

# THESE ARE THE TIMES THAT GROW OUR SOULS

GRACE LEE BOGGS

*In October 2003, Detroit-based activist, cultural worker, and octogenarian Grace Lee Boggs energized and inspired a national gathering of artists, arts organization and community leaders, and activists with her speech at Animating Democracy's National Exchange on Art & Civic Dialogue. Boggs described a United States that is increasingly jobless; that jeopardizes its youth in a problem-wrought education system; and that is resented for its economic, military, and cultural domination. "Can we create a new paradigm of our selfhood and our nationhood?" she implored. In Boggs' subsequent essay, "These are the times that grow our souls," (commissioned by Animating Democracy and posted on its web site), she expands on ideas seeded at that gathering. Stressing the need for tremendous philosophical and spiritual transformation to effect social justice and change, she advocates a shift from politics as usual and protest alone to positive and holistic change making. Boggs recounts several movements of the last half century and promising contemporary ones that demonstrate an expanding desire to "grow our souls." Boggs recognizes artists as key paradigm shifters. She concludes with insights on how arts and culture have been transforming Detroit's decimated physical spaces, education system, and neighborhoods through Detroit Summer, a multicultural, intergenerational youth program and movement that she and her late husband, James Boggs, founded to rebuild, redefine, and respirit Detroit from the ground up.*

## MORE QUESTIONS THAN ANSWERS

In the last 60 years, I have had the privilege of participating in most of the great humanizing movements of the second half of the last century—labor, civil rights, black power, women's, Asian American, environmental justice, antiwar. Each was a tremendously transformative experience for me, expanding my understanding of what it means to be an American and a human being, and challenging me to keep deepening my thinking about how to bring about radical social change.

However, I cannot recall any previous period when the issues were so basic, so interconnected, and so demanding of everyone living in this country, regardless of race, ethnicity, class, gender, age, or national origin. At this point in the continuing evolution of our country and of the human race, we urgently need to stop thinking of ourselves as victims and to recognize that we must each become a part of the solution because we are each a part of the problem.

How are we going to make our livings in an age when hi-tech and the export of jobs overseas have brought us to the point where the number of workers needed to produce goods and services is constantly diminishing? Where will we get the imagination, the courage, and the determination to reconceptualize the meaning and purpose of work in a society that is becoming increasingly jobless?

What is going to happen to cities like Detroit that were once the arsenal of democracy? Now that they've been abandoned by industry, are we just going to throw them away? Or can we rebuild, redefine, and respirit them as models of 21<sup>st</sup>-century self-reliant, sustainable, multicultural communities? Who is going to begin this new story?

How are we going to redefine education so that 30 to 50 percent of inner-city children do not drop out of school, thus ensuring that large numbers will end up in prison? Is it enough to call for "Education, not Incarceration"? Or does our top-down educational system, created a hundred years ago to prepare an immigrant population for factory work, bear a large part of the responsibility for the escalation in incarceration? In the last three years the issues in education have been made more acute by Bush's "No Child Left Behind" act. A climate of fear and intimidation has been created in our schools by penalizing "underperforming" schools, forcing teachers to teach to the test, showing "zero tolerance" to students, and encouraging military recruitment.

How are we going to build a 21st-century America in which people of all races and ethnicities live together in harmony, and Euro-Americans in particular embrace their new role as one among many minorities constituting the new multiethnic majority?

What is going to motivate us to start caring for our biosphere instead of using our mastery of technology to increase the volume and speed at which we are making our planet uninhabitable for other species and eventually for ourselves?

And, especially since 9/11, how are we to achieve reconciliation with the two-thirds of the world that increasingly resents our economic, military, and cultural domination? Can we accept their anger as a challenge rather than a threat? Out of our new vulnerability can we recognize that our safety now depends on our loving and caring for the peoples of the world as we love and care for our own families? Or can we conceive of security only in terms of the Patriot Act and exercising our formidable military power?

When the chickens come home to roost for our invasion of Iraq, as they are already doing, where will we get the courage and the imagination to win by losing? What will help us recognize that we have brought on our defeats by our own arrogance; our own irresponsibility; and our own unwillingness, as individuals and as a nation, to engage in seeking radical solutions to the growing inequality between the nations of the North and those of the South? Can we create a new paradigm of our selfhood and our nationhood? Or are we so locked into nationalism, racism, and determinism that we will be driven to seek scapegoats for our frustrations and failures—as the Germans did after World War I, thus aiding and abetting the onset of Hitler and the Holocaust?

We live at a very dangerous time because these questions are no longer abstractions. Our lives, the lives of our children and future generations, and even the survival of the planet depend on our willingness to transform ourselves into active planetary and global citizens who, as Martin Luther King, Jr., put it, “develop an overriding loyalty to mankind as a whole in order to preserve the best in their individual society.”

The time is already very late and we have a long way to go to meet these challenges. Over the decades of economic expansion that began with the so-called American Century after World War II, tens of millions of Americans have become increasingly self-centered and materialistic, more concerned with our possessions and individual careers than with the state of our neighborhoods, cities, country, and planet, closing our eyes and hearts to the many forms of violence that have been exploding in our inner cities and in powder kegs all over the rest of the world—both because the problems have seemed so insurmountable and because just struggling for our own survival has consumed so much of our time and energy.

At the same time, the various identity struggles, while remediating to some degree the great wrongs that have been done to workers; African Americans, Native Americans, and other people of color; women; gays and lesbians; and the disabled, and while helping to humanize our society overall, have also had a shadow side in the sense that they have encouraged us to think of ourselves more as determined than as self-determining, more as victims of “isms” (racism, sexism, capitalism) than as human beings who have the power of choice and who for our own survival must assume individual and collective responsibility for creating a new nation that is loved rather than feared and that does not have to bribe and bully other nations to win support.

These are the times that try our souls. Each of us needs to undergo a tremendous philosophical and spiritual transformation. Each of us needs to be awakened to a personal and compassionate recognition of the inseparable interconnection between our minds, hearts, and bodies, between our physical and psychological well-being, and between our selves and all the other selves in our country and in the world. Each of us needs to stop being a passive observer of the suffering that we know is going on in the world and start identifying with the sufferers. Each of us needs to make a leap that is both practical and philosophical, beyond determinism to self-determination. Each of us has to be true to and enhance our own humanity by embracing and practicing the conviction that as human beings we have free will; that despite the powers and principalities that are bent on objectifying and commodifying us and all our human relationships, the interlocking crises of our time require that we exercise the power within us to make principled choices in our ongoing daily and political lives, choices that will eventually, although not inevitably—there are no guarantees—make a difference.

How are we going to bring about these transformations? Politics as usual, debate and argument, even voting, are no longer sufficient. Our system of representative democracy, which was created by a great revolution, no longer engages

the hearts and minds of the great majority of Americans. Vast numbers of people no longer bother to go to the polls, either because they don't care what happens to the country or the world, or because they don't believe that voting will make a difference on the profound and inter-connected issues that really matter. Even organizing or joining massive protests against disastrous policies and demands for new policies fall short. They may demonstrate that we are on the right side politically but they are not transformative enough. They do not change the cultural images, the symbols, that play such a pivotal role in molding us into who we are.

As the labor movement was developing in the pre-World War II years, John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* transformed the way that Americans viewed themselves in relationship to faceless bankers and heartless landowners. In the 1970s and 1980s, Judy Chicago's *Dinner Party* and *Birth Project* reimagined the vagina, transforming it from a private space and site of oppression into a public space of beauty and spiritual as well as physical creation and liberation. In this period we need artists to create new images that will liberate us from our preoccupation with constantly expanding production and consumption and open up space in our hearts and minds to imagine and create another America that will be viewed by the world as a beacon rather than as a danger.

This need has become more urgent since 9/11. In the words of activist, organizer, and writer Starhawk, "9/11 threw us as collectively into a deep well of grief... The movement we need to build now, the potential for transformation that might arise out of this tragedy, must speak to the heart of the pain we share across political lines. A great hole has been torn out of the heart of the world... With the grief also comes a fear more profound than even the terror caused by the attack itself. For those towers represented human triumph over nature. Larger than life, built to be unburnable, they were the Titanic of our day... Faced with the profundity of loss, with the stark reality of death, we find words inadequate. The language of abstraction doesn't work. Ideology doesn't work. Judgment and hectoring and shaming and blaming cannot truly touch the depth of that loss. Only poetry can address grief. Only words that convey what we can see and smell and taste and touch of life, can move us. To do that we need to forge a new language of both the word and the deed."<sup>1</sup>

## GROWING OUR SOULS

The America that is best known and most resented around the world pursues unlimited economic growth, technological revolutions, and consumption, with little or no regard for their destructive impact on communities, on the environment, and on the billions of people who live in what used to be called the "Third World."

On the other hand, there is little or no national or international recognition of the movement to "grow our souls," which began emerging organically in the United States after the dropping of the atom bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the end of World War II demonstrated both the enormous power and the enormous limitations of viewing human beings mainly as producers and as rational beings in the scientific sense.

At the time Einstein summed up most succinctly the urgent need for this redefinition of what it means to be a human being. "Technological progress," he warned, "is like an axe in the hands of a pathological criminal. The release of atom power has changed everything but the human mind and thus we drift towards catastrophe. The solution to the problem lies in the heart of mankind. Imagination is more important than knowledge.

"A human being" he said, "experiences himself, his thoughts, and feelings as something separated from the rest... a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty."

The nuclear bomb created a great divide in theories and strategies for social change. Henceforth, human beings could no longer pretend that everything that happened to us was determined by external or economic circumstances. Freedom now included the responsibility for making choices. Radical social change could no longer be viewed simply in

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<sup>1</sup> [www.starhawk.org](http://www.starhawk.org). Starhawk is a veteran of progressive movements committed to bringing the techniques and creative power of spirituality to political activism. *Webs of Power: Notes from the Global Uprising*, a collection of her recent political writings with new commentary, was published in late 2002.

terms of us vs. them, of victims vs. villains, of good vs. evil or of transferring power from the top to the bottom. We could no longer afford a separation between politics and ethics. Consciousness and self-consciousness, ideas and values, mere “superstructure” in the Marxist-Leninist paradigm, had to become integral, both as end and as means, to social struggle. Radical social change had to be viewed as a two-sided transformational process, of ourselves and of our institutions, a process requiring protracted struggle and not just a D-Day replacement of one set of rulers with another.

The 1955–56 Montgomery Bus Boycott was the first struggle by an oppressed people in Western society from this new philosophical/political perspective. Before the eyes of the whole world, a people who had been treated as less than human struggled against their dehumanization not as angry victims or rebels but as new men and women, representative of a new, more human society. Practicing methods of nonviolence that transformed themselves and increased the good rather than the evil in the world, always bearing in mind that their goal was not only desegregating the buses but creating the beloved community, they inspired the human identity and ecological movements which over the last 40 years have been creating a new civil society in the United States.

The sermons of Martin Luther King, Jr., and other religious leaders, produced in the heat of struggle, played a critical role in the success of the Montgomery boycott and ensuing civil rights struggles. But as Rosemarie Freeney Harding, who worked closely with SNCC activists in the 60s, has pointed out, “Another vital source of support was music, particularly the sacred music of the black experience, which has long been an alchemical resource for struggle: a conjured strength...The songs changed the atmosphere, becoming an almost palpable barrier between demonstrators and police, giving the marchers an internal girding that allowed them to move without fear.”<sup>2</sup>

Prior to the civil rights movement, songs like “Joe Hill” and “Solidarity Forever” had demonstrated the link between music and social action. But the songs of the civil rights movement, like “We Shall Overcome” and “Ain’t Going to Let Nobody Turn Me Around” not only energized those on the frontlines. They helped grow the souls of their supporters all over the country and the world.

The publication of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* in 1962 added another dimension to the evolving movement towards inner and outer transformation initiated by the civil rights movement. By helping us to see how the widespread use of chemicals and hazardous technologies in post-World War II America was silencing “robins, catbirds, doves, jays, wrens and scores of other bird voices,” Carson awakened millions of Americans to the sacredness of nature and to the need, expressed by Einstein, for “widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty.”

The next year Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* brought small groups of women together in consciousness-raising groups all over the country. Laughing and crying over stories of growing up female in a patriarchal society, women transformed anger into hope and created a social and political movement much more participatory and closer to daily life than just going to the polls and voting for someone else to represent you. Some three decades later, the transformative power of women’s story telling has been captured by playwright Eve Ensler in *The Vagina Monologues*, a dramatic compilation of women’s soliloquies. Every year, in order to raise both funds and consciousness, thousands of women’s groups all over the country and the world reproduce or produce their own version of these monologues, turning the monologue art form itself into a movement.

As the civil rights movement, the environmental movement, and the women’s movement were gaining momentum, small groups of individuals, especially on the West Coast, were coming together in workshops to open themselves up to new, more spiritual ways of knowing, consciously replacing the scientific rationalism that had laid the philosophic foundation for the modern age. To become truly human and to really know truth, people were discovering the value of summoning up all our mental and spiritual resources, constantly expanding our imaginations, sensitivities, and capacity for wonder and love, for hope rather than despair, for compassion and cooperation rather than cynicism and competition, for spiritual aspiration and moral effort. Instead of either/or, reductive, dualistic, and divisive or “blaming the other” thinking, this movement affirmed the unity of mind and body and of the spiritual with the material. It

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<sup>2</sup> “Radical Hospitality: How Kitchen-table Lessons in Welcome and Respect Helped Sustain the Black Freedom Movement,” by Rosemarie Freeney Harding and Rachel E. Harding. *Sojourners Magazine*, July–August 2003.

advocated a consciousness that rejects determinism or the belief that we are limited by the past that repudiates all absolutes, that finds joy in crossing boundaries, that is naturalistic instead of supernatural, and that strives for empowerment rather than power and control.

Today millions of Americans are part of this organically evolving cultural revolution. According to Paul Ray and Sherry Anderson in their carefully researched book, *The Cultural Creatives*, these Americans total about 50 million, or 20 percent of the population, and include people from all walks of life and from all ethnic groups and, not unexpectedly, more women (60 percent) than men.<sup>3</sup>

These Americans are not political in the conventional sense. Although most cultural creatives are progressives, having participated in or supported the human identity and antiwar movements of the second half of the 20th century, they have not organized into a national movement to struggle for state power or “more” for themselves. They have no known leaders or national spokespeople. Yet because they believe in combining spiritual growth and awakening with practical actions in their daily lives, they are having a profound effect on American culture.

For example, most reject the getting and spending that not only lay waste our own powers but put intolerable pressures on the environment. They try to eat home-grown rather than processed foods, maintain physical well-being through healthy habits rather than by dependence on prescription drugs, try to make livings in ways that are in harmony with their convictions.

Depending on skills, interests, and where they live, most carry on this cultural revolution in their own way. For example, a doctor may decide to practice alternative medicine, a teacher will try to create a more democratic classroom, a businessman will try to replace competition with cooperation in his firm or may quit his business altogether in order to act as consultant to community organizations. Whatever their line of work, they participate in a lot of workshops because they view themselves and the culture as works in progress.

The social activists among us struggle to create actions that go beyond protest and negativity and build community, because community is the most important thing that has been destroyed by the dominant culture. For example, at mass demonstrations against NAFTA or FTAA, Starhawk organizes small affinity groups for democratic decision-making and to combine community-building with protest.

What unites us is not an organization or leaders but the sense that we are in the middle of what Buddhist writer Joanna Macy calls a “Great Turning.”

“Whether or not it is recognized by the corporate-controlled media, the Great Turning is a reality. Although we cannot know yet if it will take hold in time for humans and other complex life forms to survive, we can know that it is under way. And it is gaining momentum, through the actions of countless individuals and groups around the world. To see this as the larger context of our lives clears our vision and summons our courage.”

This “Great Turning” is not only taking place in the United States. The “Battle of Seattle” in November 1999 announced the birth of a new movement of millions all over the world who are determined to honor and protect local places, communities, and resources from destruction by global corporations. The first World Social Forum in January 2001 attracted 20,000 activists to Porte Allegre, Brazil, to proclaim that “Another World Is Possible.” Since then many more thousands have gathered at successive annual forums, the fourth and latest bringing 80,000 to Mumbai, India, in January 2004. Since the second World Social Forum, held after 9/11, dancing, poetry, puppets, chanting, and drumming have been as much a part of this “another world” as seminars and workshops.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Harmony Books, New York, 2000. Since spring 1999 the Positive Futures Network, publishers of *YES Magazine*, with the support of the Fetzer Institute, has been hosting two “State of the Possible” retreats a year to acquaint Cultural Creatives with one another.

<sup>4</sup> See *Another World Is Possible*, 24-minute video of the 2002 World Social Forum, produced by Moving Images, [www.movingimages.org](http://www.movingimages.org).

## REBUILDING, REDEFINING, AND RESPIRITING DETROIT

It is within the context of this “Great Turning” that we are currently struggling to rebuild, redefine, and respirit Detroit. Nationally and internationally, Detroit has become a symbol of the end of industrial society. Physically it is almost as devastated as Dresden, Berlin, and Tokyo after the massive bombings of World War II. Buildings that were once architectural marvels, like the Book Cadillac hotel and Union Station, lie in ruins. Many of the institutional structures that remain are fenced in or gated and in most neighborhoods people live behind triple-locked doors and barred windows.

Under these circumstances, it would be easy to abandon all hope for Detroit’s future or to be satisfied with pseudo-solutions like casinos and luxury sports stadia. Yet precisely because physical devastation on such a huge scale boggles the mind, it also frees the imagination to perceive reality anew; to see vacant lots not as eyesores but as empty spaces inviting the viewer to fill them in with other forms, other structures that presage a new kind of city embodying and nurturing new life-affirming values in sharp contrast to the values of materialism, individualism, and competition that have brought us to this denouement.

That is what my late husband James Boggs, Sharon Howell, and I have been trying to project ever since 1988 when, in the course of our struggle with Detroit Mayor Coleman Young over casino gambling, he called us naysayers and demanded to know “What is your alternative?”

Thanks to that challenge and drawing on our movement experiences, we began to understand that restoring Detroit means much more than looking at buildings, businesses, and economic relationships. It means creating ways and means to help Detroiters re-imagine our city in order to rebuild it. To achieve that goal we knew we had to start with young people because, in our rapidly changing and increasingly chaotic world they are the ones most involved, consciously or unconsciously, in trying to discover who they are and what to do with their lives.

In that spirit, in 1992 we founded Detroit Summer, a multicultural, intergenerational youth program/movement to rebuild, redefine, and respirit Detroit from the ground up.

Our inspiration for Detroit Summer came from two sources:

- (1) The Freedom Schools that SNCC activists organized during Mississippi Freedom Summer, in which children and adults were motivated to learn because they were empowered to view themselves as change agents and first-class citizens; and
- (2) Martin Luther King, Jr.’s, call for programs that would involve young people in “self-transforming and structure-transforming,” “direct actions in our dying cities,” and for “new forms of work for those for whom traditional jobs are not available.”

Detroit Summer started out by engaging youth volunteers in three main activities: painting public murals to reclaim public space; planting community gardens to re-connect young people with the Earth and with the community; and intergenerational and peer dialogues to share our fears, hopes, and dreams.

From the very beginning Detroit Summer has emphasized the pivotal role that art plays in transforming how we imagine ourselves and the places where we live.

Since the first year of Detroit Summer, we have created some 20 murals all over the city, each designed by youth volunteers and a master artist in consultation with the community. At first, we had a very difficult time finding any one to give us the public space for a mural. People said that gangs would deface the murals so there was no point in doing

them. Finally we found a principal at Maybury School in southwest Detroit who agreed to give us a wall on the outer edge of the school property. We were also fortunate to have as our master artist Ray Jimenez, a Chicano and former gang member from Fresno who was using art as a way of spreading a message of peace in the community.

One day, as Ray was working on the mural with about 20 neighborhood kids, he saw a figure walking down the street that reminded him of his mother. The similarity was so striking he followed her to talk. When the woman turned around, she looked so much like his mother that Ray was speechless. It turned out that the woman was his mother's sister, separated for nearly 25 years, who lived down the block from the mural. Her son, Dave, became part of the mural project. If his cousin could come 2,000 miles to a city he didn't know to make a difference, Dave said, the least he could do was "get off my ass and walk to the end of the block." That year Dave joined his neighbors to form the Clark Park Coalition, a group of citizens who restored the neighborhood park through their volunteer energies.

This story is an example of the capacity of art to reconnect people both literally and metaphorically. Public art, created within a community context, bringing together gifted artists with community members of all generations, provides a means of recreating community bonds. From those bonds, new energies emerge, creating new connections, instigating new changes.

Our community gardening activities immediately attracted former auto worker Gerald Hairston, passionate environmentalist and father of the community gardening movement in Detroit. Gerald introduced us to the Gardening Angels, a loose network of community elders, many of whom had come from the South and who were already growing food for themselves and the community on vacant lots. He also led us to Paul Weertz, a science teacher at Catherine Ferguson Academy (CFA), a public high school for teenage mothers, who was helping his students learn respect for life and for the earth along with math and science by raising farm animals, planting a community garden and fruit orchard, and building a barn. As a result, instead of dropping out in large numbers, 70 to 80 percent of the young ladies stay in school and go on to college.

Across the street from CFA were a couple of abandoned houses that Deborah Grotefeldt, an artist from Project Row Houses in Houston, suggested that we buy and rehab for emergency use by CFA mothers. On the corner between the two houses Detroit Summer youth, under the mentorship of Grotefeldt, landscape architect Ashley Kyber, and Trisha Ward of Art Corps/LA, then created an Art Park as a meeting and story-telling place for neighborhood residents. As a result, the neighborhood is coming back to life. A CFA teacher has bought and renovated the abandoned house next to one of the Detroit Summer houses. A family down the street has fixed up its own house and bought two neighboring houses to rehab for other family members. CFA students are using an EPA grant to do soil testing in the neighborhood and have reported their results and proposals back to the community at a community festival.

The success of the Art Park/Soil Testing and Remediation project in revitalizing the CFA neighborhood inspired us to embark on a similar effort in the neighborhood near the Detroit's Cultural Center, which once housed Detroit's Chinatown but has now been largely abandoned. To bring diversity to a city that has been too narrowly viewed as black and white, Asian American university students embarked on a project with local Asian Americans to revive Chinatown. To launch the project, they created a mural linking the struggle for justice for Vincent Chin, an Asian American Detroiter murdered by two autoworkers on the eve of his wedding in 1982, to African American struggles for civil rights. The mural, at ground level, has transformed the space facing it into a courtyard where Asian American, African American, and Euro-American residents of the neighborhood are beginning to interact with one another.

Meanwhile, to help expand the mural message movement, the Boggs Center, in collaboration with the Department of Transformation of the Detroit Public Schools and the College of Creative Studies, co-sponsors Artists and Children Creating Community Together (AC3T), a program which involves elementary school children mentored by College of Creative Studies students, in producing drawings that are then transformed into giant murals to hang on the outside walls of the school. AC3T murals now hang on the walls of four Detroit schools: Cooper School on the east side, King School in northwest Detroit, Webster School in southwest Detroit, and Thirkell School in the neighborhood known as Northwest Goldberg. With the energy generated in the community by the Thirkell School murals, Northwest Goldberg residents have been able to mobilize weekly clean-ups and other restorative activities like community gardening.

Inspired by the community gardening movement, students in the Architectural Department of the University of Detroit Mercy, under the leadership of visiting architect Kyong Park and department head Steve Vogel, created Adamah, a vision for rebuilding a devastated two and a half square mile area on the east side not far from downtown Detroit. The Adamah vision, based on urban agriculture (adamah is Hebrew for “of the earth”) includes unearthing Bloody Run Creek, which had been covered over and absorbed into the city’s sewer system, and turning it into a canal for both recreation and irrigation. The vision includes community gardens, greenhouses, grazing land, a shrimp farm and dairy, a tree farm, lumber mill, and windmills to generate electricity, and living and work spaces in the former Packard auto plant.

As people watch the 20-minute Adamah video you can almost feel their minds and imaginations expanding. Community residents draw from Adamah ideas for rebuilding their own neighborhoods. Out-of-towners start wondering how they can spend time in Detroit to help build the movement.

In 2001 Gerald Hairston passed away unexpectedly and Los Angeles community artist Nobuko Miyamoto who, like so many others, had been inspired by his passion for community gardening, wrote the song “I Dream a Garden” in his memory. To accompany the song she choreographed an Obon folk dance, a Japanese American circle dance, Detroit-style, incorporating Japanese, African, Latin, and native American rhythms and dance steps. She also worked with landscape architect Ashley Kyber to create a sculpture garden called “Gerald’s Griot Garden.” The project culminated in a Harvest Celebration, which began with elders and young people telling stories about Gerald in the Griot Garden and ended with over 200 people dancing the multicultural folkdance created by Nobuko to honor the earth that meant so much to Gerald.

As one thing has led to another, Detroit Summer, which began as a three-week program in 1992, has become year round with new programs that have come out of the creativity of the young people who now provide the core of its leadership. Out of their own need to articulate and communicate in the dynamic, pulsating rhythms of hip hop and rap, they have created weekly Poetry Workshops for Social Change and an independent media center which they call “Loud and Clear.”

Out of complaints about their lack of mobility has come Back Alley Bikes. They acquired some used bikes from supporters, found a skilled mechanic to train them in bike repair, and then invited neighborhood youth to select, repair, and take home their own bikes. The result is an alternative method of transportation with which young people are putting the neighbor back into the ‘hood.

Over the years Detroit Summer has demonstrated that the capacity of young people to make social and political judgments is directly linked to the growth in self-confidence that they gain from working with one another and making practical judgments and choices in concrete, mundane activities like gardening, rehabbing houses, painting community murals, repairing bikes.

It is because our school system deprives children and young people of opportunities to engage in activities like these as a natural and normal part of the curriculum that it is now in such crisis. All too many classrooms have become war zones where teachers can’t teach and children can’t learn because we are still following the “command and control” model created 100 years ago to prepare young people for factory work.

To address this situation, teachers, students, parents, and community activists have been meeting at the Boggs Center with the goal of discovering a form that would inspire all those involved in the educational process to begin reimagining education. After much sharing of personal stories, we have decided to follow the examples of the women’s movement and the Mississippi Freedom Schools and to create the “Freedom School Monologues,” a dramatic compilation of testimonials by students, teachers, and parents about their school experiences. Forty years ago Freedom Schools were created because the existing school system (like ours today) had been organized to produce subjects, not citizens. To bring about a “mental revolution,” reading, writing, and speaking skills were taught through the discussion of black history, the power structure and the need to build a movement to struggle against it. We hope that the Freedom School Monologues will stimulate ideas for a new participatory democratic model whose aim is to develop young people into critical thinkers, decision-makers, and responsible citizens.

These monologues will be presented for the first time at the 40th Anniversary Celebration of Mississippi Freedom Summer to be held in Detroit in June 2004. The celebration will culminate with the opening ceremony of the 13th Annual Detroit Summer, featuring poetry, hip hop, workshops, dancing.

Poet Angela Jones, now 24 and on her way to the Peace Corps in Peru, was involved with Detroit Summer since she was 14. I close with Angela's poem, "DIG," in which she shares with us the identity she has forged for herself from being in and with Detroit Summer. It is from imaginations like hers that will come answers to the many fundamental interconnected and demanding questions with which this essay began.

## DIG

ANGELA JONES

There are forgotten truths in this soil  
And I'm going to dig for them  
But don't give me those tools that my brothers used  
To extract diamonds from a land  
That they once called home  
Oh, no, I'm going to use my hands.

I'll scar the ground and scrape the stones  
In desperation  
Digging for a truth that is buried down deep  
Buried with a purpose  
I'll scratch with my nails and punch with my fists  
Shaking the earth with their urgent blows  
Until I hit some solid surface  
The surface of a revelation so true  
It's too true to bear witness to.

These violent secrets unveiled that are dirty  
Like the dust on my knuckles  
Angry and clenched in a fretful pose  
This earth is not a lake, where I can dip palms in  
And let drops drip from my fingertips  
No, these secrets are too painful  
And the earth is unwilling  
So I will make my hands of metal  
Digging through the cracked cement to excavate  
Skyscrapers

Finding tombs of wombs that bare the fruit  
Of privileged elite  
In moth-eaten purple pin-stripe  
My destiny is to dig for doubtless truths  
Shattering dogmas with jackhammers  
And hiding jailhouse files in my raised fist  
To file away the bars of steel mines  
And copper mines  
Freeing ancestors of mine, and yours  
From slavery, indentured servitude,  
And minimum wage.

This earth that hides the headlines and hellraisers  
Of old revolutions  
Is that same earth that bore me into a kingdom  
Of corrupt kings and cruel intentions  
This institution is not amorous  
It knows its sins — now I shall know them, too.

This dirt is soaked with nuclear test sites  
Ghetto mounds of grass-covered garbage  
Where children run through mutated weeds  
This dirt is carried on the wind  
Gets in your eyes and blinds you  
From the internment camps that were once there  
In this soil rests the sullen graves of adobe huts  
And in their place grow reservation HUD houses  
And welfare cheese  
Barrio booze and CIA-sold street crystals  
All picked from the same genetically modified tree  
Grown in the closet we hide our skeletons in.

The deep, dark depths of the earth  
Hide the secrets to shame and bad decisions  
What's fair is often forgotten  
And you can't find freedom from a flag  
You have to dig for it.

So dig for your freedom  
Fragile figures of history's failures  
Or I'll dig for you  
For those fools of fortune I'll plow through  
The lies and muck of middle-earth  
Turning stock shares into ploughshares  
Giving campesinos back their poly-cultural crops  
I'll worm my way though the holes in this planet  
To other kingdoms and freedoms forgotten  
Because this earth is not rotten  
It cleanses itself every other empire  
By hands that dig for the truth

Through old tragedies and fallen legacies  
We must keep the past in mind and at hand.  
To seize that chance to begin anew.

**Grace Lee Boggs** is an activist, writer, cultural worker, and philosopher based in Detroit, MI. Grace's 60 years of political involvement encompass the major U.S. social movements of this century: labor, civil rights, black power, Asian American, women's, and environmental justice. Born in Providence, RI, of Chinese immigrant parents in 1915, Grace received her B.A. from Barnard College in 1935 and her Ph.D. in philosophy from Bryn Mawr College in 1940. In the 1940s and 1950s she worked with West Indian Marxist historian C.L.R. James and in 1953 she came to Detroit where she married James Boggs, an African American labor activist, writer, and strategist. Working together in grassroots groups and projects, they were partners for more than 40 years until James' death in July 1993. In 1992, with James Boggs and others, she founded Detroit Summer, a multicultural, intergenerational youth program to rebuild, redefine, and respirit Detroit from the ground up, which completed its ninth season in June 2000. Currently she is active in the Detroit Agricultural Network and the Committee for the Political Resurrection of Detroit, writes for the weekly Michigan Citizen, and does a monthly commentary on WORT (Madison, WI). Her autobiography, *Living for Change*, published by the University of Minnesota Press in 1998, now in its second printing, is widely used in university classes on social movements and autobiography writing. In 2000, she received a Discipleship Award from Groundwork for a Just World; the Distinguished Alumna Award from Barnard College; and the Chinese American Pioneers Award from the Organization of Chinese Americans.