

Tsunamis and Hurricanes: A Book About God vs. the God Image

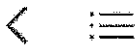
In the North American South where I was born, some years after the events in *The Color Purple* might have ended, it is still a bit of a risk to question people about their idea of God. It is a given that "God" is "God." Everyone knows what that means—what He (always masculine, of course), looks like, what he thinks, and what he is capable of doing. But in fact, what does He look like, what does he think, and what is he capable of doing? For answers to these questions people in the South, and in many parts of the globe, turn to the Bible. There we are informed that He is the father of Jesus, who we invariably see depicted as a white man. He thinks we are born of sin and embody it; he thinks man should have dominion over the earth, which includes land and water, women, animals and children. He is capable of inflicting extraordinary punishment and suffering on those he wishes to wound or destroy, while giving every conceivable support and spoil of war to those he adores. He treats the adored badly at times also, but at least they seem in a position, having been chosen by God Himself, or so the story goes, to attain audience.

It is no mystery how and at what point in time African Americans, like the characters in this novel, began believing in a God designed to guide and further the desires of another people, a God who thought of blackness as a curse. Captured in Africa, beginning in the fifteen hundreds, they were

marched for months across savannah and rainforest to the coast where slave ships waited to transport them to the New World. At the notorious "slave castles" that dotted (and still dot) the coast of Africa they were forced to kneel before a statue of Jesus, have water sprinkled over their shaven heads by a priest, and have their "old" names taken from them. They were given Christian names that went with their new summarily acquired (with the help of the lash and the threat of annihilation) religion, and then, having been branded on face or body, they were prodded onto the ships, packed, as the cliché goes, like sardines in a can. We will never know how many died of grief, or disease, or starvation. Or how many made the despairing leap into the sea.

The New World as envisioned by its creators—who wanted Washington, DC, with its swamps and mosquitoes, to look like an instant Paris, and New York to be a bigger and better London—could not be built without slave labor. Not even my home state of Georgia could be built without such labor. Immigrants from Europe sickened and died in their thousands, trying to eradicate Indians (others of our ancestors) and drain swamps, fell forests and outlive malaria. All in livid heat that seemed more like the hell described in the "Good Book" they brought with them than the Heaven unscrupulous land merchants had lured them across the water to enjoy.

Enter (dragged in) my African ancestors, many of them skilled at growing cotton, indigo and rice. Brick-making and laying. Cooking, weaving and raising animals. Many of them artists and healers, musicians and dancers. Visionaries and philosophers. Scholars. Teachers. Merchants. None of them easily overwhelmed by heat. And, also, really smart. They questioned everything, at least for a few generations. How could they not? They found themselves among people who considered



them to be objects to be ordered about and used, with no regard for their physical well-being or their feelings. They were assumed, like women and cats, to have no souls. Seven years was about as long as most of these ancestors lasted. Used up, their heads were then bashed in and they were buried without fanfare. Their remains can be found all over the South; in the North, some of their bones have been discovered in unlikely places—for example underneath what would later be known, in New York City, as Wall Street.

They lived among demons. Separated from kin and tribal members so that no one could speak intelligently to anyone else, life became nothing more than labor, unpaid and un-praised. Life was having to bear the lash. Life was giving birth to children—who could have no memory of anything other than brutal enslavement—then dying and being tossed into a ravine or buried at the edge of a swamp or field. Where was there likely to be any sign of relief?

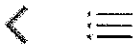
If my ancestors were like the Africans I know today, and like me, they would have held on to their common sense for a long time. But at some point, being able to sit down for half an hour on Sunday morning—after working for someone else's profit all week long—seemed worth believing the unbelievable. Could someone die and actually rise from the dead? If they were to be used up after seven years and then murdered, perhaps resurrection was worth considering. Would they teach this new idea to their children if it meant they might experience a trace of humanity from their captors? Yes. Why did the Master smile as he watched the decline of spiritual, as well as physical, resistance to enslavement among his captives?

This must have chilled them. The first Africans to give in, to be broken in spiritually, must have suffered unimaginably. They would have remembered their own Gods. And Goddesses. They would

have realized that, in essence, the one God/Goddess that proved sturdy enough to be in Africa with them, on the slave ship, and also with them in Mississippi and New York, was Nature. This thought, however, the essence of Paganism, was anathema to the new God. And to his henchmen.

The brilliance of enslaving the spirit is that it is an invisible prison from which the inmate appears to derive some comfort. For African Americans even that small comfort had to be fought for. I can imagine some wily ancestor pointing out to his master or overseer that, if the God of the Bible had created slaves as well as everybody else, surely He would want them to know how to read about it for themselves. I'm sure this was a conversation—master astride his horse, slave on his knees or surely with face downcast and hat in hand—that took at least a century. Finally, a handpicked slave, perhaps the master's son by an enslaved woman he'd raped, was permitted to read an edited version of the Good Book. Interpreted by the master, of course. A recurring sentence was bound to be "slaves obey your masters."

In Putnam County, Georgia, where I was born, the mistress of the plantation during my great-great-grandfather's time loaned the black community a small plot of land on which to build a church; though badly neglected, it is still there. Recently the grave of my great-grandmother, Sallie Montgomery Walker, was found not far away. She was born in 1861, enslaved. She died in 1900 and was buried with four of her children. What had happened to her? We will never know. That she might have had status in the Montgomery household could account for her having a headstone (most slaves did not) and for the fact that her father, who outlived her, is buried nearby. It is also probable she and her father were related to their owners by blood. In fact, Miss May Montgomery, for whom my father worked, having nearly been turned off



her large estate for asking to be paid twelve dollars a month for unending service as field-hand, dairyman and driver, made a comment that has been passed down in our family of Montgomerys and Walkers. On hearing that one of my siblings abhorred the eating of chicken skin, she exclaimed: that's a Montgomery all right. You can never get a Montgomery to eat chicken skin!

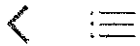
This is the means by which descendents of slaves have tried to piece together our identities, on the European side, from scraps thrown by relatives who, out of hypocrisy and cowardice, have failed to honor connection to their own kin. I know this to be true, and yet it remains difficult to imagine.

I came into the world loving "God." By which I mean the All Present and All Magical. It was so apparent that this was the case that my parents and siblings entered me in numerous baby contests because I never seemed to encounter an expression of the Divine, in human form, that I did not appreciate. It is because of this love that racism as evidenced by belief in superior and inferior looks and mentalities failed to impress me. I could not understand it. It seemed blind. I accepted people in my community joyfully, whatever they looked like, whatever their peculiarities, savoring the wonder of them. They responded to my delight in them by helping me win every contest I was ever in, thereby raising funds to build benches for the church or a roof for our school. By then, for most people, "God" as the All Present and All Magical had disappeared into the "God image" (as Carl Jung would call it) that they worshiped every Sunday at church. This was the God image they'd first glimpsed, after being captured, beaten and starved, shackled and branded, the day they left their homeland of Africa. A God image that, in fact, was someone else's image of God, and not a reflection of the people forced to worship it. It is possible to visit black churches in the South, even now, and find the

object of devotion to be a very pale Jesus Christ, blue eyes raised toward his adored (assumed bigger and whiter) father in heaven. This was the same adoration of himself that the slave master drilled into his slaves. I was born at a time that permitted me to see remnants of this baffling and soul murdering behavior, and to join the Movement of Black people in the Sixties whose goal was to eliminate it.

When I began thinking, in the late Seventies, about writing the novel that would become *The Color Purple*, I felt the greatest need to do so surrounded by Nature. I was living in New York City. After many changes—a divorce, selling my house, and leaving my editorial job at *Ms. Magazine*—I set out for San Francisco. From there, I traveled North until I came to a tiny settlement called Boonville where I rented a one room cottage that faced a meadow and whose backyard was an apple orchard. A towering linden tree offered shade. Seeking guidance, I spent days at the river and among the redwoods. Nights looking at the stars. This was the experience of Heaven in Nature I had so missed while living in New York, the ever present magical All to which my soul and my creativity aspired.

More than thirty years later, it still puzzles me that *The Color Purple* is so infrequently discussed as a book about God. About "God" versus "the God image." After all, the protagonist Celie's first words are "Dear God." Everything that happens during her life, spanning decades, is in relation to her growth in understanding this force. I remember attempting to explain the necessity of her trials and tribulations to a skeptical fan. We grow in our understanding of what "God/Goddess" means and is by the intensity of our suffering, and what we are able to make of it, I said. As far as I can tell, I added. Fortunately we had just finished discussing two natural disasters (a devastating tsunami and hurricane) that had recently afflicted Southeast



Asia and the Gulf Coast of the United States: Think of "Pa" as Celie's Tsunami, I said, and "Mister" as her hurricane.

In fact, a "Pa" and/or a "Mister" are likely to turn up in anybody's life. They might be wearing the mask of war, the mask of famine, the mask of physical affliction. The mask of caste, race, class, sex, mental illness, or disease. Their meaning to us, often, is that they are simply an offering, a challenge, provided by "God" i.e., the All Present and All Magical, that requires us to grow. And though we may be confused, even traumatized, as Celie is, by their historical, social, and psychological configuration, if we persevere we may, like her, eventually settle into amazement: that by some unfathomable kindness we have received just the right keys we need to unlock the deepest, darkest dungeons of our emotional and spiritual bondage, and to experience our much longed for liberation and peace.

The core teaching of the novel appears on page 176, and is delivered by Shug Avery, who is not only Celie's beloved but also her spiritual mentor:

I believe God is everything, say Shug. Everything that is or ever was or ever will be. And when you can feel that, and be happy to feel that, you've found it.

Shug also shares her understanding that the God in whom she delights, a God she feels delights as well in her, is far too all-encompassing to have a gender. This is why, at the very end of the novel, Celie's definition of "God" has changed radically. When she addresses "God" toward the sunset of her life, her "Dear God" includes not only people and sky and trees and stars, but "Dear Everything."

Three years after publication, The Color Purple, which won a Pulitzer Prize and a National Book Award, was made into an internationally popular film by Steven Spielberg. Five years after publication it had sold over six million copies worldwide. Ten years later that number had doubled, as The Color Purple became one of the five most re-read books in America. In 2005, The Color Purple became a phenomenally successful Broadway musical, playing to packed houses every night for over a year. In the process it transformed the "Great White Way" into a place where people of all colors, orientations and identities gathered to experience the show and to celebrate "God" as Life and Love, Perseverance, Hope, Creativity and Joy.

Alice Walker is the author of more than thirty books and was inducted, along with Amelia Earhart, Cesar Chavez, John Muir, Sally Ride, Billie Jean King and Clint Eastwood into the California Hall of Fame.

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