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*December 15, 2002
3:00 p.m.*

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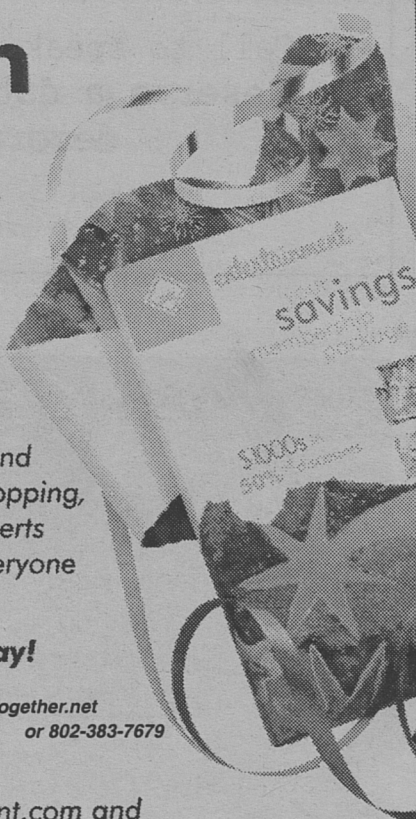
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The Spiritual Essence: Liberation as Spiritual Practice

A Since 1990, each Thanksgiving season, non-violent peace activists converge on Fort Benning, Georgia at a place formerly known as the School of the Americas. The name has now changed to the terrorist-fighting “Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation,” but the mission remains the same.

SOA/WHISC is a U.S. military and intelligence institution that trains right-wing, anti-communist military and para-military forces to put down burgeoning revolutionary movements in Latin America. The peace activists converge in November to commemorate and protest the 1989 murders of six El Salvadoran Jesuit priests, their housekeeper and her daughter by SOA graduates. In peace activist circles, the School of the Americas is known as the School of Assassins.

Among the leaders of the protests at the SOA are an informal grouping of Roman Catholic activists called liberation theologians. Some of the more famous liberation theologians include U.S. peace activist Father Daniel Berrigan, assassinated Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador, Jean-Bertrand Aristide of Haiti, and Ernesto Cardenal of Nicaragua.

Their message of justice for the poor of Latin America has fallen largely on deaf ears as the World Bank/IMF and U.S. corporate imperialism have overtaken the revolutions of Latin America, but their work continues in today's peace and justice movement. And it connects to those of us working for queer justice. Sister Jeannine Grammick and former Jesuit priest John J. McNeill are among those who bring queerness to liberation theology.

As a radical faerie, the concepts of liberation theology are immediately familiar and comforting to me. The late Harry Hay's work on subject/subject consciousness contains echoes of liberation theology's emphasis on poor people's direct and immediate connection to God through self-awareness and community-building.

Radical peacemakers do exist within the Roman Catholic Church that I left behind for my pagan practice. Had I known about Haitian Father Jean-Bertrand Aristide's work “in the parish of the poor,” as he put it, my queer pagan rejection of Catholicism might not have been so painful. To have known there were people of faith in the Church who worked for justice and freedom would have been a revelation. But at the time I was leaving the Church, torn by internal struggles with my sexuality and external troubles with my parent's divorce, I was unable to see any of that work.

I am still conflicted

pippin

today. Sometimes, I feel like my spiritual identity will always be linked to Catholicism with its beautiful ritual and reverence of the Virgin Mary, one manifestation of the Goddess. Sometimes, I am able to see our pagan rituals at Yule, Imbolc and Samhain as both the progenitors and the children of their Catholic counterparts: Christmas, Candlemas and All Saints Day. At other times, I am shocked and horrified by the deliberate abuses of power that the Church perpetuates to its own economic and political benefit, not least when it comes to sexuality and gender-based ethics and morality.

Catholic queers are often

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twisted in knots about our Catholic heritage. There is no brighter example of our tortured relationship with the Church than that beautiful organized response to the AIDS pandemic known as The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence.

Fellow travelers with the Radical Faeries, the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence sometimes seem to outsiders to be mocking the Roman Catholic Church in general and women in the Church in particular. Yet really they are manifesting some of the highest principles of liberation theology. In their own activist work for queer liberation and in the struggle against HIV and AIDS, the Sisters clash repeatedly with the Church hierarchy and the federal government because they insist on the innate value of all people, especially those who are most disempowered – homeless, poor, HIV+, queer. The Latin American liberation theologians also arose in response to extreme oppression, deadly neglect, dictatorship and imperialism. And at the School of the Americas protests, Roman Catholic Sisters and Brothers, the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence and the Radical Faeries have often marched together in solidarity.

I am newly returned from the 15th Annual Creating Change conference in Portland, Oregon. The diversity of the participants was quite an amazing sight to behold, and it once again set me to thinking about Liberation Theology, this time in the context of queer liberation. At the conference, I learned about an organization founded in 2000 called The Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies in Religion and Ministry (CLGS), based in Berkeley, CA.

CLGS recently received the archived papers of Father John J. McNeill and his life partner Charles Chiarelli. McNeill is best known for his 1976 work, *The Church and the Homosexual*, in which he laid out an argument for systematically dismantling a moral and theological condemnation of homosexuality. He was one of the first theologians to argue that queer people fit fully and completely into an affirming moral and spiritual universe. He didn't apologize for homosexuality but rather argued that queerness was a gift from god to be treasured both individually and within the community of the Church. Quite a rad-

ical concept for 1976!

Father McNeill suffered five years of Jesuit and Vatican investigation before being given permission to publish his book, and almost immediately thereafter he was banned by the Church from speaking or writing about homosexuality in public. After eight years of very public silence, he broke the ban in protest and was removed from the priesthood shortly thereafter. In a talk given at CLGS by Sister Jeannine Grammick, she notes that “to suffer and be rejected by one's faith community, like Jesus, Jeremiah, and other Hebrew prophets has been John's lot.” Many of the liberation theologians in Latin America have likewise been silenced or cast out for challenging injustice in the Church and in secular governments. Some, like Archbishop Romero and those commemorated at the SOA protests, have been murdered.

John J. McNeill carries on his ministry today. He notes that one of his role models was Maurice Blondell, a turn-of-the-20th-century Catholic philosopher. Blondell's work greatly influenced the reform movement that led to Vatican II, a 1962 gathering of the Church hierarchy that led to >>