

FREEING OURSELVES FROM THE OPPRESSION WITHIN

by Joeritta de Almeida

When I was a little girl, I had a profound experience which marked the beginning of one phase of my life and the end of another. Before the age of five my relationship to the world around me was one of unity. I remember looking at trees, people, things, and feeling that I was everything, and that I knew everything. It was as if my eyes were not mine. Some higher force within me was showing me the world. This all seemed very natural to me. For awhile I thought everyone saw all that I saw, felt all that I felt, knew all that I knew.

Then suddenly one day, walking past a mirror in my grandmother's house, I saw myself for the first time. In that instant I realized that I was a separate person with a separate will, detached from all other things around me. I lifted my arm in amazement as I realized I could do whatever I willed. At that time I thought I was experiencing a religious awakening. I felt a tremendous amount of love.

This moment of self-realization, however, also marked the birth of my personality, my small self. It was the beginning of my life as Joeritta, a small black girl living in Florence, South Carolina. The memory of that moment has always been alive in me as the instant in which I was separated from the vast mind of oneness. From that moment on, my life has been a journey to reconnect my small self to the vast mind I so vividly recall.

My spiritual path led me to Brazil where I lived for 12 years, and there I found a spiritual teacher who introduced me to the work I do today. I practice a system of self development called "Rio Abierto" (Open River). Encompassing meditation, movement, massage, voice work, relaxation, and corrective physical exercises, it uses the body as a tool to re-educate the mind as to who we really are.

The class begins with "emptying" – the deliberate release and discharge of the tensions we have accumulated in our mind/bodies. We then move through a variety of postures, steps, and sounds which reflect particular feeling states and express particular traits. Eventually, the class transforms itself from a collection of fragmented personalities into a unified body, moving and breathing as one.

An important tenet of Rio Abierto is that we learn not only from intellectual pursuit, but from experience.

Movement is the instrument used to create this experience. Each class is a microcosm of our daily lives. The characteristics of our small selves are acted out through gesture and sound and, somewhere along the line, our definitions and judgments of ourselves begin to fall away.

One student recently described to me how, at the beginning of the work, she saw herself as shy, sad, and delicate. At first it was difficult for her to make certain movements that were contrary to this image – for example, bold, joyful, and deliberate ones. After participating in this work for several years, she feels that she does, in fact, embody the full spectrum of characteristics, as does each of her classmates. She has transcended her images of herself and others as limited "types"; she has transcended her small self.

On the societal level, all "isms" are, similarly, a result of such labeling of our small selves. We impose limits on ourselves and others. The purpose of living, as I see it, is to free ourselves from these limits, so that we may center around our authentic Self. Once we recognize this as our center, it can guide and direct our lives.

Anything that prevents us from becoming fully human is a form of oppression. But the ideology which oppresses black people and all non-white peoples cannot be eliminated simply by changing the hands of those in political power. This system of oppression has been with us for so long that on many levels it has been internalized.

In my own life, for example, there have been times when I have believed that others of my race were showing some of the very faults and shortcomings that I've so often heard attributed to us by whites. I've found myself feeling intolerant of fellow African Americans when they have chosen to exhibit signs of cultural difference, such as speaking in black dialect or acting in ways that might call attention to themselves. Perhaps worst of all, I have sometimes attributed my own mistakes not to mere human error, but to some inherent racial incompetence.

Thus, we need to seek racial equality and freedom from oppression from within as well as from without. Internal work does not contradict political and social activism. In fact, effective action arises from a sense of self-worth. To this end, we must turn our energies inward to heal ourselves. As the late Bob Marley tells us: "Emancipate yourself from mental slavery / None but ourselves can free our minds." v

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