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Living It Out

FANTASTIC COHERENCE

Rita Nakashima Brock

When our experience pivots into coherence from incoherence, such insight arrives as a gift, a breakthrough erupting from heretofore scattered fragments under the power of new connections, both to ourselves and to others. When such fantastic coherence overtakes us, it is impossible to deny. It delivers a fresh understanding of the reality we inhabit, a route out of the knotted mazes we encounter. We make explicit and vivid that which we could not consciously conceive but which also feels oddly familiar. To deny such insight is to step away from all it offers: the new possibilities, hope, wholeness, and pleasure—joy even—that have arrived with a new coherence.

My friend Nelle Morton coined the phrase “fantastic coherence.” She told the story of a woman, long silent, who spoke in a hesitant, awkward jumble about her experience. Then she reached the place in herself of excruciating pain, and a core truth emerged that made everything else make sense. In that moment her story suddenly “took on fantastic coherence”:

The women clustered about the weeping one went with her to the deepest part of her life as if something so sacred was taking place they did not withdraw their presence or mar its visibility . . . a depth of hearing that takes place before speaking—a hearing that is more than acute listening. A hearing that is a direct transitive verb that evokes speech—new speech that has never been spoken before. . . . “I have a strange feeling you heard me before I started. You heard me to my own story. You heard me to my own speech.”¹

In 2004, various strands of my life—my activist commitments, my passion for the study of religion, my professional experience, a new book project, and my political convictions—began to coalesce around my outrage and anguish about the Bush administration and its impact on the world. It was clear the

¹ Nelle Morton, “Journal Jottings,” in *The Journey Is Home* (Boston: Beacon, 1985), 205.

country was tied up in a right-wing agenda, the Project for the New American Century (PNAC), which was becoming increasingly dangerous, not only to the nation's poor and women but also to the rest of the world and the environment.²

That agenda has been well orchestrated and financed. For more than twenty-five years, conservative secular foundations have funded religious think tanks such as the Institute on Religion and Democracy (IRD), the Acton Institute for the Study of Religion and Liberty, the Institute on Religion and Public Life, the Faith and Reason Institute, and the Ethics and Public Policy Center. Grants to these five organizations totaled \$7,620,000 in 2003 alone. These think tanks have promulgated the impression of a nationwide moral decay; have instructed citizens in the moral and ethical basis of capitalism; have used religious organizations to distribute government-assistance funds and to dismantle civic commitment to a common good; have moved public policy in conservative directions; have pushed mainline churches rightward; and have evangelized for conservative Christianity. The organizations named here are a small fraction of the forty-three think tanks dedicated to moving the country rightward politically that have been created over the past thirty years with \$2 billion to \$3 billion of foundation money. Today, about 80 percent of all news commentators are provided by such think tanks.³

I stepped into the crosshairs of the Institute on Religion and Democracy in May 1994, when I appeared on the television program *Nightline* defending feminist theology against an IRD reporter.⁴ Subsequently representatives of the IRD appeared at my public addresses. Groups on the religious Right published excerpts of these addresses, alleging my views were anti-Christian and heretical. Since that time I have been thinking about how to lift a progressive religious perspective into public discussions on social issues, with a voice that is marked as religious and not religious Right. Writing my book *Proverbs of Ashes*, published in 2001, was one way I chose to reach a wide audience with feminist issues and theology.

² The PNAC agenda is described by William Rivers Pitt, "The Project for the New American Century," February 25, 2003, Information Clearing House, <http://www.informationclearinghouse.info/article1665.htm> (accessed January 3, 2005). The PNAC Web site is <http://www.newamericancentury.org/>.

³ For discussions of the think tanks and their funding sources, see National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy, *Axis of Ideology: Conservative Foundations and Public Policy* (Washington, DC: National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy, 2004), <http://www.ncrp.org/>; and Matt Bai, "New Network of Wealthy Donors Seek to Defeat Bush and Revitalize Progressive Movement," *New York Times Magazine*, July 25, 2004, reprinted by the Organic Consumers Association, <http://www.organicconsumers.org/corp/defeat-bush.cfm> (accessed November 28, 2004).

⁴ The controversy that provoked the *Nightline* episode, on May 24, 1994, was a conference in Minneapolis called "Reimagining," held to celebrate the mid-decade point of the World Council of Churches Decade in Solidarity with Women.

Progressive religious leaders have been slow to respond to the religious Right, partly for reasons grounded in liberal values. Stressing tolerance and believing that truth speaks for itself, many have sought to engage conservatives in dialogue, a strategy that has given conservatives in churches an unwarranted visibility and influence. Progressive leaders tend to use secular language and meaning systems borrowed from law, public policy, and the social sciences when speaking about social and political issues. This tendency reflects a respect for education and scholarship and a commitment to the separation of church and state. We find distasteful the heat and controversy ignited by the Right for media attention, pyrotechnics to which the increasingly corporate-owned media have been happy to respond. Nor has the Left invested in major media technologies. Progressive foundations prefer to fund direct services or innovative new programs rather than provide long-term operating costs for think tanks free to pursue their own programming. Finally, the secular Left, unlike the secular Right, openly disdains religion and sees the separation of church and state as the elimination of religion from politics. For these and other reasons, progressive religion has recently been largely invisible in the public square and in the media, belying its long history of involvement in progressive political achievements such as abolition, woman suffrage, and the civil rights movement.

Lift Every Voice!

After twenty-four years of employment in higher education, I left in 2001. My first sabbatical came in my fifteenth year, too late to retard my growing exhaustion. In 2002, I began a new book project, on paradise, that brought me to Oakland, California, where my coauthor, Rebecca Parker, lived.⁵ Although I had planned to return to academe with an administrative position after finishing the book, I was instead drawn inexorably into a different life working to create a think tank for progressive religions, Faith Voices for the Common Good. I have found, somewhat to my surprise, my new intellectual work on paradise and my activist and professional commitments to Faith Voices converging around issues related to the common good and care for this world.

Fantastic coherence took over my life in the summer of 2004. I signed up to be a writer and speaker for a progressive grassroots group. In mid-June I attended an organizing meeting for writers at a local coffee shop in Berkeley, on its tree-shaded patio. The meeting did not go well. Several attendees seemed to think we had gathered to tell candidates what they needed to do to fix their

⁵ Our first book was Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes: Violence, Redemptive Suffering, and the Search for What Saves Us* (Boston: Beacon, 2001). This new project, *Saving Paradise*, is due in spring 2006, also from Beacon Press.

pet issues. Another kept talking about his problems at work. These digressions repeatedly interrupted a man named Brian who politely struggled to explain an innovative new Internet system that would allow our group to write letters and op-eds collaboratively online.

My experience as an educator made me curious about the technology. I thought I would have welcomed such means to enable students to do joint projects, so I said a few encouraging words and attempted, unsuccessfully, to steer the conversation back to its applicability to our task as writers for progressive politics. However, no one else in the group seemed to show any interest in the technology.

I left the meeting and forgot about it. The next day I received an e-mail from Brian Sarrazin. He introduced himself to me as a former CPA who had subsequently progressed into high-tech start-ups as an entrepreneur. He explained he had created the collaborative writing system from his research into cognitive science, constructivist learning theory, and emerging technologies suitable for the design of online learning environments.⁶ He suggested we meet to discuss his system.

Our first conversation lasted five hours. As I listened to Brian describe his writing technology, called Synanim, I recognized that its method embraced progressive values and resonated with feminist pedagogy. Writers contributed anonymously, sharing their best ideas with their group and selecting the ideas they most valued through a series of iterative steps that built toward a completed written document. Rank and personal identity had no impact on the process—good ideas and astuteness mattered most as the system moved participants toward consensus. Consensus leaders emerged as those who were insightful at presenting their best ideas to the group in ways that acknowledged group values and furthered group goals. It seemed to me that the process encouraged generosity, creative thinking, attunement to others, and sound judgment, and it was based on merit.

Because high-tech innovation was new to me, I did not immediately understand that Brian sought to test Synanim. He wanted it used for progressive purposes and wanted it used by writers such as those I've described. I had access to many progressive writers, so we brainstormed ways I might involve

⁶ Some of the sources for Brian Sarrazin's research include John B. Black and Robert O. McClintock, "An Interpretation Construction Approach to Constructivist Design," in *Constructivist Learning Environments: Case Studies in Instructional Design*, ed. Brent G. Wilson (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Educational Technology Publications, 1996); John D. Bransford, Ann L. Brown, and Rodney R. Cocking, *How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience, and School*, expanded ed. (Washington DC: National Academy Press, 2000); and L. S. Vygotsky, *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*, ed. Michael Cole et al. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978). More information about Brian's system, Synanim, can be found at <http://www.synanim.com/>.

them in testing Synanim for him, all of which involved people in religion, somewhat to his discomfort. Brian is an atheist ex-Catholic who, when we met, was disinterested in (even a little allergic to) religion. Our first conversation included a discussion of the book Rebecca and I were writing, on paradise as this world, which captured his imagination.

On July 2, I was one of three faculty advisers for Pacific, Asian, and North American Asian Women in Theology and Ministry (PANAAWTM), living in Massachusetts, Minnesota, and California, who assembled online to test Brian's system. A few minutes before 7:00 A.M. (PDT), I sat alone before my glowing computer screen and logged on to the Web site where we would write together. A small box for entering text appeared after I clicked "Join." I began typing ideas as fast as I could. After five minutes I had to submit my outline for consideration by the others. Immediately after I submitted it, my work appeared along with two other outlines on my screen. I was asked to pick the best one, so I picked someone else's I liked. Then I had twenty minutes to fill in an outline with text. I read all three versions of text. I found it hard to pick "the best" for the next step; each essay had strengths and ideas I liked. Though I was forced to pick one text, I remembered things from other entries and included them as I typed text into the one I had picked.

This flow of individual creativity, assessment of group work, and selection of texts created a rhythm of ideas, borrowing, creative sparking, and elaboration that carried us through three and a half hours of writing. As the time wore on, each entry migrated more and more toward a group text that included material from all three participants. None of us was a native English speaker. (All three of us were born in Asia. I learned to speak English at the age of six.) Yet, when our time was over and we logged off, we had a solid document, which, with light editing, was posted on the PANAAWTM Web site within a day.⁷

More important to me than the document, however, was my experience of using Synanim. I was surprised by the transformative quality of the participants' interactions. The sharing of ideas and the flow back and forth between my own thoughts and those of the others were something akin to mental telepathy or a mind meld. I concluded that Synanim was a powerful technology, not only for educating and for generating a consensus document but also for enhancing community among its participants.

Within a few days Brian and I hit upon the wildly improbable idea of gathering one thousand progressive Christians to write a document called "Lift Every Voice! A Declaration on Christianity and the Future of America." During the election cycle I wanted to lift up the values and issues of the many

⁷ See Rita Nakashima Brock, Kwok Pui-lan, and Seung Ai Yang, "The Future of PANAAWTM Theology," July 2004, on the PANAAWTM Web site, <http://www.panaawtm.org/pages/4/index.htm>.

Christians who did not belong to the religious Right. Having a thousand progressive Christians do this seemed ideal. We invited my friend Peter Laarman, director of Progressive Christians Uniting, to join us in organizing the project and to provide us with a nonprofit fiscal sponsor. His board agreed, and we set the dates of September 13–14 for the Synanim event. Starr King School for the Ministry, in Berkeley, where Rebecca was president and I was a visiting scholar; the Episcopal Divinity School, in Cambridge, Massachusetts; and Union Theological Seminary, in New York, signed on as institutional cosponsors and encouraged their faculties to participate.

To accommodate all the writers and arrive at one document, Brian developed a tiered process. First, on September 13, one thousand people would work for four hours each, in groups of ten, during a sixteen-hour window of appointment times. The consensus leaders from these one hundred groups of ten writers would follow the same pattern the next day in ten groups of ten, from which the last ten leaders would then edit and produce the final consensus document. Some writers would work a total of four hours, others eight, and the final group ten.

We had seven weeks to recruit writers, design the project, automate the system, and hold the writing sessions. During the first three weeks of that time, I was in Europe with Rebecca on a research trip. I worked on the project from Internet cafés, spending from two to four hours online each day. French keyboards drove me crazy. Peter and I sent e-vites to writers, and Brian worked on programming the system for a thousand people and creating a registration site where each writer could schedule an appointment time.

As we traveled through Spain, Norway, Germany, and France, Rebecca and I discussed how to set up the writing project to produce a forceful declaration. Late one day Rebecca drove from Barcelona toward Toledo across Spain's sunbaked plains as I dialed Brian's number in Berkeley from our rented cell phone. In our most recent e-mail exchange, Brian had proposed that the project begin with issues. Rebecca and I were leaning toward identifying Christian values first and moving to issues from those values. An hour-long, intense discussion ensued as we tried to sort out how best to set up the project design for a document that would be both a fresh, engaging statement of values and a compelling discussion of issues. We agreed to keep the question open until Rebecca and I returned to the United States.

As I ended the call, we rounded the crest of a small rise, and Toledo suddenly appeared in the distance. We gasped in wonder at the apparition before us. The city crowned a vertiginous bluff above a river. Its ancient stone walls glowed in the fading light as its towers reached into a sapphire heaven. Within those massive walls, along Toledo's narrow, hilly, curving streets, Jews, Christians, and Muslims had lived side by side for centuries, each group with its own

houses of worship, mingling in the squares and public places. Intimate in scale, stately in elegance, hospitable in climate and people, and surprisingly lovely, Toledo reminded us of what was once possible for these three faiths, for as long as the Muslims were in charge.

Eventually, after Rebecca experimented with writing a document beginning with issues, we all concluded we had to start with values. We created four segments for the four-hour block of time: values, embodiment, problems, and solutions. For the first hour, we would ask each participant to name the four values that lay at the core of her or his faith and church community; interactive iterative steps would follow to enable participants to elaborate, edit, and polish their emerging consensus on values. In the next hour of interactive steps, participants would identify and develop aspects of life in America where they found those values most embodied. Then, they would describe and elaborate cherished aspects of life that they felt were now at risk. Finally, in the last hour, they would propose and explain solutions for saving those aspects at risk.

In late August we opened our Web site, Lift Every Voice! (<http://www.everyvoice.org/lev/>). Registrations to write came from all over: from Puerto Rico to Hawaii and from Alaska to Texas, with large numbers from the population centers on the coasts. We asked people to tell us something about themselves voluntarily and anonymously. Of the more than six hundred who responded, about two-thirds were women and two-thirds were mainline Protestant. Among other religious groups represented were Catholics, evangelicals, and Unitarian Universalists. Half were clergy. Racial and ethnic minorities comprised 20 percent, and 10 percent were scholars and professors of religion. Three people identified themselves as transgender, and 10 percent were gay, lesbian, or bisexual. As registrations and comments began to arrive, I was struck by the participants' level of concern for the country and by the intensity of their commitment to being heard. We posted names of registrants and their anonymous comments on the Web site.

While preparing for the Lift Every Voice! event, Brian and I discussed future projects for Synanim. I could see its potential to help organize a progressive religious movement beyond the ad hoc, issue-oriented ways progressives seem to prefer. I said I had thought for a long time about creating a multireligious think tank focused on public understandings of religion in popular culture and art, in law, and in social policy. I had once talked to a friend, who was a former editor and writer for the *New York Times Book Review*, about starting a general-interest magazine on religion. At the time, starting such projects while teaching seemed formidable. They seemed impossible after I moved to Radcliffe College in 1997 and was consumed not only by an administrative job directing the Radcliffe Fellowship Program but also by Radcliffe's secret merger plans with Harvard University and by my own scholarly work. But with

my new self-employed status in Oakland, I could launch a think tank. I had the time to do it and, with Brian's partnership, the technological expertise and systems to create it in a short time.

Brian, Rebecca, Peter, and I began to talk in earnest about our new think tank, even as we were making a breathless dash to complete plans for Lift Every Voice! We generated ideas about what a think tank could do to raise the public profile and presence of progressive religious groups and to generate creative new ways of thinking. We sought to organize progressive religion for consensus work, to train the next generation of leaders, and to organize around issues at the grassroots level across the country. We decided that, whatever the outcome of the election, we would announce our plans for a new think tank on November 3.

On September 13, the first group of Lift Every Voice! writers logged on at 3:00 A.M. Pacific time; the last in this group finished at midnight. The following day, at 3:30 P.M., the final group finished, having spent eleven total hours on the project. Around 8:00 P.M. we posted "Lift Every Voice! A Declaration on Christianity and the Future of America" on the Web site, just before I boarded the red-eye for the East Coast on seven hours' sleep in the preceding forty-eight. The declaration said the following, in part:

Christian faith calls every believer to love God, love neighbor, and seek to heal a broken world. In honoring that call, we honor the inviolable dignity of every human being and we treasure the natural environment as God's good creation. As Christ bears witness to God's love for the world, faithful Christians bear witness to the love that lies at the heart of all that is. . . .

Christian faith requires that those who have received God's abundance provide for those in need, and so we must insist that God's abundance be shared. We must demand justice for those of our society who live on the margins, those whose very survival is a daily challenge, those whose labors are neither recognized nor dignified, those who cannot demand justice for themselves. . . .

As Americans, we aspire toward the common good, work for the creation of a just society, and seek prosperity for all rather than wealth for a few. We treasure the beauty and richness of our natural environments, from mountain to sea, from desert to plain, and we resolve to protect these treasures for generations to come. . . . We believe that unless all are free, none are free; that unless all citizens have the opportunity to flourish, we are all diminished. . . .

Today these historic American values stand at risk. Openly contemptuous of religious diversity and freedom of expression, the rigid religious values of conservative Christians exercise undue sway over public and social policies. A growing lack of tolerance for religious and cultural diversity jeopardizes the basic prerequisite for a functioning

democracy—the social space for free and civil debate. We have become intolerant and inhospitable to one another. Civil debate no longer has a place in our political process, and we have become fearful of those with whom we do not agree. . . .

We recommit ourselves to the care of the most vulnerable among us, to hospitality toward immigrants and other strangers, to multilateral international institutions that promote peaceful resolutions of conflicts, and to responsible stewardship of the earth's resources. We will hold onto hope, stay strong in our faith, and trust in a common vision for the future based upon the best in our past. We will remember what we struggle against, and for whom we struggle—for the poor, the hungry, the imprisoned, and the marginalized, but not only for them.

We stand and we speak because we are fighting for our future, for the future of our children, and for the soul of a great country, which we will continue to hold in our prayers and whose spirit we will honor through unyielding struggle for liberty and justice for all.⁸

Hundreds of endorsements of the declaration, many with encouraging comments, began to arrive. Numerous clergy who wrote on the declaration reported reading it to their congregations. Churches and organizations posted it on their Web sites, as did our cosponsoring institutions. The declaration began circulating via e-mail. The endorsements multiplied and came from as far away as Scotland. The comments were both appreciative and critical, indicating engagement with its content and a willingness to note what it lacked. We posted the endorsements and comments on the Lift Every Voice! Web site. Among the many endorsements were the following:

It feels very good to find common ground in a time when divisiveness is the norm. I hope there are many others who find the Declaration something they can whole-heartedly support, and that it will serve as a platform for change that people of faith can use as a benchmark when planning and evaluating social ministry. I am grateful for having had the opportunity to be part of the creation of this document. The process itself was a healing thing for me; watching the way others' ideas were incorporated into each person's statements showed me we can share even as we express our most heart-felt beliefs, hopes, and concerns. (Lynn C. Jaeger, Deacon Candidate, The United Methodist Church)

I cannot wag my finger at moderate Muslims and wonder why they do not speak out against zealot factions of their faith, if I do not now speak out as a moderate Christian to those Christians who use the Bible as a weapon and not a light in the world. (Inga Hagge, ecologist, mother, Christian)

⁸ The entire text of "Lift Every Voice! A Declaration on Christianity and the Future of America" can be found at <http://www.everyvoice.org/lev/>.

This is an urgently important statement. Finding thousands of people to openly support and promote and be faithful to the statement is awesome! I can't see you but I can feel your community! And here in the wilds of fundamentalist Mississippi that is important. (Don Manning-Miller)

The Declaration on Christianity and the Future of America is excellent. I especially enjoyed your statement that being an American means valuing the separation of church and state, so that no one particular religious voice is given priority in civil discourse and all voices are protected. America is a "little United Nations," composed of many cultures and religious beliefs. Our country's support of separation of church and state has been a model for humanity, a beacon light for democratic secularism, pluralism, religious tolerance and against the growing linkage between religion, government and terrorism in many parts of our world. Yet, the Separation of Church and State in America has come under considerable siege in recent years by conservative religious elements who have enjoyed growing political access in the present administration in Washington. As a result the separation of church and state has already been eroded. I speak as a Republican who hopes that people of good will can express their concerns about this. (Harris W. Fawell, Member of Congress [Retired])

I am happy to endorse this, but my own view is that at this time it is necessary to better balance a statement of general values with specific address to current crises and events. Hence, while critique of the Iraq war and occupation, of U.S. militarism, of U.S. and Israeli intransigence on the Palestinian questions, are all issues implied in the Declaration, they are not specifically named or discussed. That, I think, reduces the power of our statement. As I say, though, I am happy to sign this important effort. (Mark Lewis Taylor, Professor of Theology and Culture, Princeton Theo. Sem.)

As a pastor and community educator to victims and perpetrators of domestic violence and an instructor in a Catholic women's college, I wholeheartedly support this Declaration for its following of the words and actions of Jesus. It gives us a profound tool to work with those in our society who have abandoned religion, church, and God, because they have HAD to in order to pursue their own recovery from abusive trauma. This Declaration is a tool which can allow them the freedom to enjoy a healthy faith that heals, rather than shames, their injury. (Rev. Dr. Bobbie Groth, Unitarian Universalist)

Using Synanim required me to commit to an unknown outcome created by a thousand volunteers, the majority of whom were strangers to me. I had to trust the process, the values of the methodology, and the community of writers to create the best consensus that a thousand could produce. The declaration

leaves out issues I would have included. There is no explicit mention of racial justice, gay and lesbian rights, equality and reproductive freedom for women, or the war in Iraq. The writers chose instead to emphasize the values that undergird such issues. Where it does mention specific issues, such as criminal justice, Internet access, market fundamentalism, and the fairness doctrine in the media, those issues pertain to a very broad public. There is no explicit language marked as feminist, but also there are no values or issues that violate my feminist commitments. One observer of progressive religion noted that the declaration has some of the clearest liberationist language of the documents he had seen produced by any Christian group. The declaration included an explicit criticism of corporate capitalism as well as advocacy for environmental responsibility.

Some feminist friends who participated in writing the declaration urged me to travel on behalf of it, especially to swing states where the election outcome was still uncertain. A group of them circulated an appeal for financial support of my trip. Contributions began to arrive, and in early October I traveled to Pennsylvania, Georgia, Washington, Ohio, and New Hampshire, speaking to church groups and clergy about the declaration and the think tank we planned to start. In some cases I combined speaking engagements about the new paradise book with conversations about the declaration. I was deeply moved by the commitment of the Lift Every Voice! community, its hospitality, and its willingness to continue the progressive faith project.

By the time we completed the declaration, Brian had decided religion was the most important way the country could be moved in a progressive direction. He committed himself, his skills, and his information-systems innovations to furthering our work by giving our think tank proprietary use of Synanim and becoming, along with me, a codirector. He, Peter, Rebecca, and I became the Board of Trustees, along with two of Brian's friends from the for-profit world: Kevin Vaughn, a practicing Hindu, and Lee Lambert, Jewish by background, both experienced at business start-ups. We created an innovative partnership of nonprofit and for-profit experts in creating a self-sustaining nonprofit institution for the common good that utilizes cutting-edge technologies for social change.

Faith Voices for the Common Good

On November 3, 2004, we opened a new Web site for our think tank for progressive religions, Faith Voices for the Common Good (<http://www.faithvoices.org/>). Our mission statement is this: "Faith Voices for the Common Good strengthens religious and progressive organizations in working together for the common good by engendering new ideas and language, educating the public, building consensus, and developing leadership." On that morning after

the election, Brian and I consoled each other over our sadness about the outcome and intensified our work on Faith Voices for the Common Good, which seemed more important than ever to us.

In planning the date of our Faith Voices launch, we knew that the country would need a strong progressive religious voice, given that the Democrats had come belatedly and inadequately to religion, and the Greens and Nader not at all. Much work remained to be done to build a progressive movement and to advance the social issues of deepest concern to us. We envisioned creating a communications infrastructure that would enable Faith Voices' member organizations to clarify and unify their efforts. We offered Synanim for use by member groups to support their work and by theological schools as an educational technology. We used it to foster consensus work across our membership, reaching deeply into the pews with regular messages linking progressive religious values to social issues. A group in Los Angeles, led by Peter, developed a plan for a leadership-training school (on the Highlander Folk School model so crucial to the civil rights movement) to prepare the next generations of progressive religious leadership. We decided to provide media training for scholars and clergy as public intellectuals. We also began sponsoring books and essays from the best thinkers and writers in progressive religion.⁹

From late October until the writing of this essay, in early 2005, Brian, Peter, Rebecca, Kevin, Lee, and I worked to create Faith Voices. We filed for nonprofit status, created bylaws and articles of incorporation, constructed a strategic plan, formulated a financial structure, identified potential member organizations, began recruiting members, and sought funding. Brian and I visited theological schools across the country to talk about Faith Voices.

On December 8–9, 2004, Peter and I attended a progressive faith movement (PFM) summit, organized by Res Publica, a nonprofit group interested in furthering progressive democratic movements, and hosted by the Center for American Progress, in Washington, DC. This PFM leadership group had been meeting on a weekly conference call since September, using the open-source principle that interested parties could join as they wished. The summit group decided to form a Next-Steps Commission to create an infrastructure for the PFM and asked Faith Voices to organize an interfaith consensus on abortion and values, prompted partly by Frances Kissling's critique of the leaders in the PFM that had been published the month before in the *Nation*.¹⁰ Among those suggested to codirect the project was Glen Stassen, a professor of ethics at Fuller Theological Seminary and a pro-life Baptist evangelical who had published an op-ed on October 11, 2004, which was widely republished, discussing

⁹ Peter Laarman edited *In Spirit and in Truth* (Boston: Beacon, 2005), the first such project.

¹⁰ Frances Kissling, who directs Catholics for a Free Choice, published her opinion piece, "Sex and the Clergy," in the December 13, 2004, edition of the *Nation*, p. 10.

why abortion rates had declined under the Clinton administration and had risen again under Bush.¹¹ He and I organized a leadership team and began the project.

Paradise

The intellectual and personal pieces that coalesced for me into fantastic coherence with Faith Voices were a new book project and my relationship to Christianity. When I moved to Oakland, in 2002, Rebecca and I began a study of Christian understandings of paradise as this world. We arrived at that focus by beginning with a puzzle: Why in Western Christianity were there no images of Jesus dead until the mid-tenth century?

We looked at as many early images in first-millennium Christian art as we could find in art books, as well as in museums and church interiors in Rome, Ravenna, Istanbul, northeast Turkey, Cologne, Trier, Aachen, Barcelona, Toledo, Córdoba, Granada, London, Durham, Angers, and Paris. We found no images of Jesus dead before the tenth century.¹² Instead, we discovered a dif-

¹¹ Glen Harold Stassen, "Pro-Life? Look at the Fruits," *Louisville Courier-Journal*, October 11, 2004.

¹² The absence of crucifixion images is well known among art historians, who explain the lack in various ways. Some speculate that it is political. Crucifixion was the Romans' most brutal form of torture and execution, used publicly and liberally. Christians may have refused to show crucifixion as a strategy of resistance to Roman terrorization. Given its use to execute the underclasses, Christians may also have felt depictions of it were shameful. See Peter and Linda Murray, *The Oxford Companion to Christian Art and Architecture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996). After Constantine, when the building of churches began to flourish under imperial patronage, Christians may have sought to avoid calling attention to the empire's execution of its savior. For a visual record of Christian rejections of imperial iconography, see Thomas F. Mathews, *The Clash of Gods: A Reinterpretation of Early Christian Art* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993). Robin Margaret Jensen, in *Understanding Early Christian Art* (New York: Routledge, 2000), argues that crucifixion appears in disguises, such as the Chi-Rho and images of Abraham sacrificing Isaac.

These explanations assume the crucifixion should be present and was avoided. With a few notable exceptions, they have not discussed the shift in Christian theology and politics that led to crucifixion images. Instead, a thirteenth-century atonement theology is read back into an earlier tradition. This point is made by Diane Apostolos-Cappadona in *Dictionary of Christian Art* (New York: Continuum, 1995); and Mitchell B. Merback in *The Thief, the Cross, and the Wheel: Pain and the Spectacle of Punishment in Medieval and Renaissance Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999). They propose that the crucifixion was simply not the theological focus of early Christians and that the emergence of crucifixion images in Western Christianity represents a growing interest in Jesus's suffering and death rather than in his resurrection. Ellen M. Ross indirectly makes a similar point in *The Grief of God: Images of the Suffering Jesus in Late Medieval England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997) when she suggests that the emergence of crucifixions indicates a greater emphasis both on Jesus's humanity and on the compassion of God toward humanity's suffering. We think Ross misreads the reasons for the emergence of crucifixion images, according to Rachel Fulton's more nuanced study, *From Judgment to Passion: Devotion to Christ and the Virgin Mary, 800–1200* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).

ferent visual world. As the images of early Christian art permeated our consciousness, we understood that, in their midst, we stood in paradise in this world. The paradise we saw was not our modern, imaginary, utopian afterlife. Nor was it a return to a primordial Garden of Eden, though it resembled the Genesis 2 descriptions of creation at its dawn. It was something else: tensive, multivalent, comprehensive, elusive, earthly, and spiritual.¹³ We confirmed our insight about paradise in early Christian art through our study of early ritual practices, stories, hymns, and theological texts. “A church,” wrote St. Maximus the Confessor in the seventh century, “restores the normal order of the universe which had been destroyed by the fall. . . . [I]t re-establishes what had been in paradise.”¹⁴

For many in our time, paradise is trivial, profane, and irreligious, or it is a dangerous, false religious promise. The tourist industry uses paradise nostalgia to market tropical destinations. Perfume manufacturers cast seductive allures by naming fragrances Paradise, and developers sell homes in exclusive, gated communities called Paradise. Paradise is promised after death for suicide bombers and terrorist martyrs. Neither the nostalgia for an imaginary, unreal paradise nor its postmortem postponement captures its complex reality for early Christians as life in the church and in earthly creation.¹⁵

¹³ Jean Delumeau, in *History of Paradise: The Garden of Eden in Myth and Tradition*, trans. Matthew O’Connell (New York: Continuum, 1995), surveys early Christian ideas of paradise and concludes that the prevailing view saw it both as sanctified life in this world and as a spiritual journey the community took toward divinity.

¹⁴ Maximus the Confessor, quoted in Leonid Ouspensky, *Theology of the Icon* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1978), 30.

¹⁵ Ephrem of Syria (306–373), poet, hymn writer, theologian, and biblical commentator, expresses the early Christian understanding of paradise in this world in *Hymns on Paradise*, trans. Sebastian Brock (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1990):

The breath that wafts
From some blessed corner of Paradise
Gives sweetness
To the bitterness of this region,
It tempers the curse
On this earth of ours.
That Garden is
The life-breath
Of this diseased world. . . . (11.10)

Our inhalation is healed
By this healing breath
From Paradise. . . . (11.12)

Paradise surrounds the limbs
With its many delights:

In Christianity's second millennium, Jesus's death became the focal point of Christian piety, ritual, and theology instead of his resurrection. Paradise was displaced, misplaced, and replaced. Christians who looked around during worship found themselves in the rocky and barren landscape of Golgotha. They saw the crucified body of Christ, lacerated with wounds. The notion that incarnate Christ had become human so that human beings could become divine was eclipsed by his example of extreme suffering and self-sacrifice. Gender images and ideas became increasingly bifurcated, polarized, and hierarchical, depicting a stoic, resolute masculinity and a suffering, weak femininity.

Paradise receded into the afterlife and, eventually, into a time after the apocalyptic destruction of this world. Genocide against God's enemies was celebrated in the apocalyptic imagination, giving impetus to constructions of culture and race that divided people into the eternally saved and the eternally damned.¹⁶

Although paradise was misplaced in the second millennium, its spiritual power as love for the world has haunted Western culture. A this-worldly understanding of salvation reemerged with the abolitionist, suffragist, Social Gospel, civil rights, feminist, and liberation movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, all committed to establishing the commonwealth of God on earth. These life-affirming religious movements echo the earlier Christian commitment to paradise in this world: to the struggle against oppressive and

The eyes, with its handiwork,
The hearing, with its sounds,
The mouth and the nostrils,
With its tastes and scents. . . . (6.3)

My hunger takes delight
In the breath of its fragrance,
For its scent gives nourishment to all
At all times,
And whoever inhales it
Is overjoyed. . . . (9.15)

¹⁶ Key works Rebecca and I have used in forming our interpretation of Western Christianity include Peter Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity, AD 200–1000*, 2nd ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003); Caroline Walker Bynum and Paul Freedman, eds., *Last Things: Death and the Apocalypse in the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000); Celia Martin Chazelle, *The Crucified God in the Carolingian Era: Theology and Art of Christ's Passion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Peter Cramer, *Baptism and Change in the Early Middle Ages, c. 200–c. 1150* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Fulton, *From Judgment to Passion*; Christoph T. Maier, *Crusade Propaganda and Ideology: Model Sermons for the Preaching of the Cross* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); and Tomaž Mastnak, *Crusading Peace: Christendom, the Muslim World, and Western Political Order* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002).

destructive powers, to the affirmation of human capacities for moral behavior, and to the collective, organized work of human communities committed to justice.

As Rebecca and I worked on this new project, I found my relationship to my own Christian tradition changing. Since reading my first feminist book, in 1972, I had felt as if I worked on the left-wing margins of Western Christianity, pushing as hard as I could for it to change, to cease sanctioning intimate violence, self-sacrifice, and salvation by death and to make space for women's full presence as agents of religious life, not just its victims and its second-class members. I stubbornly continued pushing from the margins despite disdain from secular feminists who regarded those of us in traditional religions as pawns of the patriarchy and despite hostile or passive resistance from some of the leaders of Christian scholarship and church life. Despite the opposition, it had seemed to me, there was something of Christianity worth saving.

With the idea of paradise, I discovered an understanding of religious life that not only made sense to me but also was a sensibility that had haunted the Christian West despite its nearly being destroyed by the worship of death. Paradise is shared with Judaism and Islam, as well as a host of other religions. Each tells poignant stories about humanity's lost original home—not an after-life in heaven but life in this world, its natural environment and its human communities. This mythic sense of beauty and loss embraces the whole of the world—its frailties, its horrors, and its injustices, as well as its wonders, its tenderness, and its happiness:

nerves singing in the immense
fragility of all this sweetness,
this green world . . .
.
a lifetime is too narrow
to understand it all. . . .¹⁷

This willingness to embrace rather than reject the world gives impetus to religious work for a just and sustainable common good. In this work, we struggle for what we most love and simultaneously experience the pain of the world at its deepest. Much is promised to us in this work, as it asks much of us, this knowing of the fullness of life. It is a knowing that bestows the equanimity that comes with courage, the justice that comes with struggle, the love that comes with openness, the pleasure that comes with embodied life, the joy that comes with beauty, and the peace that comes with wisdom.

¹⁷ Adrienne Rich, "Transcendental Etude," in *The Dream of a Common Language: Poems, 1974–1977* (New York: Norton, 1978), 72–73.

As I slowly arrived at a consciousness of the implications of salvation as paradise, I felt more and more that this insight was at the heart of a life-giving Christianity. This way of being had nearly been lost to the disasters of atonement theology. Yet its life-affirming perspective had been tenaciously held by movements and people made heretical and marginalized by the power and weight of the sodden, miserable, pain-ridden piety of Western Christianity's second millennium. With this new research project, I came to see myself as Christian *and* feminist, consistent with the hybridizing, inclusive, life-affirming impulses of Western Christianity's first millennium. I found in that period not forced, either/or divisions of competing impulses but the inclusive embracing of contraries, a holding to the value of the many complex worlds in which Christianity found itself.

In this new claiming of a Christian identity, I became increasingly incensed by the hijacking of it by the religious Right and its apocalyptic disregard for the value of this life and this earth. I continue to be haunted by my time in Toledo and in the Andalusian region of Spain, where Jews, Christians, and Muslims found a way to live together for centuries. We have an opportunity, in North America, to create our own legacy of multireligious life and to develop the tensive, interactive cultural richness and social good that can come from sharing the best in each religion's values and social practices. Faith Voices is one way such interactions can deepen and contribute to social transformation. It unites scholars and policy experts to work with a nationwide network of religious leaders to provide resources for speaking on major social issues, and it provides congregations ways to deliver feedback and information to those experts and religious leaders about what touches them and motivates them. It moves beyond broadcast methods of using the Internet to interactive ones, inviting a vast network of religious people to create consensus working papers on religious values and social issues for policy makers and the media. It teaches the next generations of leadership effective community organizing, the language of religious values, and media sophistication. It sponsors new thinking through publications, conferences, and Web resources.

Western Christianity sits on the cusp of a third millennium. Religion has become a prominent national issue in the United States—our leaders feel compelled to have religious convictions and to espouse them publicly. The current administration seeks to create an American empire for the next century, endorsed by the Christian religious Right. A religion persecuted by the Roman Empire now has adherents who press for the creation of an American Empire built on a military might inconceivable in ancient Rome. A religion that originally excluded government officials and soldiers from eligibility for baptism now has followers who want a Christian government. The religious Right has hijacked Christianity for the ambitions of a military empire. Faith Voices is my

way of reclaiming it theologically and politically in solidarity with other religious progressives who care about the quality of religious and social life in the United States.

When Things Cohere: Living It Out

I loved teaching and writing books. But after my twentieth year of undergraduate teaching, I found myself intellectually bored, exhausted, and ready for a change in 1997. I became the director of the Radcliffe Fellowship Program, originally named the Bunting Fellowship Program and regarded as a think tank for women. Although this new position did not alleviate my exhaustion, its rewards were sufficient compensation. I worked with an astonishing array of brilliant, talented women from every conceivable academic discipline, as well as artists and activists, who spent a fellowship year at Radcliffe working on their own proposed projects and on becoming a community.

Important transformations happened to many fellows in our program. Some had their first opportunity in a long time to rest, to pause and reflect on their lives, and to discern what they wanted to do next. Sometimes a fellow decided to leave her field and start a different career, for example, leaving academe to become a trade writer or ceasing painting to begin playwriting.

Most found their self-perceptions transfigured. Confronted with the task of having to explain their projects to intelligent, talented women outside their fields, fellows struggled to show why their work might be of interest to non-specialists. Their "sister-fellows" (their name for one another) were frequently generous in their praise of projects, working creatively and enthusiastically to draw implications for and connections to their own fields and projects, sometimes even collaborating with other fellows on their work. These interconnections and conversations enabled fellows to see better the larger implications and importance of their work. They ended their year with greater confidence in themselves, a deeper sense of their projects' value, and a renewed enthusiasm for communicating beyond the experts in their fields. Often their initial projects morphed into far more ambitious ones and, consequently, into work more definitive in their fields.

Over my four years as director, the Bunting magic worked itself into my own consciousness. It was then that I began to envision a think tank on religion, a way to make the work of scholars and leaders more available and to educate the public about one of the most important dimensions of American public life.

Faith Voices is the fantastic coherence that brings together many pieces of my life: my intellectual passions, my career in academe, my political commitments, my administrative experiences, my beloved communities of scholars and church folk, and my transformative experience at the Bunting. These coa-

lesced as I worked with my five remarkable partners. Had I not met Brian, I would have lacked ways to make the dream of a think tank real. Had we not worked with Peter, Brian and I would not have had the progressive-movement connections to launch Faith Voices with the support we wanted from the outset. Kevin and Lee have brought invaluable experience in creating new enterprises and in constructing boards and financial systems. And, of course, Rebecca has been a sustaining friend and astute collaborator, supporting us in key ways.

Had anyone told me ten years ago that I would be spending the last stage of my career working happily with four white men to change American religious life, I would have laughed at such an unthinkable suggestion. But fantastic coherence is about the emergence of what cannot be imagined. When it makes its appearance, it demands to be lived out, and so I am living it out, living out my commitment to paradise as this life in Faith Voices. It is one concrete way to renew progressive religious work so important to justice, human thriving, and democratic values in American life, for the common good.