

FROM SILENCE TO SKEETER

"Thus, by its very nature, idle talk is a closing-off, since to go back to the ground of what is talked about is something which it *leaves undone*." Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*.

E. Ethelbert Miller asks: "Sharyn Skeeter wrote "Walking Meditation: Sangha on Unbound Pages" for you. Here is the last stanza of her poem:

*Your pages breathe, flicker
in light. Gongs vibrate,
pulse, dissolve into silence.*

What might one learn from the "silence" in your life? What have you decided not to place on paper? Sharyn Skeeter seems to be a kindred spirit. When did you meet her?

I think this question is very important. What things do we---should we---remain silent about? I can answer this question by referring to the title of a book of my collected interviews, *Passing the Three Gates: Interviews with Charles Johnson*, edited by Jim McWilliams (University of Washington Press, 2004). And what does "passing the three gates" mean?

In Buddhist, Hindu and Islamic literature I've seen versions of the spiritual advice known as "passing the three gates." The advice is a guide for how we should speak, or what Buddhists call Right Speech. Before we make our thoughts and feeling public in speech (and I would also say, writing), we must first mindfully determine if they are worthy of being shared by passing them through Three Gates. These gates take the form of three questions: (1) Is what we are about to say true? (2) Is it necessary? And (3) Will it do no harm?

I always try to consider these three questions (or gates) before I speak or write anything. For example, after reading some of my E-Channel posts that described my father, a writer-friend here in Seattle told me that he thought a book about my Dad would be a great idea. I assured him that book will never happen because my father was a very private man who had no interest in the details of his life being offered up for public consumption or, if you will, public entertainment. (That stance was very much a part of what I always saw as his personal integrity.) So, no, he would not have approved of my doing such a book.

If there is a principle here, it is this: it is not always *necessary* to say or write everything we know. Or feel. Or think. Some matters we should be silent about, especially if they will potentially cause harm or hurt to others. Indeed, some matters we remain silent about because they are no one else's damned business. And there is a beauty in silence. It is the background, the backdrop, and the precondition *for* speech and sound, the Ground from which all sounds arise and into which they vanish as all things do in *shūnyatā*, or emptiness or the Void. For this reason I abhor gossip, what Heidegger in *Being and Time* called "idle talk," and *unmindful* speech that plays fast and loose with truth. Listen to Heidegger for a moment on this matter:

"Idle talk is constituted by just such gossiping and passing the word along---a process by which its initial lack of grounds to stand on becomes aggravated to complete groundlessness. And indeed this idle talk is not confined to vocal gossip, but even spreads to what we write,

where it takes the form of 'scribbling.' In this case the gossip is not based so much on hearsay. It feeds upon superficial reading. The average understanding of the reader will *never be able* to decide what has been drawn from primordial sources with a struggle and how much is just gossip...Discourse...has the possibility of becoming idle talk. And when it does, it serves not so much to keep Being-in-the world open for us in an articulated understanding, as rather to close it off, and cover up the entities within-the-world. To do this one need not aim to deceive...The fact that something has been said groundlessly, and then gets passed along in further retelling, amounts to perverting the act of disclosing."



In the 1995 film *Crimson Tide*, the character Captain Frank Ramsey (played by Gene Hackman) is commander of a nuclear missile submarine. Early in the story he has a strong, important moment with his new executive officer or (XO) Lieutenant Commander Ron Hunter (played by Denzel Washington), who spent a year at Harvard. As they depart on their mission, just before their submarine slips beneath the waves, they stand together topside, watching a gorgeous sunset. This scene is brief, but like so many quick, well-done scenes in film or fiction it captures in just a few words the essence of Captain Ramsey's character. Hunter, smoking his first cigar (a gift from Ramsey), just quietly watches the last sunset they will see for a long time. He does not speak. He is silent. And all the while, Ramsey is carefully watching Hunter, his new XO, sizing him up, scrutinizing him in order to determine what kind of leader he potentially might be. At last, he smiles and says:

"Bravo, Hunter! You knew to shut up and enjoy the view. Most eggheads want to talk it away. Your stock just went up a couple of points."

I really do love that moment in *Crimson Tide*. Too much speech or over-thinking can obscure the beauty of that which is ultimately ineffable and beyond speech---like the experience of Nirvana itself, which is beyond words and concepts. Silence, then, shows respect for Being. And it speaks directly to one of my favorite sayings by Zen master Wu Kwang, which is the title of his book: *Open Mouth Already a Mistake*.

I see writer, educator, and former editor Sharyn Skeeter as one of my sisters in the Dharma. We correspond via email about many subjects: spiritual practice, cultural matters, literature, politics, issues pertaining to the state of black America and the state of the world, and more. We first met in 1976 when writer Clarence Major, her husband at the time, and I were both hired by the English Department at the University of Washington. I was delighted (and very humbled) to see her poem in the festschrift volume published this year in India, *Charles Johnson: Embracing the World*, just as I felt deeply moved by the contributions so many of my old friends and former students made to this book, including yours, Ethelbert. Perhaps some writers seek fame. But I

cannot say enough about how the friendships I've enjoyed for decades have enriched my life. That sense of the value of enduring friends is captured, I think, in a poem I've never forgotten by Henry Austin Dobson (1840-1921):

Fame is the food that dead men eat,---
I have no stomach for such meat.
In little light and narrow room,
They eat it in the silent tomb,
With no kind voice of comrade near
To bid the banquet be of cheer.

But Friendship is a nobler thing,---
Of friendship it is good to sing.
For truly, when a man shall end,
He lives in memory of his friend,
Who doth his better part recall,
And of his faults make funeral.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at [8:15 AM](#)
<http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/12/from-silence-to-skeeter.html>

Sunday, December 18, 2011

THE ESSENTIAL E-CHANNEL: HOLDING ONTO TRUTH

"The troubles of the world, my husband said, were due to incompleteness. Greece gave us noble philosophy and poetic insights, but her glorious cities were built on a foundation of slavery...The individual, Martin said, should strive for completeness within himself...One of the failings of the Movement was that, while we taught people to fight against the system, and how to respect themselves, we didn't teach young people that they would have to fight all over again...Freedom is never guaranteed; you have to fight for it." Coretta Scott King, *My Life With Martin Luther King, Jr.*

E. Ethelbert Miller asks: In your essay 'Holding onto Truth: Gandhi and King' you make reference to the ten points of the "Commitment Blank." During the Civil Rights Movement it was circulated among activists. Did Ella Baker create this? Could you elaborate on these commandments for volunteers? They seem like the type of knowledge and information that should be shared by everyone participating in today's Occupy Movement. Might you agree? However the tenth point reads as follows: Follow the directions of the movement and of the captain on a demonstration. Today it seems as if new activists prefer what is considered horizontal democracy and a leaderless movement. Can you offer any clarity into this matter?

I've been living with the inspiring Decalogue known as the "Commitment Blank (or Form)" since the early 1990s when I began work on my novel *Dreamer*. I honestly don't know if Ella Baker composed this document. (That is an excellent research question for an essay or article.) And I don't know if I can bring any clarity to Ethelbert's question about "horizontal democracy." But, if pushed into a corner, I guess I would say, tentatively, that a possible problem with a horizontal, leaderless movement may be that the protesters, while admirable in their youthful, idealistic rejection of any form of hierarchy and in their desire for egalitarianism, may be leaving themselves open to their members taking off in an undisciplined way in many directions, which dilutes their focus and causes confusion in regard to their ultimate goals and tactics. (For example, protesters who resort to violence only play into the hands of their opponents.) The brilliance of the Civil Rights Movement at its best was its clear focus, represented by the Commitment Form. The Movement's leaders (and, yes, there *were* strong, widely admired leaders) had specific *goals* clearly defined during the Montgomery and Birmingham campaigns, and well thought out strategies for realizing those specific goals. If the initial goals of a Movement are not agreed upon and clear to everyone (such as "Muammar Gaddafi must go") it can be difficult to determine a line that distinguishes success from failure.

But something I *do* know with certainty is that Martin Luther King Jr. said that in the black liberation struggle we always have to work on *two* fronts, one public and the other private, one external and one internal. One effort is to constantly improve the social world; the other is to constantly improve ourselves. Both efforts are necessary; they reinforce and strengthen each other. All this King addressed in the sermon he said was his favorite among all his speeches, "Three Dimensions of a Complete Life." The men and women of the Civil Rights Movement worked out the Commitment Form, which nicely complements Mahatma Gandhi's vision of *satyagraha*, in practice as they moved from one campaign to another in the south. This

form(ula), this insight, was fully developed by the time of the electrifying Birmingham campaign in 1963. Men and women, and then children filled the jails of “Bull” Conner in a massive act of civil disobedience. They---and all the volunteers---were asked to sign this document, which is as follows:

Commandments For Volunteers

I HEREBY PLEDGE MYSELF---MY PERSON AND BODY---TO THE
NONVIOLENT MOVEMENT. THEREFORE I WILL KEEP THE FOLLOWING
COMMANDMENTS:

1. *Meditate* daily on the teachings and life of Jesus.
2. *Remember* always that the nonviolent movement seeks justice and reconciliation---not victory.
3. *Walk and Talk* in the manner of love, for God is love.
4. *Pray* daily to be used by God in order that all men might be free.
5. *Sacrifice* personal wishes in order that all men might be free.
6. *Observe* with both friend and foe the ordinary rules of courtesy.
7. *Seek* to perform regular service for others and for the world.
8. *Refrain* from the violence of fist, tongue, or heart.
9. *Strive* to be in good spiritual and bodily health.
10. *Follow* the directions of the movement and of the captain on a demonstration.

I sign this pledge, having seriously considered what I do and with the determination and will to persevere.

NAME _____

This was not simply a pledge for civil disobedience. This was a grand vision in which the personal and the political were one, a blueprint for how to live. (And how similar its spirit is to the words of Horace Mann that inspired Coretta Scott King, an Antioch student, when in his address to the first graduating class he said, "*Be ashamed to die until you have won some victory for humanity.*" Italics hers.) I say all this as a Buddhist who has taken formal vows, the Precepts, as a lay person. (My very Christian wife of 41 years once said that she saw me as being like a Unitarian, someone always looking for the beauty and best in the world's religions and sciences, and I guess she was right about that.) I hope that someone gives to each and every protester in the Occupy Movement a copy of the Commitment Form, and gets them to sign it. Why don't *you*, E-Channel reader, print off this post right now, and sign it. You'll feel good, if you do. And M.L. King, wherever he is, will thank you for doing that.

With this 218th post or brief essay, the E-Channel project comes to its conclusion. I want to thank E. Ethelbert Miller and all those who followed this literary project for a year, for their comments, for the emails they sent to us, and I especially wish to thank those who shared some of these posts in the classroom with their students. As I write these final words I'm again reminded of something my father always said when he came to the end of a demanding job, when he lifted that last heavy box, laid on that last layer of paint, or when he removed the cigar

from his mouth, smiled, and happily cast his gaze at the last remaining piece or item that brought a long task successfully to closure:

That's the one I was looking for.



Posted by Ethelbert Miller at [8:34 AM](#)

<http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/12/essential-e-channel-holding-onto-truth.html>