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# Education for wholeness: la womb de mi labor

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## *Education for wholeness: la womb de mi labor*

*Ginna Malley Campos, Western Washington University*

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### **Abstract**

*Conventional education teaches and reinforces disconnection from ourselves and disengagement from the world. This presentation considers power, privilege, and the act of listening in educational settings and identity development and explores the importance of holistic education for transforming self and society. Through a personal journey that interweaves the complexities of colonial history, heritage and identity with spirit and healing; we invite all to engage inwardly with the suffering implicit in our existence in order to reconnect with the wholeness that enables our shared journey towards healing.*

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**Keywords: holistic education, spirituality and education, transformative education, heritage, Borikén, caribbean, spirit, healing, ancestors, boricua, voice, journey, disconnection, sacred, non-violence, otherness, wholeness colonization**

Buenas tardes a mi familia, ¡mami, papi, Michelle, Jessica! y a todas las familias que viajaron largas distancias para estar aquí con nosotros ahora. A mis queridos compañeros de clase, a la comunidad de North Cascades Institute (NCI), y a mis profesores y amistades extendidas. Gracias por estar presente, por permitirme este tiempo y espacio para reflexionar y compartir con ustedes mi pensar y mi sentir.

Good afternoon to all the friends and families that traveled long distances to be here with us now. To my dear classmates, the NCI community, my professors, and friends of friends. Thank you for being present, for granting me this time and space to reflect and share my thoughts with you.

I would first and foremost like to acknowledge the land on which we stand. We are on stolen land from the Swinomish, Nooksack, Thompson, Upper Skagit and Sauk-Suiattle Tribes who have all inhabited these lands since time immemorial. Let us please share a moment of silence in acknowledgement and respect of this shared history.

Thank you. If acknowledging this history is new or unfamiliar to you, I hope that this moment of silence creates within you a space of curiosity. Curiosity to better understand how it is that we all have the privilege to be standing here now, and under these circumstances. The history of this country is seldom told from an Indigenous perspective. It is not told from a perspective that honors the injustices that occurred here a mere 150 years or so ago, and that continues to occur today. I realize that 10 seconds of silence is far from being an action step in undoing these



injustices, but at the very least it is an act of acknowledging the injustices and our role in benefiting from them. So I thank you again for participating.

Before we begin, I would like to ask you all to take the next 30 seconds to think about a mother in your life. It can be your own mother, or a friend, it could even be a non-human mother, if that's who comes to mind. Any individual that embodies the characteristics you value in a mother. Please write their name on a piece of paper and save this paper in your pocket. Thank you.

My name is Ginna Malley Campos, my mother Aixa Campos and my father Jeffrey Malley, my sister, Michelle. Gracias por su apoyo incondicional desde el momento que nací. Gracias por estar aquí, los amo. My home is Puerto Rico. Borikén is the original Indigenous Taíno name for this archipelago of islands in the Caribbean. On my mother's side, like the great majority of native *Boricuas* I carry indigenous Taíno blood. On my father's side, like few other *Boricuas*, I carry Irish blood – pirate Irish blood, to be precise. On both sides I have Spanish mixed in, and somewhere in there is my African heritage. Like most Caribbeans, our ancestral story of colonization has created a race, culture and identity that is complex to its core.

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### ***The journey: spirit, healing, and suffering***

Perhaps it is from this inherited and experienced complexity –of understanding my heritage and finding my place in the world—that the unavoidable theme of this conversation springs. Spirit. When I say spirit, a few notions come to my mind. I think of VOICE: a voice inside that is honest and wild; I think of my ANCESTORS: those before me and after me whose experiences I carry and honor; I think of LIFE: irreducible, spontaneous, and sacred. I think of all these things and more.

In her essay *The Creative Spirit: Children's Literature*, Caribbean-American activist and poet, June Jordan has a beautiful quote that I'd like to share with you. In speaking of creative spirit of the universe existing within each of us, she says that “there is an orderliness, a perpetual inclination to grow, to become manifest from an invisible beginning, a perpetual impulse to expand, and to transform, that seems to be the essence of being, even perhaps, the irreducible purpose of being” (1977, p. 11).

I believe this. I understand this spirit of expansion and transformation intuitively as a seemingly individual, but essentially collective journey for healing. This may be a conscious or unconscious journey, but either way there is inherent suffering in it. Whether it is explicit suffering we experience firsthand or perhaps ancestral suffering that we carry unknowingly. We are all on a journey for healing.

I believe that the greater our unconsciousness of this journey, the greater our suffering. This suffering is the pain of separation, or disconnection. Disconnection from ourselves, from each other, and from the greater being –Earth—that we are fundamentally part of.

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### ***Disconnection in Education***

In her book *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope*, feminist theorist and cultural critic bell hooks has a chapter titled *Spiritual Matters in the Classroom* (2003) where she states that “conventional education teaches us that disconnection is organic to being” (p. 180). In its design, content and methods, our educational system models disconnection and reinforces it.

As I imagine everyone in this room has probably experienced firsthand, we were educated in a system that does not acknowledge spirit, a system that is obsessed with separating the head and the heart. Education that is disconnected from our lived experiences, our emotions, and our deep intuitions. Education that fosters a way –one way—of knowing that is fundamentally disconnected from reality. In reflecting our society at large, this education is obsessed with individualized and competitive learning; with standardization, objectivity and facts. *Well, it seems clear to me how far facts have taken our society... as far as post-truth apparently. Isn't that great?*

But I believe in spirit. And I believe that we all have spirit that is sacred, spirit that carries immeasurable depth and beauty of experience and will. From an Indigenous perspective, we all come to Earth with “learning spirits who travel with us and guide us along our Earth walk, offering us guidance, inspiration, and the quiet unrealized potential to be who we are” (Battiste, 2010, p.15). “Who we are” goes beyond the bodies and the material conditions we were born into, beyond the professions and identities that we inhabit, beyond the stereotypes we fall into and the personalities that shape our relationships. We all have spirit. The person next to you, and behind you, and on the other end of the phone, the stranger on the street, the perceived enemy, our students... all have spirit.

So how can education honor the needs of our spirit? This is a question that writer and activist Parker Palmer asks himself in his keynote address *The Grace of Great Things: Reclaiming the Sacred in Knowing, Teaching, and Learning* (1997). He says that “education is about healing and wholeness. It is about empowerment, liberation, transcendence, about renewing the vitality of life” (p.3). Education is about finding and claiming ourselves and our place in the world (hooks, 2003, p. 179).

*¡Ginna, estás en las nubes! Te estás perdiendo en las ideas bonitas para esconderte de la realidad que te rodea.... Ginna, you're in the clouds! There are innocent immigrant peoples getting detained by ICE, there are Indigenous people's getting forcibly removed from their sacred lands by militarized police, there are wall street billionaires filling their pockets with the funds cut from my Alma Mater –the cultural and intellectual seed bed of my people.... And here you are, talking about spirit.*

Yes. I am. And this is my process of finding and claiming my place in this world. This is how I honor my spirit, and if I didn't, I would surely lose all meaning.

Dr. Rachel Naomi Ramen, a clinical professor and early pioneer of holistic and integrative medicine, states in her essay *The Heart of Learning: Spirituality in Education* (1999):

*Educators are healers who trust in the wholeness of life and in the wholeness of people. We cannot heal the shadow of our culture by educating people to succeed in society as it is. We must have the courage to educate people to heal this world into what it might become (p. 34).*

There is no certainty in 'what the world might become'. The only certainty that I see, is that it's a struggle, a constant struggle (Davis, Barat & West, 2016). But as bell hooks says, therein lies the practice of freedom. In this struggle lies the "opportunity to labor for freedom, to demand of ourselves and our comrades, an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality even as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries" (1994, p. 207). In this way, trusting the wholeness of life is not a cop-out from action; it is the fundamental core of resistance itself.

It is an unimaginably long journey we are on. We are trying to envision a different world, one that we, in these bodies will surely never see, nor smell nor taste. But as a popular quote says: "we only begin to grasp the full meaning of life when we plant trees whose shade we know we will never sit in".

So back to education, how can education honor our spirits and this wholeness of life? How can education be holistic, in a way that cultivates whole learners, and not just their intellect? How can we teach in a way that does not bureaucratize the mind; educate in a way that fosters an understanding of life as the process of becoming? (Freire, 1970/2000).

I am speaking about transformative education. And there's a fundamental nuance here, in that this does not mean that education is this transformative thing that transforms us, but rather, it is an education that acknowledges our transformative nature. We are beings in continual transformation (what isn't?), and education must cultivate those transformative qualities that resides within us. Education must help us nurture our own journeys towards self-realization. In this sense, education cannot be an external transmissive process. Instead, it needs to make space for learners and teachers to go within.

This is particularly important as we see ourselves, and especially the next generation, born into a society of instant gratification and instant reward. A society built on superficiality, on breadth of information with little depth of understanding. A society that defines success so narrowly.

There is little out there that helps us remember, that being whole is beautiful, being whole is valuable, being whole is necessary. Capitalism certainly does not tell us this. Patriarchy certainly does not tell us this. And education all the while is shying away from facing this most harmful and painful truth.

Parker Palmer points out that "we can no longer afford a system of education that refuses to get engaged with the mess" (1997, p. 4). Should I name the mess? What is not a mess right now? Our systems are failing. Our social structures and psyches are not showing signs of resilience, to say the least. And although some say that things are better than they were before, I would say

they're still a mess. And if at any point they were worse and have gotten better, it's because people engaged with the mess. People faced it in order to change it.

Inspired by the words of the Brazilian critical educator Paulo Freire in his book *Pedagogy of the Heart*, I am denouncing the fatalistic notion that things are this way because they cannot be otherwise. As Freire states, history is possibility and not determinism. Liberation is a possibility, not fate or destiny nor burden (2016, p. 44). Again, at the root of the mess I speak of, is disconnection.

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### **My mess**

I come from a place where, disconnection seems to be a fundamental part of our Puerto Rican identity. We are Boricuas with US citizenship, we have two official languages but most people speak only one, we have two flags, and if you translate our official name to English: *Estado Libre Asociado*, we are a Free Associated State. We have a statue of Christopher Columbus bigger than the statue of liberty. We are caught between the history of colonization and the myth of the great American dream.

I suppose that I have made assumptions thus far, that you all know what I mean when I say "the mess". So perhaps it would be appropriate for me to share my lived experience of the mess... Now, I'm not here to give a history lesson, nor do I speak on behalf of all Boricuas, but I feel as though to not acknowledge the mess that eats away at my soul every single day, would be dishonest. So here I go...

Last year 2016, while I was up here living the NCI grad dream, my island crashed into the worst financial crisis in its history. Our corrupt government owes over \$70 billion to a multitude of investment firms and wall street vulture funds. Given that we are not a state, we are excluded from bankruptcy codes for insolvent local governments. Given that we are not a sovereign nation, we cannot proclaim sovereign default, and therefore cannot seek emergency assistance from international financial institutions. The United States Congress, where we have no representation or vote, passed a Bill - titled PROMESA, which means Promise in Spanish— creating a Fiscal Control Board, with members appointed by the US president, a President we cannot vote for. This board has powers above our own elected local government officials to decide how the debt will be paid. It is no secret that this board, is more sympathetic to bond holders at the expense of the Puerto Rican people. The conflicts of interest are nauseating, and the board members are pushing austerity measures that sabotage our basic human rights, leaving thousands without healthcare, drastically cutting education funds, and selling our natural patrimony to private developers, to mention just a few outrages.

Men in power are being accused of sexually assaulting women, and are not being held accountable; our most fertile farm lands are occupied and exploited by multinational seed-engineering corporations while farmworkers are getting sick and while we continue to import over 80% of our food; thousands of families are leaving the island every month

in search of jobs, because they have no choice. This is an island 100 miles long and 35 miles wide, with over 500 years of exploitation.

This is not a unique story. Colonialism, capitalism and patriarchy systematically oppress us all –materially and ideologically—regardless of race, nationality and everything else. I must recognize the privilege I have to be standing here, to be in the United States getting an education out of choice and not obligation. To be speaking here is very unsettling.

This is a small example of the mess, the one that is closest to my heart, and as a radio host in Puerto Rico would say, “si no lo digo reviento” – if I don’t say it I’ll collapse. The mess I am talking about is that we live like there are infinite resources for infinite profit making on this finite planet. We live like we don’t know that what enables us to live the life we live is the exploitation of people, and not to mention Earth, and also not to mention all of our future generations.

I believe that when we acknowledge the mess and the grave needs of the world, the non-violent thing to do is to find our place within *that* reality. To face it, and to lean into the discomfort.

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### ***Leaning in – engaging inwardly***

To Palmer, and to myself, the mess is ultimately our disconnection from the sacred. The sacred may be lofty concept to throw out there, but Palmer defines it simply, and I believe truthfully: sacred is that which is worthy of respect. This grounds sacredness in a way that is palpable, and enactable. I may have a spiritually or intellectually complex relationship with the sacred, but I think we can all assume we know what we mean and what it looks, sounds, smells, and feels like to simply hold respect for each other.

Yet we live in a culture of fear, and today’s conventional education is at the core of this. We often do not grant respect to that and those whom we don’t understand. We’ve been trained in many subtle and explicit ways to dismiss that and those whom we are not familiar with. We are not taught to engage with the other – to engage with difference in a respectful, curious way. At the core of all this looking away from what doesn’t quite fit with our notions of right and wrong, our world views, our deeply rooted convictions, is a refusal of engaging intimately – engaging inwardly. When we refuse to engage inwardly, we do not let the ‘other’ – the difference—enter our inner realm.

This is life-threatening. It is life-threatening to dismiss the inward learning that is stored in engaging with otherness. Palmer suggests that there is no way to grow morally if we fail to respect and to teach/learn from the “inwardness of things” (p. 8). What does this mean? It means that everything out there—from political chaos to all of our relations—all has a connection to the heart – to our “inward dynamics” (p. 9). In schools, we read novels, learn about world history, practice math equations, possibly without ever



being engaged inwardly. We are taught by externalizing and objectifying content, and we consequently become morally and spiritually deformed (p. 8). So I ask myself, what is the cost of this refusal to engage inwardly?

Palmer has an example that is very fitting to illustrate this. He speaks of how he learned about Hitler in school, and about the atrocities of the Holocaust. He says that the way this history was taught gave the impression that this occurred to a different species, on another planet. As a consequence of learning this brutal history with no engagement of the spirit, there was a lost opportunity to take this information and truly learn with it, from within. Palmer goes on to say:

*I did not learn that there is within me, in the shadow of my own soul, a little Hitler, a force of evil, that when the difference between me and thee gets too great, I will find some way to kill you off. I won't do it with a bullet or a gas chamber, but I'll do it with a category, a dismissal, a word of some sort that renders you irrelevant to my universe and to my life: "Oh, you're just a \_\_\_\_\_. This is a dismissal that we do with such facility [...] to render each other and each other's truth irrelevant to who we are. (p. 9)*

So, what's the point of learning all the facts and histories, all the beauties and atrocities of the world out there if it is not to transform what's within ourselves?

*Pero Ginna, how are you going to that? ¿Qué pretendes hacer? ¿Cuál es tu grandioso plan? How are you suggesting we apply this in schools and in our lives?*

I don't know. I don't have the answers! I am simply inviting myself and all of you to embrace this inquiry as a journey, a lifelong journey. Whatever that journey may look like in the complexity of your own experience and your own identity. And I am claiming that this journey is inherently one of healing. Because when I recognize that little evil within me and face it with humility, I am healing and we are all healing.

I believe that when we consciously engage with this journey, we create a community of seekers. Through this deep connection to ourselves, we connect with others. When we honor and respect that difference – that otherness within our own selves – then we are truly able to respect different lived experiences, different ways of knowing, of being, different cultures and languages, races, identities, ethnicities... we create a greater community. What better place to start trying to change the world than from this vast, timeless, place that resides at our core?

My yoga teacher Ingela Abott, in one of her very first dharma talks at the beginning of our class spoke of *ahimsa* – the Sanskrit word for non-violence. Reading from Vimala Sakar, one of the few female translators of the ancient yoga sutras (or teachings), she said that *ahimsa* is an “intelligent, cooperative, harmonious, relationship with life”. When we speak of non-violence, we generally understand it as not harming others, not killing, hurting, etc.



When we practice *asanas* (postures) in yoga, we learn what movements and postures are loving to our bodies and spirit. We work with the strength and the intelligence of our anatomy, our bones and muscles, and energetic bodies, in harmony with gravity and with the energies of Earth. In doing so, we are practicing non-violence. In this dharma talk, Ingela put the notion of non-violence under a different lens. She spoke of honesty as non-violence, integrity as non-violence. She basically called on a sense of responsibility as a vital part of non-violence.

When I know that good posture is essential to my heart's well-being, when I know that slouching strains my neck and upper back muscles, it collapses my lower belly and thus constricts my diaphragm and limits my inhalation, and it also energetically closes off my heart to the world... when I know all of this, and I continue to slouch, this is violence. Not just violence to my body, simply violence in itself. To know what is wholesome and to chose to ignore it – to not assume responsibility – is violence.

From this understanding of non-violence as acting accordingly to one's knowledge, we assume responsibility, we hold ourselves accountable, and we tap into great power. This connects to what I believe Palmer means when we make the "decision to live divided no more" (p.13). He says that those who live undivided make "the fundamental decision to act and speak on the outside, in ways consonant with what we know to be true on the inside" (p. 14)

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### **Power and Privilege**

June Jordan tells us that,

*Vast changes will have to be envisioned and pursued if any let alone all of us will survive the destructive traditions of our species. Enormous reversals and revisions of our thinking patterns will have to be achieved, somehow, and fast. And to accomplish such lifesaving alterations of society, we will have to deal with power: we will have to make love powerful. We will have to empower the people we love so that they can insist upon the validity of their peculiar coloring or gender or ethnicity or accidental economic status, so that they can bloom in their own place and time. (Quoted in Gumbs, Martens, Williams & Ross, Revolutionary Mothering, 2016, p. 12)*

She said this in the 1970's. It is 2017 and we are facing times when it becomes ever more clear that the world –Earth– needs you. It needs every single one of us. I am not speaking from a place of urgency (this is where language becomes limiting). If I spoke from a place of urgency, I would ultimately be inspiring fear, anxiety, guilt. And I believe those three make up the holy trinity of the Ego, making us defensive of the self-narratives we've created against our injuries and disconnections. I am not interested in provoking anyone's ego. No, I speak from the heart, and with kindness. The world needs us! She is

inviting us every single moment to participate, in the healing of your own soul which is one with the universe.

And why not let this healing be radical? Because ultimately, my oppression is your oppression. In the words of mother and interfaith activist Valarie Kaur, we are living in a world where black bodies are seen as criminal, brown bodies are seen as illegal, trans bodies as seen as immoral, indigenous bodies seen as savage, and women's bodies are seen as someone else's property.

This, is a mess. And I call upon your compassion in light of the fact that somehow, in the insanity of this mess, we are able to live as though none of this was happening. Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen says that compassion is discovered, or perhaps remembered, but not taught:

*Compassion emerges from a sense of belonging: the experience that all suffering is like our suffering and all joy is like our joy. True compassion [...] requires us to come into right relationship with that which is most human in ourselves, that which is most capable of suffering (p. 35).*

In this way we find a profound connection to all life, and an authentic sense of meaning in life.

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## **Listening**

The other day at a talk on Gender, Race and Social Change, with Seattle based writer, speaker and internet yeller, Ijeoma Oluo, she addressed the notion of "resistance fatigue" (in other words, activist burnout). She kind of scoffed at this idea, looking down and sort of shaking her head, and said, "try existence fatigue". I attended that talk shortly after our cohort took a full 3-hour class discussing how to avoid activist burnout. At that time, resistance fatigue was something I was beginning to feel identified with. So I'll admit I was kind of set back by her seemingly dismissive expression. My ego's instant reaction was to dismiss her experience, because I felt it somehow threatened my own.

But I sat with it. I sat with that discomfort, and it was a humbling moment for me to listen and ask myself without judgement, why do I feel this? I let the discomfort settle, in order to be there with her and truly listen to her. We may have different experiences, but they are not mutually exclusive.

Throughout this quarter I have tried to be as active as possible at several events and gatherings organized by groups that are led by marginalized women. I've been trying to "live my way into a new kind of thinking," rather than "think my way into a new kind of living" (Palmer, 1998). Even as a woman of color myself, there were numerous times where I felt my privileges were shaken. My worldviews were called into question in

subtle and profound ways. Over and over again, the lesson I kept being called to learn, and the action I kept being called to practice was to *listen*.

My journey this year has been one of finding the balance between listening and speaking. Asserting my needs and recognizing other's needs. I have felt as if I was re-living the childhood trauma of a dawning speech impediment when I was barely 4 years old, when I was learning to speak but the words would not come out of my mouth. My parents could not understand me, and I would shut down, in frustration, and cry. Here in Washington State, about 3,700 miles away from home, despite being in an incredibly supportive community, I found myself at a loss for articulating myself. My thoughts would simply not land from their floating state in my mind.

I resonate with Gumbs, Martens, Williams and Ross words when they say, "when you don't see yourself, you become, or feel, kind of off and unarticulated. To articulate yourself would seem perhaps, that you are to be questioned or blamed, misunderstood, or just silenced. The odd, in its lack of familiarity, has a different relationship, to the whole" (p. 83). They were talking about their experience with poverty, and I almost feel inappropriate in using their words to speak to my extremely privileged experience as a graduate student who chose to live in the Pacific Northwest. As I stand before you right now, I am still figuring out my relationship with this whole.

My point is, we must make space for each other in order to listen to each other. We have to embrace each other's suffering. Again, the world needs each and every one of us! In the introduction to their anthology, *Revolutionary Mothering*, I am reminded of the "importance of centering the more fragile/precarious within society, [and] how this better supports each and every one of us to make an improvement which will really make a difference" (p. 12). Centering the more fragile and precarious within society begins by listening to their voices, stories, their experiences, and needs.

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### ***Invocación a la madre***

I think now is the time to make an invocation. For Taíno people, the supreme deity is Atabeyra. She is the Earth goddess, mother of water, creation and childbirth. If you would all join me in this, I would like to invoke *a todas las madres* – all the mothers. First, to my mother: mami you are the strongest and most life-giving being. You nourished me in your womb, you endured unimaginable pain to ground my spirit on this Earth, you put up with years of a really annoying baby, you fed me, protected me, taught me, and above and beyond all else you loved me with all your humanity. Now, to all the mothers in this room, I'd like to express my sincerest gratitude and admiration. Your mere existence is a subversive act (Gumbs et al., xviii). I now invite you all to recall the name that you wrote down on that paper at the beginning of this presentation, and please take a moment to remember the strengths and beauties that this person embodies.

I read a story recently by Lisa Factora Borchers, where she tells of an excruciatingly painful birth. She remembers her body as an open wound, and says never had she been so life-giving. Every part of her body simultaneously healing and giving (p. 165). We might not all be mothers in this room, but we all have mothers, and we were all present in that sacred healing and giving moment: our own birth.

In a way, I believe we all, regardless of gender bodies or identities, have a mother spirit within us that we can connect with. We have all been birthed, and in this way I believe that we can all give birth and give life.

So I would like to ask everyone here to take a moment and connect with your mother spirit, and identify within yourself the strengths and beauties that you yourself embody and bring to this world. (If connecting with the spirit mother is too weird or uncomfortable, please feel free to connect with the midwife instead, as the one who assists and supports the mother in the birthing process).

We will all now find a partner and each will have two minutes to share those strengths and beauties. I will announce when the first 2 minutes have passed so that you switch speakers. When it is your turn to be the listener, I invite you all to listen quietly and respectfully to your partner, honoring and supporting them in their honesty and vulnerability. (Play *Mercedes Sosa: Si No Creyera*)

Thank you so much. Would anyone like to briefly share?

I think that our world today and especially the world of future generations would greatly benefit if we were to all make a point of connecting with the mother spirit within us, in the sense of truly seeking to understand and embody what it means to depend on each other, and to be responsible for each other (Cynthia Dewi Oka, p. 51). What it means to simultaneously heal and gift.

As I end my words to you, I invite us all to ask ourselves, what are my life-giving gifts? What can I nourish within myself to offer to the world as we journey towards collective healing? What is the power and privilege that I was born into or have accrued throughout my lifetime that I could direct towards a life-giving purpose? What is my art, skill, passion that I could align with the great needs of the world?

**Gracias.**

[Listen to Viva Puerto Rico Libre - Ghetto Brothers](#)



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