

# The Seventh Shrine: Spiritual Biography Continued / Orland Bishop and Host Michael Lerner

February 4, 2023

Part 1

Michael: Well, welcome all to the first of four conversations with Orland Bishop. Let's just go back into quiet again together now that we're all here, just for a moment.

Peace, peace. Orland, it's a great honor to be here with you. Thanks, Michael. You are the founder and director of the Shade Tree Multicultural Foundation in Los Angeles, where you have pioneered new approaches to creating urban truces and youth mentorship. That's what it says on the back of your book, *The Seventh Shrine: Meditations on the African Spiritual Journey from the Middle Passage to the Mountaintop*.

I'd love to ask you to begin the morning with an invocation and a prayer for our work and our community here.

Orland: Thank you. To that which lives in us, the life that guides us towards these moments of destiny, these appointments to meet not only each other, but the time that we share. This life, living us. This life, living us leads us to where we must go, into forgetting and remembering. This life that has been lived before us, through other bodies, other mines, other places, returned here with us. This life, for this time, we call it forth to share it abundantly, reverently, that it may reveal to us, to our eyes and to our hearts, what it sees ahead of us. This life that is ahead of us, may it live in us now.

Michael: Orland, I've said to you and to the community of us that are gathered here that your book, *The Seventh Shrine Meditations on the African Spiritual Journey from the Middle Passage to the Mountaintop*, I believe that it is destined to be recognized as a classic in the literature of spiritual memoirs.

I've spent many years reading such texts. I had the honor 11 years ago of doing a spiritual biography like the one we're continuing now at Cavallo Point Retreat Center near here. And I'd never done a spiritual biography with anyone before. Now I've probably done 50 or 70 of them, but I did it because when I met you at Cavallo Point, introduced by Jennifer Stowell, I felt a deep need to know who you were.

And I would say that that exploration has now continued into its 12th year. And I thought I got a start in, I think it was three conversations, but it could have been four, 11 years ago, which many people I've listened to, and it's on the new school website, [tns.commonweal.org](https://tns.commonweal.org). And we had another conversation a few months ago that was very brief, but it was very sweet, and we agreed to do this.

And then I read your book, and I was so struck that even with all my efforts to understand your work, I didn't understand it in depth until I read this. It has some qualities that I find in you, personally. The first is precision. You are a man of very precise speech, precise thought, precise intention, precise purpose. There is a precision about you.

Your speech itself is very precise. The thought behind the speech is precise. There's also an extraordinary synthesis of different traditions that have guided you toward your prophetic purpose. You also speak in traditions that have not been fully heard in the United States or around the world, certainly not in the way that you've done it. So these four conversations that we're going to have present me with a dilemma. The dilemma

is that, if I could, I would have you read the entire book. I would, because each thought, each sentence, each paragraph, each section has a compactness to it. There are no wasted words. There are no wasted sentences. It's a remarkable, remarkable contribution. So I won't be able to do that simply because time does not allow and we want to have some conversation.

But I will be asking you to read—finding my way and finding our way through the conversation and the combination of readings and and dialog both between us and with our community here. Yes. So that's my intention. And this morning I thought that we would try to cover as best we can the introduction and the first section called History as Initiation.

So the book has three session sections. The first is called History as Initiation. It includes The Darkness of Night, The Middle Passage, and The Making of the New Covenants. The second is about your personal journey. It's called Personal Initiations and the sections are The Beginning of the Personal Path, Gnostic Initiation, The Story of Lazar, Ritual and Rites of Passage, Shade Tree, your organization, Ancestral Memory, The Veil, and Imani. And the third, called Returning Home, includes Accessing the Seventh Shrine and The Prophecy of Martin Luther King, Jr. So where I'd like to start, actually, is at the very beginning, with the poem from Langston Hughes, with which you choose to begin the whole book. Would you read that for us?

Orland: First I want to thank you for hosting this space, Michael. It's timely and I'll say why after the poem.

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The Negro Speaks of Rivers  
by Langston Hughes

I've known rivers:

I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow of human blood in human veins.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.

I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.

I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.

I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln went down to New Orleans, and I've seen its muddy bosom turn all golden in the sunset.

I've known rivers:

Ancient, dusky rivers.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

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Michael: Thank you. Did you want to say some introductory words?

Orland: Yes, thank you, Commonweal. It's so good to be here, to be in this sanctuary of nature, and the making of this space dedicated to the healing factors of human life and culture and the restoring of hope in our world. To peel away the layers of denials and invite, again, the sacred to live in to this shared space and time to engage with. Since the invitation to return to this discourse, a lot has happened in the in the month of

December and January of this year in California and many other places. The waters poured in and we understand that the water that precipitates and falls as the forms we recognize it is only one form of water.

The other is a psychic water. The psychic, or imaginative level of soul, which has expanded, supported by other influences within the cosmos. But Earth is precipitating a new intelligence for our world. Rain doesn't fall because of culture. The sun doesn't shine because of culture. And there are many things that happen on this earth that happen because of another kind of wisdom and the water that came in is because of a certain kind of wisdom.

And we have to learn to live with wisdom now. We've exploited our knowledge as human beings. We've disregarded other forms of knowing, and now the wisdom will take hold of the world. And so the beings that are holding a realm of intelligence that surrounds our atmospheres outside of our planetary reach will speak to the human being in a different way.

And so part of our work in Gnosis was to understand how to read the signs we call prophecies within other dimensions of reality that support the spiritual ecology within nature and within all cultures. And so we call in sacred hospitality. So this is really what we're entering, an age in which the sacred will become more and more revealed because it lives in the most inner parts of our psyche.

And a renewal is going to happen. So our task is to host it.

Michael: Thank you. I want to give you all a sense, and I'll do this repeatedly, of the compact persuasion with which Orland writes as well as speaks. And Orland, I'd like to ask you to read us the first page of your introduction, because I think it describes the heart of what your book is about.

Orland: This book tells the story of the path my soul is taking of the places, the processes, and the people that have inspired its awakening. It tells of the timeless currents that flow from the ancestral world into my own expression of life. It reveals my challenges in crossing the boundaries of my soul into the world where the agreements of my life can unfold.

My development unfolded through the social impulses of certain vital places: Guyana, Brooklyn, New York, Los Angeles, and South and West Africa. Within these social spaces and relationships, are cultivated, these relationships further provided the context for the forming of my own identity: friends, mentors, teachers, and colleagues, with whom I explore the meaning of life, have shaped my aspirations, I choose to learn and do as work in the world. Various processes have supported the unfolding of my soul potential, from my academic education to mentorship. I've come to understand that the highest prerogative of my soul is initiation. These processes have different levels of access to my inner life and my outer understanding of the world. They continue to shape how I live, the shape with whom I create my agreements, I explore in this book events of my life that reveal the relationship directly to the ancestral world. The relationship serves as the purpose of my work. I share how I was guided into conscious initiation.

Michael: So simply to underscore a few points. The book tells the story of your pilgrimage from Guyana to Brooklyn to Los Angeles and in South and West Africa, and of course, you traveled far beyond that.

And this idea of your movement from academic education to mentorship. And you say you "explore in this book events of my life that reveal the relationship directly to the ancestral world. This relationship to the ancestral world serves as the purpose for my work. I share how I was guided into conscious initiation." So I'd like to ask you to continue with the next page.

Orland: We know the soul to be as ancient as the world. It lives in a stream of memory, often referred to as the ancestral world. Through the soul, our personal and collective dreams, and often prophecies, are transmitted. It is the stream into which we are born and out of which we live. It is the source of our individual striving, of the communities we form and the civilizations we create. Through the soul, we draw on ancestral memory to connect us to events before our birth and to divine the possibilities within our futures. When I navigate the currents of my soul, I find myself within the ancestral pool. I find myself swimming in their grief and the longing during the great event and initiation called the Middle Passage. I find myself in their collective soul journey from a place of homeland to a dream of the promised land.

This book is a telling of the soul striving of people of African heritage into the American experience of creating a community, a community created for the possibilities of a new covenant within the larger collective sphere of human life.

Michael: Each page is like this. You see? Each page. And we could spend our entire time taking each page, reading it with consciousness, because of the depth of the reflection and the learning and the understanding that the book represents.

It will be seen as a spiritual classic. It is not yet recognized as a spiritual classic—I went on Amazon. There are 37 comments on Amazon, many very positive. I looked up reviews of the book. Maybe there are somewhere, but I didn't see a lot, you know. And I would love to know where they are, you know? But my God, this is a classic.

It will be recognized as a classic, and I think it's not inappropriate that we're gathered here now, in the 40th year after your coming to the United States, where, as you said to me last night, you're really coming into the fullness of your purpose for being here. Isn't that what you said?

Orland: That's the dilemma, the invitation. See, in the history of the making of this culture, what informs the edge now, what we call the edge of the Western world, is a very old story of the archetypal world within which the intellect developed its knowledge streams. So all of those streams of human knowledge can be found here. And what I was part of in my study was to understand the collective story of the Western initiation tradition, and what happened when the West took up the wisdom of ancient culture and could not navigate the morality. Light is a virtue. We just don't know things because we are curious. We know things because we have to do more with it in terms of development.

So a lot of knowledge poured into the West from other ancient civilizations and the West lost the significance of holding it as sacred. A lot of great libraries were created, a lot of great institutions were created, and the learning was not as integral.

And this had to do with the influence of other intelligences within the human development processes that had to do with materialization of consciousness. The physical body which evolved with a certain kind of guidance from the ancient Rishis, from the Mahatma's, from the pharaohs, and all of those cultural agents, took on a burden. The physical body took on the burden of an identity in which people only look at the physical body and say, that's who I am—and lost the soul and spirit reality behind it.

And even our languages became so literal. So even when I read the book, I have to concentrate to make sure I say those words again, because to me, it's like water. I can substitute them again.

Michael: And I actually noticed that you weren't fully following the text. You were interpolating from your own inner experience. I thought, are we working from different editions?

Orland: Because I don't read that way. I don't read literally. There's one level in which, yes, the print on the page can tell you something that was there, but then you activate the interest in what is trying to be communicated, and that is the living world. The world is trying to communicate something to us.

We call it signs and and symbols. But behind it are beings whose intelligences are to guide how we interact with those symbols and do something with them. So the body is a symbolic space, holding as an invitation for other intelligences to inhabit. And when we look at our neurotransmitters now, even though genetics, we see that it's actually more like a language needing an interpreter, needing a transducer to move higher intelligences into it so that it could move through the world and fulfill what the source of it is guiding.

Michael: So let me try an interpretive overview, which I'd like to ask you to correct. I don't think anyone else has created a synthesis like yours, and I think that what great spiritual guides do is they take the imprint that they were given as uniquely themselves and, working through the influences that come to them, they weave together as something, the power of which is precisely that it is not general, that it is a very personal understanding. So you have taken the Middle Passage where, according to your estimate, 100 million Africans were pulled out of Africa, many died fighting enslavement. Others died in the dungeons in which they were kept. Still others died in the Middle Passage. We could add that others still died when they got here.

And of that 100 million, the estimate is that 27 million survived. I say this with deep respect, as my father was Jewish, I know all about the Holocaust. The Holocaust was about 8 million people. Just by way of reference. Right. This is about 100 million people. And even if that were a high estimate, the order of magnitude is almost certainly unprecedented in human history.

So there was this immense enslavement of African people. And what you've done and perhaps other people have done this, I wasn't aware of it before you, is that you made the forced migration into a transmigration of the extraordinary grief and suffering which gave birth, as we know suffering can, to a new spiritual impulse that was destined to take place in the Americas.

And then, as history has continued and as the oppression of people from Africa has continued, it took place largely outside the political realm. It took place in other forms. It adopted itself through Christianity. It took place in the Harlem Renaissance, took place in the Freedman's Bureau, so on and so forth. And then it encountered, or at least you encountered, because I think this is part of your uniqueness, Dr. Alfred Ligon—am I pronouncing his name right?

Orland: Yes.

Michael: Who was the Gnostic priest and founder of the Aquarian Spiritual Center, with whom you studied for many, many years. And interestingly, I find in the book that you don't say what I think I've heard you say to me—which is that he regarded you as his as his lineage holder.

And he was combining the African experience with these Western mystical traditions. So you're drawing on a quite unique confluence. Where have I misspoken there?

Orland: You're correct in that form. The Africans who were forced to migrate from Africa were keepers of shrines. One has to keep the culture in awareness—that they were not just individuals who were enslaved. They were communities that were enslaved. There were people who had responsibilities for very sacred spaces. It was not only their grief that was felt: it was the grief of the gods that was felt. They were taken away from being who had sustained very important ecologies, not only in Africa but throughout this planet. The

Orishas are part of a larger context of nature, and without those maintaining the shrines, we lost significant hosts for the sacred in other dimensions.

So there was a decline in the spiritual responsibility for maintaining social initiatory structures within those communities of memory. But as they were taken somewhere else, that had to be rebuilt. So that's a new covenant, a new kind of ceremonial awareness came into the Mississippi Delta, in the Caribbean and Brazil and other places where Africans had to restore their memory with the sacred nature of the shrines that they were able to find. And other qualities of that remaking brought in new elements as well to their traditions that had to do with futures and sciences that are still coming through the veil.

Human beings have never been without initiation. In any circumstances, if it's difficult, the spirits will choose that as the way of initiating, because something has to change radically to get our attention and get our intention to restore the right relationship to self and the sacred. So this is really what I was mapping and what I continue to map.

I'm not the first. Pastor Beverly Randolph came and set up the first Masonic lodges to restructure what was in Egypt in the United States, because he had done so in Europe. Given all the levels of interpretation to the mysteries that were in ancient Egypt. So that happened, you know, in the 1800s.

Michael: Yes. Randolph set up the first African-American Masonic Lodge, but you have gone beyond that. And in other words, let me just ask it as an open question. Who before you, perhaps there are many, I simply don't know, has taken the Middle passage as a forced initiation that caused the birth of a transformed consciousness that Africans, people of African descent, in the Americas have been carrying throughout up until the present and continuing. Who else, I'm just curious, who else has offered that particular metaphoric description of that passage?

Orland: Yeah. So it couldn't just be a description of a historical factor, right? There was a need to wait for current realities to actually confirm what the past created. So certain people had to be born into the wisdom of that experience. One is Langston Hughes. Why was this poem was chosen? Because it's an initiative poem that tells of different stages of the evolution of the soul and civilizations. And the last one being Mississippi. So these rivers are considered boundaries of the soul, as well as boundaries of ages of the soul. Spanning millennia. And so the idea that Langston Hughes posits points to the Akashic field, the Akashic Records, that all of our memory is stored in another reality, and you can do whatever we want with the bodies: the memory will flow back. Because the soul will bring time back into its current reality.

So I've been researching that poem since high school. That's when I discovered that he had a capacity to cross these boundaries of the soul and bring in words that remind us of other levels of consciousness.

Michael: Was he able to read from the Akashic record?

Orland: Most poets do. Most musicians are doing so. The Harlem Renaissance, the Renaissance was a return of the soul for hearts for the right.

Michael: Forgive me for asking, but do you have access to the Akashic record?

Orland: Some of this book was written for you.

Michael: You tell the story of the seventh son, and you link that story to the African experience. Could you describe that linkage?

Orland: In the prophetic wisdom of the Gnostic schools, the seven was considered to be the time in which the age will recapitulate or remember all the prior ages. I put them in the form of elements: earth, water, fire air, or nature in the sense of the West African cosmology, and the blood. We've crossed the last 6th one, which had to do with the human blood. Because it is in this encounter of the West..the last thing that the West encountered was the energy within the human blood, that had the power to redirect the genetics of the planet. And so what emerged as white supremacy was the recognition that the human blood of black people changed their blood. And to keep the blood pure, they had to create a system to separate all of the encounters. But it's not culture. This is the higher purpose of the blood to unite humanity to a very, very specific future. Sex unites humanity to a higher power. And it's not just biological sex. Sex is the integration of the masculine, feminine principles of creation, which could create in the ancient it was the deity, thought. So thought actually articulated the energetics that then fulfilled itself into manifested reality.

All things are this weaving of life forces, from the unmanifested to the manifested. So the blood carries forces from the higher worlds and the inherited world. And there are times when we encounter very difficult circumstances that the blood chose to go to the higher worlds for the reality, not our genetic blueprint. And a lot of that transmigration of consciousness is happening in our world as a result of what we now call trauma. But it's pushing humanity into the need to have another orientation to awareness.

Michael: You speak of the stars as the golden keys to—I forget whether you say specifically—to understanding the Akashic record, but to a deep wisdom which has been studied all around the world for a long time, and that the study of the stars enables a form of divination. Could you say more about that?

Orland: Yeah, we now call that astrology. Or astronomy. But it's a realm in which time can be altered. So the stars asis a keeper of futures and also of the past. It used to be highly related to the being Isis or ascent in Egyptian cosmology. Her wisdom is the arcana of all the galaxies and all of that movement.

It's a kind of intelligence. If you want it to be here, you'll find it here. If you want it to be there, you'll find it there. Nothing is where it ought to be. We now calculate distances in relationship to the stars. In the ancient time, the stars were as approximate to consciousness as our thoughts are. They were our thoughts.

And they would give us dreams. They would give us all manner of sciences and arts. And that's how the intellect was created: from the stars. We've forgotten that. That we needed a process to be able to hold the knowledge that still is mostly vast, beyond our reach and intellect.

Michael: Carl Yung notably said that astrology encapsulated the entire wisdom psycho-spiritual wisdom of the ancients. That astrology sort of brought that into the present, and it's been a subject of interest to me simply because of the power of astrology as a system of archetypal understanding.

You also speak, in the genocidal experience of both Africans and indigenous Americans, of souls that did not reach the spiritual threshold and therefore created a world of the dead that is, as I understand, very present to our own, if I have that. Could you say more about that?

Orland: Yeah. Well, that's a big one. Ceremonies for the dead can be found in many cultures. How we support them reaching the afterlife. In most of these genocides and most of these Holocausts, souls were left without a guide, without a priest, without a funeral, without true acknowledgment. Because those protocols were essential for what remains in the body as memory and how it unfolds. The human being doesn't just decay. There are parts of the body that does, but there are parts of the body that sustain its relationship to the earth, to the place in which death happens.

In the last 400 years, we've accumulated more living dead in the world, communities of the dead in different places. That, to the degree they have more control over our environment, they cause storms because to them their feeling is so powerful that it creates currents. And we don't create, as intentionally, the feelings for remembering and restoring this higher balance of energies.

Most of our feelings are of self-interest feelings: "I want mine from all of this wisdom." The higher world doesn't work like that: if it gives us a language, it is to communicate with someone what we really mean. And it has to be transparent. So the dead have been giving to the earth a certain kind of magnetism, a reality, prophecy, because the dead can see the future that we can't see. And the future is more like this unfulfilled story, the unfulfilled aspirations, that have accumulated. An effective presence in the world that will cross over into our sleep time more so than our waking time. And this shift, which is already happening, in which people are developing extrasensory perception of realities that they don't yet know what it means. But we'll find the codes. We'll find the codes in the deep, deep memory of our soul.

But these events are becoming what we call climate change in different ways. But it's more than just elements of nature, of carbon and all of that in excess. We have the presence of beings who are removing the veil from our consciousness, removing our ignorance from our awareness.

Michael: I'd like to understand that more, about the world of the dead. The people who reach what you call their own spiritual transition point—there are some who don't remain in the world of the dead. They go beyond, right? Where do they go? The ones who go beyond?

Orland: Into the will forces of higher creation. So one can say light, what is also love. They return to the spheres where the substance that is cultivated through their initiations can then flow back into them.

Michael: And are they sometimes reborn?

Orland: Yes.

Michael: Okay. And the world of the dead who do not reach that and go on to the higher, do have the potential as the dead to go beyond that boundary into the higher worlds, or are they sort of caught in a world of the dead? In other words, I don't understand what happens to them.

Orland: They're guided over time. There are many traditions that have been maintaining the prayers for the dead. The Tibetans are tremendously committed to guiding the dead out of the realm of the Bardo. The entire *Tibetan Book of the Dead* is about that. The *Egyptian Book of the Dead*. There are still schools connected to that. Most indigenous cultures have a ceremonial earth shrine to which the dead's legacy can be integrated into the earth. Once someone takes up meaning of their life and death, they leave.... they can be absorbed within the higher creation. But we have sacred texts about all of that in many traditions. Lord Buddha created a pathway of meditation, and anyone who enters into it contributes to them leaving.

The same peace that we receive in meditation comes from them leaving. The peace is not self feeling. I'm not feeling my peace. I'm feeling their witnessing of us: when the dead witness to us we have peace.

Michael: One of the questions that I always find challenging—you talk to the many traditions with their different ceremonies and understandings of the nature and meaning of life, of what happens after death and so forth. At a surface level, they are very different. You know, they're very different understand. You've worked across a whole series of these different traditions. In my own limited way I've also worked across a whole series of



them. How do you understand what lies behind all the different, if we understand it as light coming through a prism that refracts into different traditions, whether you call them religious and spiritual traditions or whatever, and then each one, according to its prophecies and so forth, creates its own theories and system.

You actively work with quite a few of these in your initiations and experience. How do you understand...is there a unified truth behind the different traditions, or is it simply, you know, my house has many mansions, saith the Lord. That there are these different things, but there isn't actually a unified spiritual truth behind them. They simply exist as a set of different interpretations of something completely unknowable and untranslatable.

Orland: The guides tend through all traditions other than the keeper of the tradition. Meaning if you ask permission, you gain access. But you have to ask with the sensitivity of feeling to let the guides take you. So permission is not out of a kind of authority. Permission is how we prepare ourselves to enter into something that requires someone else's experience or knowledge. And there are knowers of all of that. And that enters into our feeling for truth. So if we really want the truth about something, you create a feeling that allows it to be taken up. I don't pursue knowledge in that way, so it's not, "I just want to know what that tradition is about." I want to serve that tradition. I want to help that tradition remember what it had lost...because I can come in and give back something that belonged to it for a long time. We're not limited by our biology, culturalizations from any tradition. The human imagination is the door to all past, present and futures. So the imaginative knowledge space is, is the sense that am I willing to hold the integrity of what can be revealed? And that's the question that I'm asking if I pursue something that I don't know. Will you be able to serve it? Okay. That's a self-initiated individual.

Michael: We could spend a lot of time on these questions, but I'd like to go actually into the beginning of your personal path.

You were born in Guyana. Tell us a little bit about the history and tradition of Guyana where you were born. How was it founded? What is it about?

Orland: Well, it was it was encountered by the Western experience through the same enslavement of African people, but the indigenous people of Guyana sustained their own culture and civilization there for a long time.

So it's a Portuguese and British colony for the most part in the current world view. It gained its independence from Britain in 1966. It's the only English-speaking country in South America, culturally diverse by way of Chinese, some Portuguese, English descendents, Africans and Indians, and the indigenous people.

Michael: You didn't mention Dutch.

Orland: Yes. And so there were three Guyanas: British, French and Dutch. So the Dutch actually migrated over to \_\_\_\_\_.

Michael: So your Guyana, which was British, you said it's the only English speaking country in South America. And you were born in London, Guyana, 1966, the sixth of seven children in a tightly knit nuclear family that operated within the orbit of an extended family. "Some of our relatives lived with us. Others joined us on a daily or special occasion basis. Though there were economic difficulties, my childhood provided me with a great sense of stability and security. As siblings, we were close and spent a lot of time doing things together and with friends. My mother provided spiritual guidance for the family and a religious structure for the younger siblings. Education was an essential element of our family values as well as music. We had a piano at home and frequently sang together." Could you say more about your mother?

Orland: Yes. She just turned 91 last November. Inherited from her family was the midwife tradition, their particular characteristic was that, at birth, they knew who the child ought to be. So I was named by my great aunt, who was the midwife of my birth, or close to the time.

Michael: And what did your name mean to your great aunt when she understood who the child was supposed to be?

Orland: It was more like a memory. The memory was someone going into the Earth. So "Orland" had to do with the mining of the ore. It's connected to ancient mysteries in Ireland and Scotland.

Michael: So your great aunt, did I hear that correctly? Was the one who named you and your mother came out of a midwife tradition. And so your great aunt, was she the one who understood who had been born, who this child was?

Orland: Well, she was the keeper of the spiritualist tradition.

Michael: And did you know her?

Orland: Yes. She's still alive.

Michael: What was she like?

Orland: A spiritualist. She just keeps to herself. She had, you know, influences on my mother and her siblings and all that. Yes, she did. You know, they lived so long. All my mother's relatives were over 100. You know, many of the women live quite a long time.

Michael: And how was your family seen in your community? In other words, what was the way the community saw them related to your family and to your mother and your great aunt?

Orland: At that point, my great aunt didn't live close to us. We moved from the rural areas of Lindon to the city a couple of months after I was born. So I grew up in the capital city and then most of the families would travel there for a time on occasions and then go back to their homes. So or we would travel out into the country to visit and stay for summers. But our time in Georgetown, which was the capital city, was more about education, more about the pathway of integrating what came in from the independence of the country. The culture was building, say, restoring the legacies that were lost. Indians had their religious views of the traditions of India. Africans were restoring theirs as well.

Michael: You say, "When I was a child, I did not always feel part of the culture of Guyana. I was aware of things that were not taught or spoken about. As an adult, I realized that there are aspects of reality that most people do not experience. I, as a child, however, had a different level of access. I woke up with a certain level of intensity to be connected to something that allowed my daily rhythm to be guided. My attention was strongest in the morning because I wanted to affirm that reality. I kept most of what I imagined and felt to myself because there was no one I felt I could communicate with. I understand now that there was something about my imagination that wasn't being served by the cultural mythos. In a certain way, I was required to spend more time searching for a cosmological framework to support my imagination. Neither the religious structure we were raised on nor the surrounding folk culture helped me to explain my inner experience. In search of some larger cosmology, I found museum and library. They became beloved places to explore what lay beyond the conversations at home and community and even beyond my own time."

Michael: Could you say more about how museum and library, how your search was there? What was the process by which you began to understand a larger cosmology in museum and library

Orland: With the library, of course for the books. I started with stories. Stories that had to do with the deep cultural—so stories from other cultures that were in the library, Indian stories in particular. But what when I went to the library mostly for—Guyana, was gifted a piece of rock from the moon. And I would just go to the museum, actually, to look at the moon, because my imagination from this little fragment of stone allowed me to have a feeling that I wasn't just on Earth. It's the closest I could get to the moon.

Michael: Beautiful. When you were six, a teacher asked you a question. You were lost in front and did not hear her. And something happened for you in that experience, could you describe?

Orland: Yeah. She asked me a question and I was in my own contemplation. I looked at her and she was thinking whether she should punish me for not paying attention. And I observed the conflict of her own thoughts. And I said, "Why would she do something her heart is telling her not to do?" Because there was just this dilemma of "what is right" and "what do I want?" Her heart was telling her what was right: attention is not hers to control. Attention is sacred and...yes, your teacher wants your attention and that's the rule. But it was a kind of authority that "I am right." And she didn't host my attention. She wanted it. And that created a problem for me. You can't want what's mine.

Michael: And you say that, at that moment "I made a vow that I would never betray my heart."

Orland: I realized that the thing that I wanted to do most was maintain the freedom of my attention. And it served me best when I give it without someone else taking.

Michael: You say, "making this vow, I awoke to another level of knowing I understood that my heart was something to safeguard and to act from. I understood that through the heart there was a way of knowing the truth about reality. We can choose, trust it or not. Then and there I made the commitment to stay true to what the heart knows, to trust my heart."

Orland: So my cognition changed. The heart cognition. I learned that my heart "thinks." I didn't know the words for it, but the cognition is that if I ask something from a deeper level, insight will come. So I studied on my own from that point on. I had my morning ritual to lift the veil and participate in other knowings and then close it and go to school.

Michael: That was at age six. You say, "At this time I also discovered I could turn my attention wherever I wanted. Through using this kind of attention, I learned to experience people's motives more clearly. I saw that many people had a fundamental unwillingness to be open and generous. I realized this was not how I wanted to be, and so I determined that giving would be an important part of my life. I understood that to give was part of my commitment to the heart's path of knowing.

Orland: Yeah, it was more like creating sacred space. The giving wasn't about things all the time. The caution to not take up space and time and energy, but to concentrate it and use it as needed. And, in a way, support what others are trying to do. And so I was really engaged with what others want more so than what I wanted.

Michael: When you were seven, an extraordinary experience happened that resonated for you throughout your life. And I remember in our first spiritual biography talking about it, but you were walking on the beach and tell us what happened.

Orland: Yeah, I walked into the water and my brothers and I, we were there to swim and I walked into the water and fell into a hole. And in this current, got pulled into this circular flow, and realized that I was in another space, another dimension, and witnessed that I was breathing in some way under the water. And as this light came in to my psyche, it became so still. I was looking around as I was still circling the hole, and then I surfaced and the hole disappeared. I stood up and I had a very serious headache. I went and sat on the rock and was just thinking what just happened? My brother said I almost drowned, and I said, no, I was breathing. I didn't have the effect of water coming in. So that remained a mystery for about 14 years.

Michael: And later you came to understand the connection to the mystery. Could you describe what you came to understand?

Orland: Yeah. The mystery was: one of my grandfather's five generations back from West Africa was a water diviner, and he would open these portals in the ocean and create a certain kind of baptism. So people will go in and this energy will infuse them and heal them, and they will come out and be well. So I was told by the shaman who was doing this divination for me, she said, through these beings that were communicating to her, your grandfather pulled you into the well. So I asked, I had never met any of my grandfather's. She said, "yes, he was the one who pulled you into the well." And she told me who he was and what his work was.

Michael: And who was he?

Orland: Well, he was just five, four, five generations back, this water diviner. And she said, well, he did that to pass his gifts on to you, which was really this prophetic space and the psychic energy of being able to move through these different fields of communications. But it was also mostly to communicate with the dead. And I understood that was the purpose of them.

Michael: When you were around nine, a friend your age was killed in an automobile accident, and shortly thereafter your grandmother died. And so this brought you into a contemplation at age nine about death. What was it that you explored and learned about death at nine that helped your evolution?

Orland: That there was still a communication that no one else was really attending to. The funerals were done but the dead remain. Because the funerals took on religious forms that really did not serve the purpose of sending people off. And so I realized that something that was lingering in my awareness around these individuals. And so I opened my own communication. And that happened in really quiet space: I call it contemplative or meditative space.

Michael: While you were still in high school in 1982, your family moved to the United States, and between 78 and 82 parts of the family moved at different times. You settled in Brooklyn and you began to go to high school there. And in the school you attended, there were a group of Haitians to whom you were drawn. Could you describe that experience?

Orland: Was something had started in Guyana for me before going there. The assassination of Dr. Walter Rodney. And in the lifting of that veil, he wrote a book called *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, and it was specifically about the colonization of Africa. But it's also about the colonization of other parts of the world with Africans coming into labor. But he was trying to understand the working class. How do people rebuild something that has to transcend colonialism? And part of his interest was with the Rastafarians, because their attempt was to look back into Ethiopia, look back into other parts of Africa, and understand that some of the early slave revolts were the result of African spiritual knowledge. Particularly in Haiti. So the Haitian Revolution and the Cuban Revolution were connected to the Orishas that guided how those revolutions got expressed. Fidel Castro had a shrine dedicated to the Orishas. They tried to kill him 65 times. And so there was a lot of

different kinds of knowledge about the Cuban Revolution and Congo. Haiti and the Congo, New Orleans and the Congo. The Africans did not leave their deities. They followed them. They came with them in Haiti. Haiti is one of the strongest places still for the African spiritual traditions that is in disarray because of the constant disruption of their true freedom. So we think of it as an island in terms of the geography, but it is a mountaintop. All islands are mountaintops. And the critical thing of bringing people who understand the powers of mountaintops to a mountaintop, you give them the entire promised land.

Haiti was the only country that actually made reparations to France.

Michael: That's right.

Orland: They had so much wealth from their mountaintop. So the dynamics of what I'm speaking about—when I came to New York and realized that those Haitians who came as refugees and who were isolated were so oppressed in the high school that I was in. I didn't speak French, but I spoke the language of culture, which is eye contact. And so I would go and join them and just sit with them. That's like, I'm in meditation. They're doing what they're doing. But the idea was to host their isolation and create a space.

Michael: You say, "For the first time I experienced what it is to be a stranger and to be welcomed and unconditionally accepted. From then on, the Haitian students always greeted me in Creole. I found sanctuary in their greetings and their welcome. We seldom spoke and we did very little together, but I understood that I had been seen by this group. A real exchange took place even when we just passed in the corridor on the street. I felt seen and witnessed. I later I learned the Zulu greeting Sawubona, meaning 'we see you.' As noted in chapter one, in South Africa, when you meet somebody he or she says sawubona, you reply yebo, sawubonawe: we see you, too. Seeing is an agreement: we see and we are seen are one gesture. Sawubona elevates the reality of human of mutual human development by affirming that in human relatedness a greater spiritual reality is present. My Haitian friends gave me my first experience of mutual seeing and recognition. They taught me that to be seen is healing."

That's one of the most profound experiences in the Cancer Help program. And I ask everyone who comes to write me a spiritual biography letter, and it's far more important than anything else they put on the form about what kind of cancer they have or anything else. It's the spiritual biography that I seek, because the real healing work and the cancer Help program is to see and be seen.

Orland: And I see that characteristic in you very deeply. I mean, you do it with everyone and I'm really appreciating you.

Michael: And that's what I sought to do with you from the start. I really needed to understand who you were for. My own sake, really. The last section that we'll talk about in this session, and then we're going to open it up for the wisdom of our community to explore things with you. The last section is called Social Impulses, and I wonder if you could read that. That starts on page 53 and just read as far as you'd like to try. Or you can interpolate. You can work from it. You don't have to read it.

Orland: There are two threads that are fundamental to my path. The first is initiation. The process that develops a person's capacities to make the deepest possible connection to the world. As a child, I intuitively experienced initiation through the various episodes already described. I've carried a subtle awareness of the world of the dead. The ancestral presence influenced what I understood about the world. Only much later in life did I experience conscious initiation processes under the guidance of elders in Africa. The second thread is human rights. The question of what the human being is entitled to that supports individual development and social possibilities. The thread of human rights began for me in Guyana when, as a child, I attended the

political rallies of Dr. Walter Rodney, a human rights activist, economist, historian and founder of a political party, Working People's Alliance. I observed Dr. Rodney's capacity to unite people of different cultural backgrounds in creating common agreements around their political understanding of their rights as people. He was able to build a movement beyond race and class, giving meaning to the economic thriving. I was interested in understanding what he was describing as a new possibility for Guyana. One afternoon in 1980, my cousin, who was a nurse at a hospital in Georgetown, came to our family's home with the news that Dr. Rodney had been injured in a bomb and taken to the hospital where he died. I remember being tremendously shocked by this news. I had, after all, been present at one of his rallies only a few days earlier. I was angry at this act of violence against someone who I had loved for the cause of people and the country. I needed to understand more fully what had led to his assassination.

Michael: That's a good place to stop there. And then after that, when you came to college in the United States, you became involved in the anti-apartheid movement. And so your studies focused on the historical context of the struggle on the continent of Africa and in the diaspora. You were part of a coalition of students and teachers who advocated for increasing the availability of African and African American Studies in California. And this led to your deeper work in this area. So I'm going to consciously close the book there. We came to the place, I hoped to stop. And in our next conversation, we're going to start talking about Gnostic initiation. But I'd just like us all to go quiet for a moment and just allow Orland's presence, our conversation, the life and the teachings that Orland offers us. Just let them be with you. Be with us. Peace. Peace.

So I open the space for questions, observations, comments. And I'd particularly like to welcome questions from those who come from afar or guests of Orland's. Please don't be shy. I'd love to hear from those of you who know Orland in different contexts have something to offer. Don't be shy, not limiting it to those of you who've joined us from Los Angeles and elsewhere. But I just want to warmly welcome your thoughts and reflections, because you bring experiences that others among us don't have. So consider offering thoughts. But the floor is open.

Participant: Hello, Orland. I was having a conversation this morning and we were talking about the truth being like a tuning fork, and with, there's so much noise that's created, orchestrated, and there's tons of echo chambers. So with that, the the truth in what you bring, how do we as a community, as loving beings, how do we cut through that noise and continue to cultivate focus on building beloved communities as in your book?

Orland: So there's some basic acceptances. One, in particular, helps to bring in awareness, which is acceptance of invisible guidance. That our sense perception prefers things that are not seen, not known, not found. It wants the mysteries. Not what is finished. And so part of choosing, the fact that most of the reality is not yet here. And we have to remember. Most of the reality that makes this place exist is not here. It's just energy, holding all of these artifacts in place. So we train ourselves to remember that there are other levels of experiences that can only be cognized. Don't get overwhelmed with what you just perceive. Bring it in. Bring it into the cognizance. And that means you give your attention to the essential question. How do I have to be to deal with what I'm dealing with so that "I" is the host for other levels of development. And not the mind's eye. The eye is your will, but you have to be willing to accept all of the chaos in order to find the I. That's the order. It's a paradox: that I don't try to control the chaos. The chaos cannot be controlled. I can also ascend to a level in which the chaos actually is an order. It's like that. It's just that reality. I don't have to be affected by it. And so the guidance is the "I" to a level in which everything comes into balance. I hope that makes sense.

Michael: Thank you for the question. Other reflections. Yes. Now, would you start with your name? That would be helpful.

Participant: I'm Christina. I have this question, it is kind of emerging, so I'm just going to share what's emerging. I feel like, well, you, Michael, have been very open with that you're at this phase in your life where you're preparing transition and on the earth right now we are preparing for this massive, we are in a massive transition, almost a death of the old and stepping into the new. And so the question I think is for both of you, almost like a death doula question of like how, do we prepare and walk the path of the Earth's death/transformation in a way that takes us into both what we're being called into, what our ancestors are reminding us we're here for, and what we are being guided into. And also, what is your preparation looking like and what is that for you as you are like gathering all the pieces of your life and then preparing for what your next place will be.

Orland: So I would love for you to take the lead.

Michael: So let me go quiet for a minute. Thank you, Christine. Christine, I hope and pray for a beautiful future. I hope and pray that humanity, through its struggles, will be given the wisdom and the consciousness that Orland is describing to become a mature planetary civilization, among others. Because I am certain there are others in the universe. I believe the universe is alive. I believe it's basically based on love. I believe that those species that come to consciousness and are fortunate enough not to destroy themselves, which some probably do, are part of a very large network of conscious life around in the universe. And I pray that we can find the wisdom to do that. We just talked about the Middle passage and the immense grief, the immense grief, unprecedented, that was created, and the consciousness that emerged from it. I wonder if humanity itself is not in a middle passage right now and that the African experience may teach us something about how to navigate a middle passage in which I believe there will be immense suffering. Immense. I'm a strangely constructed human being. I don't understand my own construct very well, but I am able to live in the face of death with considerable peace and joy. And I think what Orland was just saying about the place at which one sees order, the place from which one can see order in the midst of chaos, in the midst of suffering.

There is a teacher named Oscar Ichazo, do you know his work at all? He created the enneagram of personality. He was a Bolivian mystic, and his core teaching was that the cosmos is alive and it is moving at a certain speed with intention and purpose. And that this is true, whether the individual understands it or not. And that if you do understand that the cosmos is the greatest reality and it's moving with intention and purpose, that the best way to respond is to align yourself with it. So whatever my personal faith, whatever the fate of humanity on Earth, I find peace in knowing that all of this is in accord with the immutable laws of nature. And Ichazo also says the laws of nature are not cold; they are based on love. And that everywhere that life and the universe finds a fertile planet it plants a seed, and then those seeds grow. Some of them are destroyed and others live on and create, I think, parts of what Orland was talking about. So for myself, I see immense suffering ahead and I'm constructed to be able to look up directly in the eye. That's just how I am constructed. But it seems to me that if we want to navigate the suffering ahead as skillfully as possible in the service of love and the service of life, we need to be able to see what's actually happening. We can't pretend it's not happening. And so that's how I'm constructed. But I deeply am aware that my construct is an unusual one and that many, many people are not designed to look us in the face. They're not designed to look, you know, the struggles and troubles ahead directly on the face. And I don't want to trouble their peace. So it's not like I go around shouting these things from the rooftop, but rather I try to be of direct service where I can. And then, when asked, I will respond and say, you know, I think the road ahead will be difficult. I pray that it's different. But my guess is that it will be very difficult and that the questions that we as a community and Commonwealth and like-minded communities around the world will have to ask themselves about how to serve will be very profound questions. I'm not sure that's responsive, but it's the best I can do. Orland, what would you say?

Orland: Well, I would reflect on your comments. We can see a lot in our time. Most people could describe the dilemma. However, in bringing what we see into a feeling, something of a shift. So rather than feeling

powerless or hopeless, which is the characteristics of most feelings about our world, we have to almost like create an interest. An interest in the phenomena itself that allows to see that challenge, right? This is actually a gift to the Western mind: to be able to see the initiation of the dilemma that our history has created. Now, if we create an interest in that, the higher forces in the soul says, I know how to navigate that. It's not using the intellect to navigate it, but using higher creativity. So our feeling, it's like we're putting thinking into our feeling. How do I think my feelings for the future that has to come, first, as a kind of sensitivity, not to my own will, but to the collective superconscious world. So in our collective superconscious, where Jung tried to point to, is a feeling, that we haven't cultivated a real deep appreciation. Because self interest cannot feel it. So these are the social impulses I'm speaking about. If I say I'm interested in your feeling of truth, of well-being, the human rights work, I want to make sure that you feel good about your future. I'm actually creating the future.

Michael: This is thinking from the heart.

Orland: This is thinking from the heart. The mind cannot transform spiritual realities with knowledge. No kind of knowledge affects a spiritual world. A feeling affects it. A feeling for its truthfulness, to say, well are you willing to be a host for a kind of intuition, because beings can only be understood by intuition. There's no knowledge that will tell me who you are. No tradition can tell me who you are. As much as the traditions are valid, they're only for how we encounter each other. But it cannot describe me to you and you to me. And this is the challenge. We are trying to fix spiritual realities with conceptions. They don't work in spiritual realities. A concept is for a book, for this, for a table, not for who we are to be. Who we are to be has to be a choice for each other's future. That I am willing to be the person I am to be so that your future can be what it should be. This is an ecology in consciousness, not in nature. And what happens? The wisdom of nature begins to re-present pathways for creative expression. We only know the liberal arts and sciences as they have been constructed for our disciplines of learning. We don't know the higher mysteries; we only know the lesser mysteries. That's why the intellect now has built this civilization on the lesser mysteries, not the greater mysteries. The greater mysteries can only be discovered in sleep for this present civilization. Meaning we just say, forget all the work we are doing. It wouldn't solve anything in the conceptual sense, but the imaginations that allow us to really come to the places like where we meet and the work that we've done with those who are close to death. Michael, you know what it means for a person who was close to death to say, I remember something, that's the wisdom there. They whisper, before they leave the world, how they preferred to be if they had lived with the preference and not the compulsion of what they had to do to live. The shift is: who am I to be for the future to happen? The real future, not the projections that we've made. This sensing is how we go to sleep and how we wake up. You know, and why I said what brings me joy is this moment, because there's a moment and every day, and William Blake says, there's a moment, there's a moment of eternity in every day. Meaning the power to shift the paradigm of what is happening occurs every day. And we miss it. Because it has to be observed with such reverence as if this world is going to die today. Not 50 years, because we keep postponing it, it just keeps getting worse. But we should give it up today. For the moment when eternity reveals the higher mysteries, the higher mysteries happen in our lives every single day. And only those who really sit in deep contemplation. But we can do it by, you know, by ourselves. You see the most amazing things but can't do anything with it because it's a grammar, it's a language that has to be mutually understood. And unfortunately, we would like, or maybe fortunately, too, the elders will be on the other side of the threshold. Meaning we will have more elders on the other side. The elders that would really take more serious interest in the world becoming itself wouldn't be in control here. They'll be on the other side and they will host the dreamers. Meaning the younger people will choose the world to start again. Because we we are attached to our traditions, all of it. And we want to keep elders in position of that authority, of the traditions, not in service of what is not being lived. And in a way, if we invite elders to live their life as if it really matters now, to say, "this must end." This being the way we thinking about the world has to end, not the world. The world cannot end, it's the way we think about it ends and when the thinking is complete, the world will revive itself. There's certain



conditions that will take a little time because they're already, you know, decisions that should have been made a long time ago. But the dead is a very powerful community that we don't call on, and I hope we do.

Attendee: So this is Adam. Just observing that a large part of your conversation has been about the role of the dead in our lives. And I think you ended a moment ago Orland by saying we don't call upon the community of the dead. And I was just wondering if you could elaborate a little bit more on how we might do that.

Orland: We have shared about the presence of the dead in other states of being and realities. And the question is, how do we invite them to be part of our experience. The dead holds our feeling in their attention, our feelings. So in creating a feeling that gives them the sense that we are actually inviting them into the world is how we do it. So we call it justice in our civilization. We want something that allows the space between us to be just. Where I'm not taking something from you and you're not taking something from me. The other level of justice is the agreement for peace. So we said, No justice, no peace. Well, you've just put the dead out of our world, because they require both. The civil rights movement had, at the core of it, the cultivation of reverence for the feeling towards injustice, meaning to recognize when something is not in the interest of life and death. Not just life alone, but "cause no harm" towards those who have an interest in our feeling. Martin Luther King or call it Christ. The Christ consciousness has interest in our feeling for each other, that if we choose each other, we are choosing those other beings who live within the confidence of that trust. And so the nonviolent movement was the cultivation of bringing the dead into the world, because it was, even if I'm being violated, I chose peace, because larger reality depends on that. What you call the promised land depends on peace. So this is bringing the the greater mysteries back into civil society. Because there's no way I could understand intuitive realities without a peaceful disposition of heart and mind. And there's no way I could actually put my will in touch with the wisdom of life unless it chooses nonviolence. So Dr. King was very close to getting to talking about something else. What he called, you know, I've been to the mountaintop, I've seen something. He was really ready to talk about the dead. He actually did. He said, I may not be here when that future comes. Talking about himself as the dead. Because it was only from that level where, this is not my self-interest, this movement is not a self interest movement, I'm here to remind us that there's a higher vision that sees us and we're responsible for seeing it. That's where the work was going. A large part of honoring the parts of the higher mysteries as it's called is that, the qualities of those entities of the wisdom of realities are distributed throughout the creative world. And contact with each other on the level of feeling brings those qualities into the world. It's been with us for a long time, so justice is not, "I want something from you that corrects a wrong." Justice invites us to be able to engage with what was understood in the realm of the dead: the liberation from injustice. The dead doesn't have a justice issue. We do. They realize when they crossed over, the truthfulness of even their mistakes. Why it really happened, and what we could learn from their wisdom. The sixties corresponded not only with the timeliness of the dead coming back into the psyche, because that was a countercultural reality, but it was a way of, I would say, timing for the justice movements all over the world. I hope that, I mean it's not an answer. It's like we are the host for what happens to their reality.

Participant: I'm Katherine. I'm just going to trust that this question came in to me as we leave this picture, you as a child and this incredible developmental journey and the growth of your consciousness and initiation throughout your life. What did it feel like to be that little boy? Did it feel alone? Did you feel alone?

Orland: I had a lot of imaginary friends. So the aloneness wasn't like I was a separate from. The more that I understood what wasn't observed, I actually came further into the culture. Service, for me, became a big part of what what I did to fill the gap. So what I understood and to later put into another context, we're not in the same reality. Even though we are in the same room here, we're not in the same reality. For me, reality matters. And how I understood we get closer to the shared reality is when someone else's needs are being met. When someone really says, "you helped me connect to something that I needed," we bridge reality. And the understanding is that the agreement becomes more and more formed for reality as a shared space when we

have a mutual connection to the energy that allows people to say thank you. This is a kind of grace that we can't make up. It has to be experienced. And I just did it. When I'm in service, it's so beautiful because it's not something I want. There's nothing in it that I want. I just fulfill it. The challenge is that at the end of the day, at night, before sleep, I realize how much went unfulfilled. So yeah, the night was quite long for me and I learned to sleep very little because this was a kind of vigil for all the lost opportunities that we did not honor from the heart. And so by 11, I had a social activist awareness. So I went into service of all kinds of things. But one of my best friends, we would get together and he would sit over there, I would sit over here, and we just looked that direction. And because he was, Thomas Aquinas called adequation, we don't need to talk to be in the same reality. You can find the truthfulness in a kind of superconscious awareness. My brothers will come and say so why are you guys sitting there doing nothing? Like, we're not doing it nothing, we're actually trying to make reality more real. Leave us alone.

Michael: Beautiful. We are at the time we have an agreement to begin and end on time. I cannot thank all of you enough for the quality of the attention and the energetic feel that's surrounding the whole conversation. So we will reconvene here. Orland, thank you so much.