Rosemarie, c. 1952.

PHOTO COURTESY OF JEAN FRENEY CAMPBELL.
FOR
Sue Bailey Thurman
AND FOR
Charles
IN MEMORIAM
* * *
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A gallery appears after page 143
There is no scarcity. There is no shortage. No lack of love, of compassion, of joy in the world. There is enough. There is more than enough.

Only fear and greed make us think otherwise.

No one need starve. There is enough land and enough food. No one need die of thirst. There is enough water. No one need live without mercy. There is no end to grace. And we are all instruments of grace. The more we give it, the more we share it, the more we use it, the more God makes. There is no scarcity of love. There is plenty. And always more.

This is the universe my mother lived in. Her words. Her ways. This is the universe she was raised in, by parents from rural Georgia who came up in the generation after slavery. People who had lived with many terrors but who knew terror was not God’s final say. This is the universe she taught me. Whatever I call religion is this inclusive, Christian, indigenous, Black, southern cosmology of compassion and connectedness. It is the poetry of my mother’s life.

Mama died at the end of winter in 2004. For almost ten years, we had been writing. Gathering up her stories—her long, sweet flashes of brilliance, her prayers, what she remembered of her Woodlawn, Chicago childhood and the high strong laughter of her mother and aunts;
her father’s gentle work-worn hands. She was giving me what she knew I would need to survive this world; and what I would need to love it. What she wanted me to tell about her, what she knew of God, the people we come from and her many magnificent companions in the movement for justice in this nation.

Lord, I have been writing Mama’s story for too long. Much too long. Passing through so many sicknesses to get here—hers, my father’s, my brother’s, my own. But she stood there, like the mother in Lucille Clifton’s poem, at the other side of the river, holding out her heart, set to throw it across when my waiting hands could finally catch it.

II

God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors.

—Genesis 45:7 (Revised Standard Version)

Mama trained her mind toward the good. Even before she knew anything about Buddhism, or the Dalai Lama. Before she ever traveled to India. I don’t know when it started. Maybe she was born that way. Or perhaps she had seen her own mother and father do it so often, her aunts, too, that it became an artless response. She would lean naturally into the side of encouragement and moral strength. And forgiveness, though she was not imprudent.

She could find a blessedness in anything. She assumed it was there and no matter how deeply hidden, her expert hand would scoop it out and show it to you.

In her counseling, she used a Japanese practice of gratefulness, Naikan/Morita Therapy. It emphasizes training our spirits toward gratitude, especially for our mothers and those others who sacrifice so much for our happiness and well-being. That appealed to her. “It works quickly,” she told me. I told her she wouldn’t have many clients if she kept asking people to remember what they had done to hurt their mothers and all the things their mothers had done to take care of them. “That’s the opposite of how most psychotherapists make their money,” I said. She laughed.

The Dalai Lama says look upon all beings as if they were our mother—the person who has loved us best, loved us most in our life; the person who has been kindest to us. Treat all beings as if they were our mother. Because, in fact, they are. Mama says the Dalai Lama said, “We have all been each other’s mothers.”

x • Daughter’s Précis
In my classes, Mama tells the students we have all been the good one. And we have all been the “evil” person. We have all been many things. And we yet carry those lifetimes in our cellular memory. Just as we carry all of the universe in our cellular memory. So there is no judgment of others. Just the will to do good toward them. To show kindness in this life. We all want happiness. We all want someone to be kind to us. We all want and need and have the right to joy in this life. To avoid unnecessary suffering. None of us is more worthy than the next. None of us is less worthy than the next. We are all the same in this. We have all been each other’s mothers.

III

Listen to me, house of Jacob and all the remnant of the house of Israel, a load on me from your birth, carried by me from the womb: till you grow old I am SHe, and when white hairs come, I will carry you still; I have made you and I will bear the burden, I will carry you and bring you to safety.

—Isaiah 46:3–4 (New English Bible)

This book is neither autobiography nor biography. But some of both. And something else. It is Mama’s and it is mine. Mostly it’s a representation of the richness of my mother’s creative imagination, the mystic streams of her spiritual life, and the lyricism and joy of her activism. It is also the way she modeled for me a female-centered, indigenous wisdom about the world.

There are women in communities all over this country and around the globe, I’m sure, like my mother. I have met some of them. Women with original and powerful ways of understanding life, ways that come from the struggles and pleasures of their lived experience, but that may not find much expression beyond their kitchen tables, their market stalls, or the crises in which their families inevitably turn to them for guidance. (Like Mamie Till-Mobley said, “Any trouble I’ve ever had in my life, it took Mama to get me out.”) My mother had a few outlets for her magnificence. But not nearly, it seems to me now, enough.

Mama had an acute and gentle intelligence about navigating the world—finding the wine, the sweetness in the unexpected places. The hard places. And sharing it. Making it last. Making more. (Talk about loaves and fishes . . . ) Her understanding of social justice activism situated struggle very comfortably alongside hospitality and mothering. This is a meaning of activism I have not seen widely discussed among scholars, but the women of the Southern Freedom Movement (and their families) know about it. More than anything, it is an activism based in “being family”—bringing
people into the house, literally and figuratively. Making room and making welcome. Letting people know there is room for them in the vision, in the struggle, in the nation, in the family.

IV

I will gather the remnant of my sheep from all the lands, and I will bring them back to their fold and they shall be fruitful and increase. I will set shepherds over them who will care for them, and they shall fear no more, nor be dismayed, neither shall any be missing.

—JEREMIAH 23:3–4 (RSV AND NEB)

Mama joined the Mennonite Church when she was a young woman, around twenty-one. Her older sister, Alma, joined before her and Mama followed, admiringly, in Alma’s footsteps. It was the Mennonites, the Movement, and her marriage to my father that sent my mother south to Atlanta in 1961.

I was born there; my brother Jonathan too. We lived in a household that streamed with progressive ideas and people—Black nationalists and pan-Africanists; African independence movement intellectuals and artists; labor organizers; Quakers and Mennonites (and a few Catholics and Southern Baptists) who were trying to live a witness of peace and racial reconciliation; student activists; our Chicago cousins; blues musicians and folk singers; painters and writers; radical publishers and co-op founders; and just plain ole good-hearted people. All kinds. Of course, the freedom movement people were the mainstay—our parents’ activist friends and comrades who were like a big extended family to my brother and me.

In the houses where I was a girl, there were beautiful sepia-toned paintings by Kofi Bailey and Elizabeth Catlett Mora’s Mexican-workshopped black-and-white prints. A full set of Blue Note jazz albums and folk stories and songs from Atlantic and Folkways records that my mother borrowed weekly from the library for us. Also lots of books. Black children’s books were an emerging genre and my father brought home from his travels the newest titles for me and Jonathan. Black coloring books, Black comic books, biographies and histories for children with illustrations by Tom Feelings and Jacob Lawrence. Most of the books in the house were from my dad’s collection of American and African American history and literature, but there was, too, a growing set of texts on comparative religion, Eastern philosophy, meditation, and the Christian contemplative tradition. People like Gerald Heard and Thomas Merton, and, of course, Howard Thurman. Later, Paramahansa Yogananda, Bawa Muhaiyaddeen, Hannah Arendt, and
the Dalai Lama. These were Mama’s books. Both of my parents were interested in these world teachings about peace, about centering, about the grace in our shared humanity and the transformative power of love, but for my mother, they were a special sustenance and she read them with quiet enthusiasm. The spiritual teachings were places she went and considered and remembered the way she considered and remembered Bible verses or my grandmother’s counsel.

My parents met in 1959. They were among the few African Americans in the Mennonite Church of that era. Both were eloquent and perceptive public speakers who shared an interest in how the Mennonite witness of reconciliation and peacemaking could contribute to Civil Rights struggles, and what insights those struggles could offer back to the Mennonite Church. Shortly after their marriage in 1960, with support from the Mennonite Central Committee, my mother and father moved to Georgia as representatives of their denomination to the Movement and established “Mennonite House”—an interracial voluntary service unit, community gathering place, and retreat space for activists and peace church volunteers. It was the first of its kind in the region.

Before and after Mennonite House, Mama taught school and did social work, infusing her activities with an essential compassion and respect (and self-respect) that she modeled on her own mother, who learned it from her parents and grandparents—those southern generations who repeatedly transformed collective trauma into empathy and acumen. Mama surely absorbed some of that skill. People would come to her, in private moments or in public tears, and she would put her hands on them and draw out the pain so they could drop it. Or she would show them how to make something useful of it—a song, a dance, some poetry for those following behind. That’s what she did with her own grief, until it weighed too heavy even for her. Then it was lifted.

All throughout my life, although I wasn’t aware until much later, Mama must have been collecting and laying out teachings and experiences like a trousseau. What she read and studied, judged against what she lived, balanced with what she knew in her heart to be truthful and good. These beautiful, useful garments; worn close to her skin: the movement work; years of research on Ida B. Wells-Barnett and the history of Black women’s activism; friendship with Makota Valdina Pinto, a Candomblé priestess from Bahia (Mama and Valdina each spoke slices of the other’s language enough to recognize their
kindred lives); visits with my father to Hopi elder Thomas Banyacýya and Dhyani Ywahoo, a spiritual leader of the Cherokee nation; study with Michio Kushi; the initiations she took with Lama Zopa Rinpoche; and the Vipassana meditation and Feldenkrais training and certification. And so much more . . .

All of this spiritual and intellectual exploration was undergirded by the foundational wisdom my mom received from her mother, Ella Lee Harris Freeney, whom everybody called “Mama Freeney.” And, toward the end of her life, as she reflected on it, my mother said, “It’s all the same source. The way Mama Freeney and Grandma Rye and them taught us, the way they lived, is the same as these beautiful teachings from around the world, Rachel. It’s all the same, baby. Everywhere we go.”

It was a lifelong conversation with my mother I had. She knew that she could be accused of irrationality, but there was nothing more rational, more logical, more grounded in reality for Mama, than the way the universe loves and tends to every living being within it. That was the life model for her.

By the time I got to know her as an adult, Mama’s mystic way in the world was “hidden in plain sight” like the freedom quilts and slave songs whose steal-away meanings were camouflaged. She lived, in moments, an exquisite, shamanic love for the world in open concealment. Simultaneously feeding and protecting a philosophical approach to life that connected her powerfully and intimately to her own source of supply—which was both ancestral and cosmic. Either way, it was something that reminded her, in almost everything she saw, that the universe is filled with mercy and forgiveness. And that people will always fight for justice, reach for a way to be whole in the world.

Candomblé—a lyric, poetic, ancestral religion of strength and supplication—echoed my mother’s mystic attention to life, to the universe, to spirit. My first visit to a temple in Bahia in 1985, was for a festa de Xangô¹ at the terreiro of Olga de Alaketu. My attraction to this Afro-Indigenous Brazilian tradition was immediate, visceral, and sublime. The orixá rhythms stammering out the names of God; the smell of holy leaves; the smoke-grease flavor of old iron pans and palm oil; the insistent, inherent language of drums.

Mama taught me to know the presence of God in the kitchen; ancestors in cooking—her hand raised, shaking an affirmation out of her bones; sharp percussive claps; prayers and gestures of prayers sliding into pots of greens and chicken. We ate her tenderness. Candomblé was a religion I knew from home. Women slicing onions and cutting meat. Tending fire and telling stories. And any moment, any moment at all, they enter—the ancianos—coming in through the door, a window, the floorboards: rising up the helixed ladders of our own breath and blood. Telling God.
This African-based mysticism was a deep strand, a wide band, in my mother’s life, as it is in my own. It is why I am drawn to study and write about Candomblé, Vodou, Santeria, and other ritual traditions of the Afro-Atlantic diaspora. It is also, I am convinced, an underappreciated resource of Black American life and culture that has a great deal to teach about who we are and what our history offers to the world. To paraphrase Alice Walker, it is often in our mother’s lives and gardens (and kitchens) that the numinous, the persevering, and the creative meet.

And I will make her that halted a remnant, and her that was cast far off a strong nation.
—MICAH 4:7 (KING JAMES VERSION)

My mother lived forty-four years with my father. Stayed with him “through many dangers, toils, and snares.” She taught him and fought him and forgave him. And loved him and taught him some more. It was a difficult union in some respects. Nevertheless, when my parents were able to work together they were an absolutely amazing pair. Both intellectually sharp and full of imagination, Mama and Daddy were capable of deeply inspired thinking and, at their best, each generously fed the other’s genius.

What they created together—in workshops, in classes, in their comments and revisions of each other’s writings and speeches, and in their ministry to people around them—was an offering of astounding beauty. My mother and father both loved history and people. And they shared a remarkable devotion to this country, believing profoundly in its democratic and creative potential. In the best times, I loved simply being around them. Their conversations and company fascinated me far and above anything my peers could offer and they nurtured my curiosity about the world.

My dad is past eighty now, a senior scholar of African American history whose work resonates in the DuBoisian tradition of scholarship firmly yoked to social justice activism. And his life has its own poetry, its rhythms urgent, tangled and soaring. . . . In Mama’s final year, and since, he is a magnified comfort, a rock.

Mama and Daddy were both activist-scholars. While she raised my brother and me and a half dozen of my younger cousins who lived with us at different points, Mama wrote a master’s thesis on Ida B. Wells-Barnett focused on the antilynching activist’s biography and the progressive leadership of African American women. When we were older and in college, and
as she cared for her aging mother-in-law, Mama did another master’s degree in nutrition and social work, documenting the benefits of a healthy diet for the rehabilitation of juvenile offenders. In the year before she passed, she talked about doing a PhD in archaeology; she wanted to study the African burial ground in New York City. Always, my parents shared a conversation about the radical tradition in American life; and as they began to teach and write jointly about the relationship between spirituality and social activism, my mother’s strengths and sagacity surfaced in more obvious ways.

VI

And the remnant that is escaped of the house of Judah shall yet again take root downward and bear fruit upward.

— 2 Kings 19:30 (KJV)

If you didn’t know better, and you saw them at a public gathering, you might at first think she was a gentle helpmeet. (Or, you might not.) If you were lucky, or simply present long enough, you’d see her rise up in the middle of a crisis room and deftly turn the tension into a reconciling, embracing wind. She could do it subtly; or she could do it like a tornado.

My mother knew how to talk, how to debate. She was a brilliant debater. She would think of perspectives and justifications that occurred to no one else in the room until she uttered them. My grandmother, Mama Freeney, loved logic and thinking and trained all of her children to use their minds inventively and well. Mom won speech and debating contests in high school and college and she developed into a thoughtful and passionate public speaker.

Sometimes though, she sat silent in the public circle and offered her mothering and mentoring to the offended/offending parties only afterward. She knew so much about healing . . . about recognizing the underlying, unspoken wounds that catalyzed the outbursts on the surface.

A few years before Mama passed, the Veterans of Hope Project convened an activists’ retreat at the Fetzer Institute in Michigan. Most of the participants were older folks from the movement days—people like Tom Feelings, Grace Boggs, Zoharah Simmons, and about twenty others. There were a few people present under thirty, but not in equal numbers to the elders. Two of the young folks, a man and a woman, were working with a film crew to document the retreat and they felt particularly alienated from the conversation and history shared by the elders. While they gathered footage and sound, they were also observing and quietly seething inside. They
didn’t see themselves reflected in the stories, in the planning, in the community. And on the last day (something explosive almost always happens on the last day with activists, doesn’t it?), the young people from the film crew blew up and told everybody else they were hypocrites. Most of the older people were stunned. They certainly didn’t see themselves that way and they wondered where the youths’ seemingly sudden rage had come from.

The retreat had been coming to a close and people were talking about what it had meant to them—how rejuvenating it was to be in the company of ones who shared some of their history and some of their earnest, frustrated love for their country. The young videographers declined to join the circle, saying the gathering had no place for them—people who were not movement veterans, or professional community activists, or nonprofit administrators. They said they had thought several times to leave, and now, here at the end of the weekend, when everybody seemed to be relishing a kind of feel-good moment, they were angry and hurt because it seemed as if none of this had anything to do with them.

By the end of her statement, the young woman was turning to walk out, visibly choked up and emotionally exhausted. Mama went and got her, and stood next to her, bringing her back to the circle. My mother looked around at all of us and said the responsibility of the elders is to take care of the youth, to protect them. “No, you can’t leave,” Mama said, holding on to the young woman whose eyes were watering now. “Because you are part of us and none of our work means anything if our children don’t know that we love them.”

Mama stood there talking to the circle, holding the girl tight around the shoulder and turning the energy in the large open room from defensiveness and frustration to proof that this family we had made over the three or four days of our gathering was strong enough to mend a circle some had not even seen was ruptured.

VII

Remnant: What is left of a community after it undergoes a catastrophe.

—THE ANCHOR BIBLE DICTIONARY

In 1997 my mother was awarded a fellowship to the Mary I. Bunting Institute at Radcliffe College. At the time she was very sick. She had recently been diagnosed with diabetic neuropathic cachexia (a rare and debilitating neurological complication of diabetes) and was struggling to find a treatment that
her sensitive body could tolerate. She wanted very badly to accept the fellowship and do a research project on the relationship between spirituality and social activism among veterans of the Southern Freedom Movement. She also needed some time and space of her own to think and to heal.

Mama originally envisioned Remnants as a book that could serve as a manual for people in the helping professions—social workers, community activists, teachers—giving them encouragement and creative models for grounding their work in a broadly inclusive vision of community, justice, and human relationships.

I had just finished graduate school and was taking care of my mother as her condition became more acute, so I accompanied her to Cambridge where we shared a one-bedroom apartment for almost a year. We visited medical specialists, experimented with various treatments for the wracking pain and extreme weight loss Mama was experiencing, and in the moments when she was strong enough to sit with a tape recorder, we talked—about family history; about politics; the joys and lessons of her childhood; the strangeness and meaning of her current illness; her study in India with Tibetan lamas; the plays and performance pieces she envisioned as healing ceremonies for our fractured nation; the ancestors, the orixás and God; and the Black southern mysticism that informed so much of her mother’s and grandmothers’ wisdom.

Remnants quickly grew from a manual into a more personal memoir, influenced by our conversations and my curiosity about the details of my mother’s life, and the roots of her spirituality and her politics. We began work on a collection of essays and stories, poems and recipes, play fragments and autobiographical remembrances that connected my mother’s history with stories of the many extraordinary women and men she knew from the movement days. She was trying to get well from the accumulation of burdens she carried, using the writing as a way to explore how she and other movement people had come through trauma in the past. In a way, it served that purpose. Telling her story, with support from staff and colleagues at the Bunting Institute, and restorative visits to see her family in Chicago, Mama saw her health improve remarkably by the end of the fellowship year.

Once we returned to Denver, I worked only sporadically on the project (to my everlasting chagrin). Mama wanted to finish it quickly, but I was by then helping to direct the Veterans of Hope Project and found it hard to make the time we needed to pull all the pieces together. After Mama passed, I left the day-to-day operations of the VOHP and began working in more earnest on the book.
The voice of this text is now our mixed utterance. Our dialogue. While Mama was living she would tell me stories or write a first draft of her ideas and I would stretch and mold and shape the text further along and then read it back to her to make sure it still said what she wanted it to say. She’d tell me if it was good or if I had left out something or had missed a detail or tone she wanted to emphasize. And I’d work some more and come back again. Sometimes, I’d add things that occurred to me as interesting or helpful and usually (but not always) Mama would say “Oh yes, that’s good. Let’s put that in too.” In shaping the chapters of this book, I have employed stories I heard from Mama all my life; entries from her journals; interviews with her family members and friends; essays she and I wrote together while she was alive; and transcriptions of more than forty hours of our taped conversations (made mostly between 1997 and 1998).

Like any mother and daughter, we had our discords. We both tended toward the dramatic—although my dramas were passive-aggressive and Mama’s moments of fire were strikingly lucid. And while she didn’t generally interfere in my life choices as an adult (most of the time I was asking for her advice anyway), if she got a strong feeling about something she’d let me know. Sometimes to my frustration, and sometimes to my relief, her instinct was usually right.

Our family moved a dozen times before I was sixteen. Different neighborhoods, different cities. Mostly because of my father’s academic itinerancy and my parents’ political commitments. Mama said, “Some people moved around a lot because they were military; we moved because we were militant.” Sometimes the accommodations were only temporary anyway or the rent was too high. Through it all, Mama worked very hard to give Jonathan and me stability. She and her nephew, our cousin Charles, made all the packing and unpacking every year or two seem like fun. I was a fairly well-adjusted child, but I needed a lot of affirmation in the midst of so much unpredictability. My mother and my cousin made sure I had it. In the final seven years of her life, as I worked to claim and nurture my voice as a writer and scholar, my mother was my mightiest champion—giving support without stint and in abundance, a broad infusion of confidence and love.

But Mama needed her own space and air. All my life, she was looking for retreats—monasteries, meditation centers, places to go breathe some quiet, restore her strength, and hear herself think. While my grandparents were still living in the family home in Chicago, she would go there. Home.
respite. The family took care of her. Even so, she said later, the problems in
the marriage had a constructive effect. They pushed her further into some-
place infinite. She had to make an inner sanctuary where she could do the
alchemy of healing her own spirit, so she could get up and keep dancing.

Through my mother’s story, Remnants seeks to bring the indigenous
wisdom of the African American community, particularly of women, into
engagement with more academic understandings of intellectual produc-
tion. At various points, this book is in dialogue with the work of historian
of religions Charles H. Long, dramaturge George H. Bass, womanist writer
and scholar Alice Walker, philosopher and mystic Howard Thurman; with
the wisdom and experience of religious activists Clarence Jordan, Martin
and Coretta King, Anne Braden, Will Campbell, Marion King, and His
Holiness the Dalai Lama; and with the creative insights of artists Bernice
Johnson Reagon and Lucille Clifton, among others. These engagements
help situate Remnants as a resource for critical investigation of indigenous
African American religious and philosophical thought in relationship to a
range of other traditions.

Like Walker’s In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens, Lucille Clifton’s Genera-
tions, and Gloria Anzaldua’s Borderlands/La Frontera, this book contributes
to and draws from the critical, ethical, philosophical, and creative meth-
odologies that are, in current parlance, understood as “womanist.” These
are approaches that profoundly wed interdisciplinary, intellectual work to
reflective insights emergent from the lived experiences of women of color.
The rhythms and tones of Remnants are conversational; its narrative is pop-
ulated with stories and poems and dreams, as well as analytical essays and
autobiographical meditations. In some ways the quality of the text is like
music, jazz, and old soul—you’ll hear it best with your heart, the inner ear.

My hope and expectation is that the book will speak to many communi-
ties and disciplines, crossing varied terrains of academia, community, and
spirit. Obvious points of scholarly interest will be found in the subdisciplines
of religious studies: especially African American and Afro-Atlantic religion;
comparative religions; American religious history; womanist theology and
ethics; public theology; Anabaptist studies; mysticism; and spirituality and
social justice. In particular, Remnants provides helpful avenues for examin-
ing a meaning of Black southern indigeneity as a cultural-religious scaffold
for the 1960s freedom movement struggles and as a grassroots philosophical
tradition with valuable insights about the uses of compassion in healing the
experience of trauma. Scholars and students in other fields, such as history (African American social history, the Great Migration); literature (spiritual autobiography and coming-of-age narrative); sociology (family studies, social movement theory); peace studies; ethnic studies; and women’s and gender studies, will also find benefit in the text.

The book will be particularly valuable to activists, teachers, students, and artists—those members of our larger society who are in especial search for ways to gather and express both informed critique and fervent hope for the transformation of our society.

*   *   *

Remnants proceeds in roughly chronological order. But it is also circular—starting from the ancestral Georgia ground and ending there as well. The book is organized in six sections, plus a foreword and afterwords. The foreword includes this preface and an opening reflection “(the light),” which introduces the mystic-spiritual element in my mother’s life running throughout the narrative. The preface is my attempt to outline major elements of my mother’s worldview and personal experience as well as to offer guidance about the nature of the text and help readers appreciate its somewhat unorthodox timbres. With the exception of the preface, the afterwords, and the call-and-response of the section called “The Bunting,” this book is written in my mother’s voice, sometimes from verbatim transcriptions of tapes and journals, sometimes from my reassembled memories of her words and ideas, often a combination of both.

The first and second sections of Remnants, “Ground” and “North,” are animated by motifs of ancestral history and extended kin, beginning with the stories of an enslaved great-grandmother, Grandma Rye, and coursing through the family’s life in early twentieth-century southwest Georgia, their move north to Chicago in the Great Migration, and Rosemarie’s youth and young adulthood in a city that was an incubator of joys and possibilities as well as a place of deep segregation and constraint. This portion of the book illustrates the spiritual values my mother learned from family in examples of our death and dying rites; daily associations with extended kin and neighbors; the special tolerance for children, people in crisis, and social outcasts; the dreams, visions, and personal, mystic spirituality of her own mother and Mama’s early encounters with the inexplicable, the holy. Among the chapters here are stories of angels and ghosts in the Georgia backwoods; Daddy Freeney’s memories of the lynchings that sent him north in search of safety for his sons; Aunt Mary’s fistfights with death and the snowstorm
that paralyzed Chicago when death finally won; the yellow-flower healing teas of my mother’s great-grandmother, Grandma Rye; and meditations on the battered shields and ironic beauties of blackness.

The third portion of the book, called “South,” recalls Mama’s years as a full-time worker in the freedom movement, her perspective as a racial reconciliation activist and the spiritual journeys she began in the aftermath of that time. It includes stories of her work as cofounder (with my father) of the first integrated social service agency in Atlanta, Georgia—Mennonite House—in 1961; recollections of their travels in the South as an “advance team” for organizations preparing to launch desegregation campaigns; and reflections on the transformative spirit and power of the movement. This section also incorporates stories of Mama’s friendships with men and women who embodied a convergence of spiritual conviction and dedication to social change, such as Clarence and Florence Jordan, southern white founders of Koinonia, an interracial agricultural community in Americus, Georgia; Anne Braden, a white Kentuckian with a lifelong commitment to racial and economic justice; Howard and Sue Bailey Thurman, deeply ecumenical spiritual elders to my parents; Martin and Coretta King who lived around the corner from us in Atlanta; and Bernice Johnson Reagon, early member of the sncc Freedom Singers² and founder of the women’s a cappella group, Sweet Honey in the Rock.

The latter parts of Remnants, “The Dharamsala Notebook,” “Bunting,” and “The Pachamama Circle,” trace Mama’s immersion in the mystic traditions of Buddhism and contemplative Christianity. Here again she is drawn to reconciliation, forgiveness, and healing—the grounding values of her earliest life. In this portion of the book, she connects the practice of Insight Meditation (Vipassana) to the visionary traditions of African American folk religion; and ties Tibetan Buddhist teachings on the purpose of human life to the lessons Rosemarie learned at her own mother’s side as they visited dying relatives and friends. This section examines the links among the healing of personal wounds and societal injustices; and between the search for meaning and reconciliation in Mama’s life and the journeys of others who were her companions. In many ways, “Bunting” and “The Pachamama Circle” coalesce as the mystic heart of the text. In a grammar of medicine, womanist storytelling, and ritual, these sections narrate my mother’s journey through a staggering, uncommon illness and recount how her effort to tell the stories of her life moved her toward renewed strength.

The AfterWords of the book are a poem and two essays I wrote in the years following my mother’s death; the poem is an homage to Oyá, the Yoruba energy of storm and transformation, and to our fugitive forebears. One
essay is about Mama’s extraordinary engagements with my students and the other describes the experience my father and I shared of my mother’s final weeks of transition. The last pronouncement of the text, “(the Call)” is Mama’s—offering to all in her reach an assurance of ancestral strength and an urge to reclamation of our national identity as a place of compassion and justice.

VIII

But now for a brief moment favor has been shown by the Lord our God, to leave us a remnant, and to give us a secure hold within his holy place, that our God may brighten our eyes and grant us a little reviving in our bondage.
—Ezra 9:8 (RSV)

When my mother died we held two memorial services. One in Chicago at my cousin Phillip’s house, which was mostly family and a few old friends. And another one, a larger one, later that spring in Denver, where people from many strands of my mother’s life came to honor her with stories and songs and fellowship.

At the first memorial, the one in Chicago, my father stood up and told everyone how Mama had inspired and directed him to be the kind of teacher, writer, and pastoring presence he became. He said, “When Rose and I were first married, I sometimes spoke in a judgmental way. I had a tendency to lecture in hard, harsh tones—especially about racial justice issues; criticizing people for what they were not doing and doing wrong. My manner could be rough, even caustic at times. Rose observed me for a while, and then she took me aside and said to me, ‘Vincent, you’re a good speaker. But you can be very critical. People need encouragement. If you can give them that, it will inspire them to know they can change.’”

Standing there, surrounded by my aunts and cousins and family friends from way back, I announced that I had known many intelligent people in my life—growing up around universities and in the movement. I had studied at plenty of fancy schools myself—but my mother was the smartest person I knew. Categorically. She was brilliant—on multiple levels simultaneously. Creatively, emotionally, intellectually—there wasn’t a problem any of us ever had that she couldn’t figure out how to help us through. I mean her mind was sharp. Nothing got by her. Sometimes she perceived things so quickly and so keenly and so differently from anyone else, that I had to whip my head around to catch the backdraft of her genius as it sped on its way to the next sun.
Remnant: the remaining, the part leftover, the trace still perfumed; ephemeral and persisting, the buried things, coming up out of the ground like ladders.

Her dying was hard for all of us. We were weary and undone. I was not there at the very end. The ambulance beat me to the house and her heart had already stopped. But Daddy and my Aunt Sue were there and they held Mama’s hands and rocked her soft and sweet from this world to the next. The emergency workers revived the heartbeat but nothing else, and then at the hospital, not even the heart would pulse on its own. Mama had gone.

We sang for her in the hospital room. Waiting the day or two until everybody could come to say good-bye. Hymns and spirituals. The old-timey church songs she loved like the blues. And the prayers from Ikeda and Bawa, from Lama Zopa and the orixás. We washed her with mint and marjoram and roses. We placed suras and Tibetan prayers on her chest, her forehead, whispered into her ears. And then, after the wires and tubes had all been released from her body and the room was quiet, we sat a while longer. Then we left.

Mama is gone, but she is not. Her hand still rests on my back when I am troubled, or sick, or frightened. She comes and she watches us. Her nieces and nephews. Her children. Our father. Her sisters. Her beloveds. All the circle of those who remember her. We are her remnants. The remaining lace, the cloth. The small rocks. This book, not perhaps what she would have made of the vestiges, is still hers. And mine. And yours . . .

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Notes
1. A public ritual ceremony in honor of the orixá of fire, justice, and communal well-being.
2. The Freedom Singers were a singing group formed in 1963 by young activists in support of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee.