

**U.18 Long Civil Rights Movement:
Heirs to a Fighting Tradition**

**Interview U-0565
Claudia Horowitz
February 25, 2010**

**Field Notes – 2
Transcript – 4**

FIELD NOTES- Claudia Horwitz

Interviewee: Claudia Horwitz
 Interviewer: Bridgette Burge
 Interview Dates: February 25, 2010 (Interview 3 of 4)
 Location: Stone House, Mebane, NC

HEIRS TO A FIGHTING TRADITION: Oral Histories of North Carolina Social Justice Activists” is a multi-phased oral history project which explores the stories and traditions of social justice activism in North Carolina through in-depth interviews with fourteen highly respected activists and organizers. Selected for the integrity and high level of skill in their work dedicated to social justice, the interviewees represent a diversity of age, gender, and ethnicity. These narratives capture the richness of a set of activists with powerful perspectives on social justice and similar visions of the common good. These are stories of transition and transformation, tales of sea change and burnout, organizing successes and heart wrenching defeats. These are the stories of the Movement.

All of the oral histories will be archived in the Southern Historical Collection at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, and will be a valuable addition to the modest amount of literature about contemporary social justice activism in the South. This is a project of the North Carolina Peace and Justice Coalition.

THE INTERVIEWEE: Claudia Horwitz is the founding director of stone circles, a nonprofit organization that helps individuals and organizations integrate spiritual and reflective practice into their work for social justice. Based in Durham, North Carolina, stone circles creates opportunities for training, retreats, conversation, organizational development, and interfaith exchange. Claudia’s previous work includes developing youth leadership, supporting struggles for economic justice, and strengthening nonprofit organizations. She is the author of *The Spiritual Activist: Practices to Transform Your Life, Your Work, and Your World*, (Penguin Compass 2002) is a practical guide to individual and social transformation through spirit and faith. Claudia has a master’s degree in Public Policy from Duke University, is a Rockefeller Foundation Next Generation Leadership Fellow and teaches Kripalu yoga.

THE INTERVIEWER: Bridgette Burge graduated from Rhodes College in Memphis, Tennessee in 1995 with a degree in Anthropology/Sociology and a semester of intensive study of oral history theory and methodology. In 1995 and 1996, Burge and a colleague conducted fieldwork in Honduras, Central America collecting the oral histories of six Honduran women. She earned her master's degree in Anthropology from the University of Memphis in 1998. In 1999, she moved to North Carolina and served as North Carolina Peace Action's state coordinator, and later as North Carolina Peace Action Education Fund's executive director. In 2005, Burge began her own consulting company to provide training, facilitation and planning to social change organizations. The same year, with the support of the Southern Oral History Program at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, Burge launched the project "Heirs to a Fighting Tradition: Oral Histories of North Carolina Social Justice Activists." The interviews from this project are archived at the Southern Historical Collection in the Wilson Library at UNC-Chapel Hill.

DESCRIPTION OF THE INTERVIEW: February 25, 2010 I used the internal mic on the Marantz 660 this time and the volume of the recording is noticeably softer. I need to remember to turn the recording settings up next time. Mercy, I wish I had a sound technician to do all this stuff for me during recordings. They would be much more competent.

TRANSCRIPT— CLAUDIA HORWITZ

Interviewee: Claudia Horwitz
Interviewer: Bridgette Burge
Interview Date: February 25, 2010 (Interview 3 of 4)
Location: Mebane, Orange County, NC, Stone House
Length: 1 track; approximately 74 minutes

START OF INTERVIEW

Bridgette Burge: It's okay. [Laughter] So today is February 25, 2010, Thursday morning, late morning. And we're in Mebane, North Carolina doing the third interview in a series with Claudia Horwitz, the director of stone circles. And this is Bridgette Burge, the interviewer, and this is part of the project Heirs to a Fighting Tradition: Oral Histories of North Carolina Social Justice Activists. So Claudia, will you say your name, today's date, and kind of describe the day?

CH: Yeah, my name is Claudia Horwitz. It is Thursday, February 25, 2010 and we're in my cabin at The Stone House in Mebane, North Carolina. There was a little bit of snow on the ground this morning, but it seems to have all melted. And we're looking at our pond, which is really high. The levels are the highest they've been since we moved here, and they just keep getting higher. And now I'm a little bit worried about it.

BB: Yeah, I noticed that. [Laughter]

CH: Now the dock is almost submerged.

BB: Are you worried about flooding?

CH: I'm not worried about flooding, because of where the pond is. It's already on the lower part of the land. I guess I'm a little bit worried about flooding, but I'm also worried about then the changing, how it changes the ecosystem of the pond and the--. Anyway, yeah.

BB: So we talked a little bit before we started recording and decided we were going to sort of pick up where we left off time-wise. So let's talk about 1992 and what was involved in the decision to enter Duke University's Public Policy program to work on your master's in Public Policy.

CH: I had been doing organizing since I graduated from college, student organizing and done organizing around homelessness through Empty the Shelters. And I had seen close up what a big gap there was between grassroots organizers and the decision makers that tend to have a lot of control over policies that then affect people's lives. So I had this theoretical interest in closing that gap, and that's why I decided to go to public policy school. I think underneath that was some sense that I needed to go to graduate school. That that's what people do in the way I was raised. But also I think just my own desire for learning and in some ways I think processing the work I'd been doing, so there's all kinds of ways to do that. In retrospect, it would've been interesting if I had made a decision to go to divinity school instead, but at that point the spiritual sort of elements of my life were not overt or explicit. So anyway, so I made the decision to do public policy. I did look at other programs, but it made the most sense. And it's interesting. I think within the first couple of weeks of graduate school, I knew that in fact that was not the role I was interested in in the world.

BB: What made you decide that? What was happening?

CH: There's sort of this given in public policy that you're working with constraints, sort of how to make the best decisions given the constraints, whether the constraints are a limited amount of resources or the law, what the laws say. I mean there's just so many constraints that you're working in, and I do believe that there are policy makers who do their damned best to make good decisions within those constraints, and I think the majority, the overwhelming majority of people end up just getting enamored by the constraints or hamstrung by the constraints. So we started having a theoretical discussion one day in my economics class about poor people and what they would do with--. Oh, what were we talking about? I think we were talking about the differences between income taxes and sales taxes and stimulus. Anyway, there was a whole theoretical conversation about what poor people do with money. And I had so much reactivity around that, having come out of organizing with poor folks. I'm not saying you can't have an economic theory based on some actual data about how poor folks deal with increases in income taxes versus sales taxes, whatever, but it just hit me completely wrong. And I saw through, I guess, to some, what I would've described then as like an arrogance built in to the discipline. Now I would describe it with more complexity. I just became very uninterested in the whole thing.

BB: Very quickly, it sounds like.

CH: Very quickly.

BB: And that was a tough semester anyway. An undergrad at Duke got killed by a bus, and there was a sniper that took two hostages in the building next to us, and then the sniper--. I mean not a sniper, an escaped convict from a prison took two hostages at gunpoint, and then was killed by a sniper. That's what I meant to say. So it was a crazy semester.

BB: Yeah, so, I need to make some adjustments, I'm sorry. So, we are going to have to just move him, and I am going to try putting the microphone on you a little bit, too.

[Sounds of moving dog]

BB: Sorry, buddy. We'll get the little sunny spot and I'm kicking you out. [Laughter]
[Tape is turned off and back on]

BB: So it became clear to you pretty quickly that it probably wouldn't be your path, but you stuck with it. You finished--.

CH: I did. I stuck with it for a couple of reasons, I think. I knew there were valuable skills I was getting still. We did a lot of small group work. That's when I really learned how to do small group work that had a finished project. I learned how to write in a very concise way. I mean policy school, you're constantly writing one to two page memos, like in preparation for being able to give that kind of concise advice, and I think that was great training. I'd gotten a full scholarship, so that was a big gift. And I loved Durham. I had already connected with a number of people outside of the Duke community who were doing--. Is it okay?

BB: Yep, it's great.

CH: Who were doing community-based work of one kind or another here, and so I had already started forming those relationships. And between the people and the city of Durham itself, the place, I just really, as much as I didn't quite love Duke, I really loved Durham. So those were all the things that made it worth staying. And it was only two years. You know you can sort of--.

BB: Yeah, twenty-four months goes by really fast.

CH: Yeah.

BB: What are some of those early relationships and some of those that you were building that are memorable to you, new relationships in the Durham community during those years?

CH: Well, actually there was one that was more Duke related. I'm not going to remember the whole history of this, but Duke had torn down a significant chunk of a neighborhood to expand the medical center. And as a result of having done that, their promise to the community was like to do a bunch of things that they never did, which I'm not going to remember what those are. But I worked with a number of other Duke-affiliated folks, undergrads and grad students, and some faculty to put pressure on the University to create a revolving loan for housing. So there was some of that. There's so much work, consistent work to hold the University accountable for its citizenship in the city of Durham and so many manifestations of that. So that was really interesting, but in terms of relationships, Julia, Julia Scatliff-O'Grady, was definitely—at that point, Julia Scatliff—was a very significant--. That was the beginning of our friendship. She continues to be one of my closest friends. She was doing incredible work in the national service world when I met her. And Tony Deifell was doing awesome work around media and youth. And there was this push to start the Community Youth Cooperative (CYC), which I then worked on and ended up writing my master's thesis about. And so that put me in touch with all these other amazing folks, the folks who started the SEEDS community garden, the people that were starting Public Allies, Jason Scott, and some other people. Maia AshmeraMaya Ajmera was around then. She was getting her, at that point it was, I think she had one children's book, and the

idea was to create this global foundation for youth out of the proceeds. And now it's this massive thing. So you know it's so cool to see people take the seeds of ideas and grow them. Kelly Overton, who now works for the New York Public Library, was doing this amazing project called Youth Voice Radio. And all these things ended up being housed at the Community Youth Cooperative.

So it was just a really vibrant time, I think. And also meeting, I always think of them as--. I don't know what's the--. The word just flew out of my head. There's so many really neat folks who went to Duke as undergrads and stayed in Durham. It's kind of a rare breed. And a lot of those people are doing really interesting work still, the folks working at the Center for Community Self-Help, started meeting a lot of those people then, just getting a sense of when you have a pretty big number of, I would say, effective nonprofit organizations, interesting institutions, smart leaders, in a fairly medium sized pond, you know, it just makes a big difference. That was the beginning of my Durham love affair, which continues to this day, even as I'm now like an expatriate.

BB: [Laughter] It's not that far down the road.

CH: No, it's not. It feels far some days.

BB: I love Durham so much, too. It's such a gem, for all the reasons and more that you just said. It's such a treasure. It's incredible. Do you want to say more about the Community Youth Cooperative?

CH: Yes, sure.

BB: Were you involved at the time?

CH: I was really involved. It was really Tony's brainchild and he got a number of us

together to--. First, we had to convince--. It was a Center for Community Self-Help building. It was a floor within a Self-Help building. We had to convince them to let us do it, and then that meant that they had to put a little bit of renovation into it, which they did do. And then it was recruiting tenant organizations. And I was really interested, what I ended up writing my master's thesis about was--. Oh, it was so ironic because I'm just realizing right this second that it's very similar to the question I'm in now, probably, about stone circles. The question was, "How can the institution become financially viable and completely responsible to its community of stakeholders?" which is still a core question for me. So that was great to be able to take my academic work and apply it to the cooperative.

And it makes me think of one other thing I want to say about the public policy program and its strengths is how much real world application there is. I mean I sort of said that thing about the theoretical discussion about poor people and how they spend their money, but the reality is ninety percent of what you're doing has real-world immediate application. And for an academic program, I learned a lot from that. So I loved working on the CYC project. I think I already knew at that point that I had a dream, like a long-term dream of starting a center, and the CYC wasn't my vision, but I know I would learn a lot and I did. So it was great.

BB: What were some of the insights that you--? What were some of the, I suppose, conclusions or themes from your master's thesis that you remember, that kind of stand out?

CH: I should go back and read it. I haven't read it in a while. I don't know what I remember directly from the thesis. I think what stands out for me is the challenge of, well, the dynamic tension between all these fairly young folks trying to build the organizations

they were building and also trying to work together to create this collaborative space, and how you get on the same page around expectations and possibilities and work assignments is a really big question. There's a lot there in terms of how people build coalitions. I look at some of the national field-building work we're trying to do right now and the relationships. We've been involved in this national field-building work around spiritual practice and social justice and there's a really interesting similar tension, right, between you have all these people that are trying to build their own body of work and their own organizational frames and keep their organizations alive and growing, and then how do they also then come together and bring their energies together. And one thing I would say about the CYC was that there was not a lot of ego that got in the way. There were other things that got in the way, but that was not one of them. So there was just a lot of openness and willingness, which was cool.

BB: Do you think that's indicative of youth, kind of a life stage of being less attached to ego?

CH: I do, in some ways, I do, and I wish that we had had a couple of elders that could have been consistent mentors or consultants or whatever for us because I think we needed that. I think there's a bravado, which is beautiful, but there were a lot of things we just really did not know what we were doing. And it would've been great to have a little more consistent wisdom and support.

BB: Are you willing to stay here a little bit and unpack, talk in some more detail about what you were just saying about some of the dynamic tensions of organizations having to kind of carve out a niche and a name and a reputation even, and also the importance of

working together? What are some of the tensions and struggles and insights or lessons learned around that that come up?

CH: Yeah, I wish I had more to say that was useful around it. Okay, so one thing I could say--. [Whispers] Is this relevant? Is this connected? Yeah. [Pauses] There's a couple threads. There's the thread of this term that's been coined of the nonprofit industrial complex, which I think is a really important doorway to looking at, for those of us that are building organizations or institutions, why we're doing it, what the motivation is, the levels of responsibility that accompany that. I don't feel like I'm really answering your question yet, though. I don't think I can go into this right now without it looping back into the harder stuff I don't want to get into right now.

BB: The current stuff?

CH: Yeah.

BB: Isn't that--? It happens a lot. Something's so charged, your brain won't let you shelve it, will it? [Laughter]

CH: Yeah.

BB: That's fine. And I'm asking those questions around--. Well, another one I want to ask is about how did--. You might use CYC as a place. You might use stone circles, but what are some of the things that you've learned about how you divvy up roles and negotiate responsibilities? So these questions, if it helps for me to step back and contextualize it a little bit, these are sort of the nuggets of the organizing tradition, right, like the nitty-gritty, the nuts and bolts, and filtered through what you've found to be useful or struggles that are particularly memorable where you've had a learning, or that you're still confused about, and

like, “I see this happen over and over.” There’s no right or wrong, but I think these nuggets are the nitty-gritty of organizing, you know, and it’s a special glimpse into the behind-the-scenes, the meat of it.

CH: Yeah, I don’t think I’m going to be able to say anything interesting about it today, partly because it was a long time ago. I haven’t thought about it, just the state of my own brain right now. So I totally hear that, and I think it’d be good to put that in the next section around some of the other stuff we were just talking about. I think all I have the capacity to do right now is sort of more recount--.

BB: And not analyze.

CH: Yeah, exactly.

BB: Surmise and reflect.

CH: Partly just because I think what we’re asking is so important that I don’t want to give you like a half-baked response that won’t be useful, which is about what you would get right now.

BB: You’re kind of tough on yourself.

CH: Yeah, no, I’m really cognizant of the effects of having a migraine on how your brain works. It’s just not, there’s just certain things you can’t do.

BB: Okay, good for you. So give me a second. I just don’t want to lose it if we do it again next time. A quick question, Maya Ajmera’s, what’s the name of the?

CH: It’s Global Fund for Children, and I will double-check that because that’s what’s coming to me, but I don’t know for sure.

BB: So any other highlights from those couple of years in grad school you want to

touch on?

CH: Yes. So the summer of 1993, which was the summer between my two years, was the summer after Bill Clinton had been elected. And that was the time that the AmeriCorps program was birthed. And the birthing of that entailed what was called Summer of Service, which was an eight-week program in cities throughout the country that kicked off with a weeklong training out in San Francisco, which I was a trainer for. The training was on Treasure Island, which was a naval base that was in the very, very initial stages of being re--. What is that word? Well, anyway, it was transitioning from being a naval base to other uses. And they brought fifteen hundred young people, seventy to eighty percent young folks of color to this training, and there were fifty of us that were trained as the trainers.

BB: What hat were you wearing? Was it a training for--? Or was it a--?

CH: No, no, no. It was someone that had been really involved in the national community service movement and just had those, I knew all the people that were running the thing, or most of the people that were running the program. And I actually, I wrote an article about this called "The Monster Has No Teeth." That was like a total critique of the national service legislation, the training itself, all the problematic elements around race and class that had not been dealt with, the kind of championing of these ambitious go-getter younger people at the expense of older community leaders. I mean I just I had this like huge critique that came out of that, which I could give you a copy of at some point. I don't even think it's online. I need to scan it.

But anyway, it was a big turning point because I was there with a lot of my peers. We had huge issues with the curriculum, with the patronizing form of the program, the way these

young people were treated, the race dynamics, the class dynamics, and I just found myself in the middle of this situation that was so horrible. And I wasn't able to make the most of it. I wasn't able to rise above. I think a lot of my peers who had a similar critique were still able to rise above and be responsible to the group of young people that they were training, you know? I just, I couldn't even get there. It was like I felt so battered, I think, by it. And I just remember this massive turning point at the end. We did this big debrief evaluation of the whole thing and I remember spending some time by myself and just realizing that I had gotten involved with something that I didn't agree with from the start, that I knew was going to be problematic for me to participate in. It was a huge question for me of how that had happened.

And that was the beginning of the spiritual seeking chapter of my life because it was this really big question of what are my values? How do I remember them in these decision-making moments? It set off this period of searching and then that led me to some friends who recommended that I try meditation and that just opened the whole door. So I think it's so interesting what can come out of suffering and how we come to these, in the Christian vernacular, like the "come to Jesus" moments. And, you know, they're really powerful when you have to reckon with yourself in a way that you haven't before, and then what tools we have to do that and what emerges. And, too, I think it's interesting thinking about it in the era of the Obama presidency because there was quite a bit of hype around Bill Clinton's election and there was hope. I don't think I ever felt about Clinton the way I felt, and actually in some ways strongly still feel, about Obama, but there was a lot of energy, and the possibilities around the AmeriCorps initiative, which is still alive today, and not a bad program. It's this

constant circling back to--. What's the word? It's almost like how we create iconic examples of things and where resources go and how programs get built at the expense of movements getting built. I mean there were just so many juicy issues.

BB: It sounds like such a rich case study.

CH: Yeah.

BB: I really would love to see that, the article, and I really support your idea of scanning it and getting it out there. I mean so many of the themes you touched on are like, repeat, repeat, alive and well in movement and struggles, so that would be great. So do you want to spend a little time talking about that transition phase for you, questions like: Who were some of the people that supported you then and what was that like, that time of reflection and digging deep around, "What are my values and how do I stay rooted in them in hard times?"

CH: Yeah.

BB: Talk a little bit about just that phase.

CH: Yes. So I went and saw these two mentors that lived in Kentucky, friends. They had been involved with this Summer of Service program. They were really deeply spiritual people, and they were the ones that kind of introduced me to this possibility that there would be some relief through spiritual practice. And so I started experimenting with meditation and experiencing the benefits pretty quickly of that. Ask your question again, just the--.

BB: I asked about eight in one, which is why it's hard. So, let's see. Which one do I want to ask? Is your refrigerator easily unpluggable? I was so into your story, I didn't hear it. Usually things--. Can you push pause?

[Tape is turned off and back on]

BB: So, maybe you could tell me about what was involved in the journey at that time, specifically about, “What are my values and how do I consistently sort of hold and implement them?”

CH: I think it's somehow related to being a somewhat introverted, kind of emotionally sensitive person, in the sense that I often feel very over-stimulated in the world and easily affected by other people's perceptions of me. This is much less true now, but it was very true then, that part of it. The invitations that were being extended to me to be involved in different things, and what I'm trying to say is that I think it's so easy to lose yourself in what the world is offering you, who other people want you to be, who you think you should be, the ways of acting and utilizing your energy that are going to make more people like you in a very fundamental human way, that's going to allow you to build the kind of relationships you want to build in the world and feel more connected, which I think is ultimately a lot of what we want. So I'm really aware of all those things now, much more so clearly than I was then, but I think what happened then in the '93, '94 era of my life was getting a sense of how much external stimulation there was and how to wade through that and how to be true to yourself and how to be in relationship with what is true for yourself in that ever changing nature of that. So I think that's what I mean.

BB: That's good. You mentioned meditation was one tool that helped you on that reflection process and that journey. What were some other tools in that transition phase?

CH: That was the main one. And then the next summer, I spent a lot of time at Kripalu, which ended up being, which is a center for yoga. Well, let's see. Its official name

was the Kripalu Center for Yoga and Health, I think, back then. Anyway, it's been through many iterations. Kripalu started out as an ashram with a guru, and then transitioned. And when I went there, that's really what it was. It was--.

BB: Where is it?

CH: It's in Lennox, Massachusetts, Western Massachusetts. So that was the introduction to yoga and yoga as a doorway to deep personal exploration and growth. Their approach to yoga, particularly back then, was not about physical tricks and fitness. I mean those things were important, but it was a gateway to self-knowledge.

BB: And how long were you there?

CH: I went a couple times that summer for a day. It was very short, but it was enough to get a taste of a new way of being. So it was kind of life changing in a short amount of time.

BB: Did you make a decision about, that you knew you were going to further pursue that in a big way at that time?

CH: I don't think so. I think I just knew that I had a taste of something that I really liked, in terms of the awareness of self, the compassion. It's a very heart-centered practice. I was able to witness the relationship between guru and discipline, which is a very fascinating and complex relationship, particularly transposed in Western culture, but I was really intrigued by that as well, the level of surrender and discipline and accountability that can exist in that relationship. So, that didn't really go anywhere in my life in a full way. I mean it continues to be a subtext, but it's not like I have a guru, but I think some of the other things, they just were doors more than decisions.

BB: So what happened next after that summer?

CH: I took that summer--. I did a lot of spiritual exploration. I attended some other longer workshops, places, lot of reading, and then I spent some time in Philly with my parents. I was working in a bookstore. I didn't really know what was next and I remember very clearly--. Oh, and I had been planning to stay in Philadelphia and work more closely with George Lakey and Training for Change. He needed someone to kind of run the organization, basically. And so I was really considering that, and I knew in my heart, I didn't really want to do that, but I didn't know exactly what I wanted to do. And I remember my mom had been working for a community college, and the woman who was the president, that she really liked quite a bit, died of cancer. And I remember getting up the day of this woman's funeral and getting dressed to go with my mom and thinking--. It's so cliché, right, but I was like, "Oh, I have to move back to Durham." It was like I knew that I had to make decisions based on what I knew was right for my life and not just turn over the energy to something else.

So that was the day I decided to move back, and I moved back like spring, I guess, of '95, and started thinking about working with the Community Youth Cooperative again, in a more full capacity, and what happened--. So I wanted to do some youth work. It felt very vague at the time, and I called a "clearness committee," so this Quaker notion that you can actually make decisions about your life in community, with community support and insight and questions. And Julia hosted it, and there were a number of people from different parts of my life there. And I mentioned almost in passing something about the role of spirituality in the movement because I had been doing my own continued exploration and meditation and

yoga at that point. And my friend Alex Byrd, who's a black Baptist and academic historian now living in Texas, was like, "Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait. I want to hear more about that." And that was another one of those moments that I think, where you put a stake in the ground and you're like, "Oh, this is actually what I believe. This is what I'm interested in." And that group of people was really, they really helped me get to the point where I was at least considering the possibility that what I really wanted to do was figure out how to bring more of a spiritual foundation to social change work. So that was kind of the start of it all.

BB: What a moment.

CH: Yeah, it was cool. It was a really neat group of people, and I believed so strongly in clearness sessions because of my own experience. I've helped a lot of other people do them. It's a really sweet concept.

BB: I'm curious, I'm going back a little bit, but I remember from one of the other interviews, you talked about how you'd come to see yourself as a much better trainer than an organizer. And I've heard you speak about your affection, your deep affection and respect for George Lakey, so it strikes me as interesting that that opportunity didn't move you at the time. What was that about? What do you think that was about?

CH: Lack of humility, maybe? Like I didn't want to work for someone else in that way. What was that about? I did not want to stay in Philadelphia. I didn't feel particularly respected in the context. George is an amazing guy who happens to carry a lot of sexism, I would say, in the way he--. And then there's ageism rolled in there. The culture of the organization wasn't very healthy or interesting to me. What was interesting to me about Training for Change was the approach and the effect that the approach can have and his level

of skill. That's what was interesting to me, not managing the organization, which I unfortunately, you know, I wish I had figured that out a little earlier, but we had our own process around the closure. It was hard, but fine.

BB: So talk more about after that. So after the clearness committee, what were some of the next transitions and decisions?

CH: I think the first thing I decided to do was to convene a group of peers in this notion of a circle. And so I started writing up invitations to people to come and explore what this would be like. And I held a couple of potlucks as way of sort of communicating to people what my idea was. I mean I knew so little about what I was doing at that time, and it's really interesting to me looking back on it, and I have reflected on it often, but to learn in community. That was what ended up happening. It was like I had no idea what it meant to strengthen the spiritual foundation of social change work at that time, no idea. I had glimpses. I had passion. I had motivation. I had time to put into it, but I really, I did not know what I was actually doing. And so there's a couple of different ways you can approach that, right? And one is to go freaking figure it out and learn and study on your own and ask a lot of questions and interview people and read and all that. And I think the other is to get a group of people together and say, "Let's try this." And that's what I ended up doing. So it really ushered in this era of experimentation and exploration in relationship.

BB: Took courage.

CH: Yeah, or stupidity.

BB: With boldness and risk.

CH: Yeah, it was a lot of risk, lot of risk.

BB: I'm going to switch places real quick. And I want to ask you how you went about choosing those folks. Do you remember what you were thinking? Was it a set of skills? Was it intuition about them? Was it trust? Like what sorts of things went into how you convened that early team?

CH: Do you want to sit on the floor, or do you want to switch places with me?

BB: I'm actually going to sit on the floor.

CH: Okay. It was just inviting people I knew who I thought might have an interest. That's all. It was just about willingness. It wasn't anything more complex than that, really.

BB: So what were some of the first things that ya'll did together?

CH: Oh, we did a lot of storytelling. We did a lot of ritual.

BB: Hang on. Okay. You did a lot of storytelling and ritual.

CH: We'd always eat food together. It's funny to talk about it because I think a lot of the stuff we did is actually in my book, so it's sort of--. You know, once you've--. Okay, for me, once I've documented something, I'm done with it. I'm like, "It's all in there. You can read it." [Laughter]

BB: It's in the email. It's in the memo.

CH: Exactly. I don't anything really interesting to say about it.

BB: [Laughter] You're bored with .

CH: I am. This is why I don't think I would be such a great biological mother, because I'd be like, "I freaking raised you. Can you just go live your life now?"

BB: "Didn't we talk about pooping in the potty? Didn't we go through this?"

[Laughter]

CH: Right, exactly. [Laughter] The sheer patience of having to re-explain, that's why I ended up writing the book because I was so tired of actually having to go through this over and over again. It's so funny.

BB: [Laughter]

CH: It's like what we have energy for and what we don't.

BB: So let's talk about the book , The Spiritual Activist: Practices to Transform Your Life, Your Work, and Your World, and that was in 2002, so we've skipped a chunk of years here.

CH: Not really, because the first draft, the first version of that book I started writing in like '97. So I still had started doing the experimental work with stone circles. I was collecting a lot of information about what worked. I was getting these questions and requests, I think, to do more of sharing that with people. And I hadn't trained other trainers or anything, so it was just me, and I set out to write a training manual. And I thought it was going to be like fifty pages. And then by some time in 1998, I had this like two-hundred-and-fifty page manuscript. Something I do really quickly is write. And I tried to get it published, sort of didn't really work out the first time, so we self-published it. The initial version was called A Stone's Throw, and I can't remember how many copies we printed, but there were events, and I started leading discussions around it and just getting the book out into the world in like 1999, 2000. And then fate would have it, my brother started working for a literary agent on the West Coast. And I had gotten some interest from other people, but my brother called and said, "We'd love to represent the book." And of course, I said yes, and by 2002, Penguin published the revised version.

BB: You know, one of my first memories of you, I moved here in '99, and I had heard your name a couple times. I can't remember if we were in person or on the phone, but I said, "Yeah, I wanted to come." You were speaking at Know Book Store or maybe Ninth Street Books about the book.

CH: Oh, I did a thing at the Regulator [Bookshop].

BB: Regulator, I guess that was it. And so like one of your sentences, too, is like, "Oh, yeah, I hate that." [Laughter]

CH: I hate what?

BB: You're like--. I said, "What do you mean, you hate--?" "I just hate--. It's just so awkward to talk about my book and the publicity round piece." I'm all excited and you're like, "Oh, I hate it." [Laughter] It was great.

CH: Yeah, it's so interesting. That is so interesting. I still feel that way about things. It's like I really want the ideas to get out there. I'm really happy to talk about the ideas of things, anyway.

BB: What do you think that's about?

CH: I don't know. I get really bored having to tell the same stories over and over again about myself. It's really uninteresting to me. I think you fall into this, and particularly the way I wrote the book, there's a lot of personal narrative in the book, at the beginning of each chapter. So then your story becomes like "Your Story," "My Story," in capital letters, and it kind of feels a little bit fixed and you get a little bit over exposed.

BB: Defined by it, because it's in a chapter?

CH: Yeah.

BB: What was the workshop? There was a workshop recently about, “Who are we without our stories?” What’s it like to dig deep around questions around that is pretty interesting.

CH: Yeah.

BB: Is there a story that comes to mind that you haven’t told that’s interesting to you?

CH: In general?

BB: Yeah.

CH: Oh, oh, my god. [Laughter] I don’t know. I don’t think I’m such a good storyteller. I think I am more of a muser or something, like I think I have interesting things to say about the world and I certainly have a lot of things to say about my own emotional world, in particular, but I’m not such a great storyteller. I’m an okay storyteller. You can put that on your list for next time. I’ll think of a story I haven’t--. It’s such an interesting way to look at it.

BB: So, we asked, particularly women or female-identified people, so far, this story, but not the men, which is interesting to me. So about halfway through, maybe we’ve done five interviews, and then someone offered that it would be good for us to ask, particularly women, about how have feelings about your body image changed over time.

CH: Hmmm... [Laughter] You’re dropping that in to my--. Just that small question, Bridgette, into the middle of my chronological--.

BB: Yep.

CH: I’m not sure they’ve changed that much. I think they’ve been fairly consistent.

Well, maybe that's not totally true. I think there's been mostly consistency around--. Okay, hatred is definitely too strong. Inadequacy, I don't know what other words I would use at this point. I mean there's many. I think what's interesting to me, though, is the places where I've been able to find my way into other relationships with my body. So what I know is that the more physically and spiritually engaged with my body I am, the more healthy and powerful I think of my body. So the body image completely changes. So I sort of tend to have two speeds around body and body image. And one is about engagement and one is like estrangement.

BB: What does engagement look like?

CH: It's either like a lot of intensive yoga or the periods of my life when I've been a runner, those are the two. It's like a real exploration of the edges of what I can do, and sort of pushing my physical capacity, which is important to me because, important for me because of my--. Like in ayurvedic medicine and Indian medicinal tradition, my dosha or body type is Kapha, which there's a lot of like generally laziness, physical laziness.

BB: Kapha?

CH: Kapha. K-A-P-H-A. You have to really push yourself. So I'm just, I'm really aware. And then I have family history around that, and I'm sure karma, and a lot of addiction around food. I had one of my energetic healers tell me once she got an image of me as a victim of starvation in a past life. So there's these funny little things of like occasionally I'll get some impulse around hoarding food. It's not at all at the level of like--. I could see how that could become a little bit psychotic or something. It's not that level, but little impulses, you know? So there's all that. And yeah, I feel like I'm swimming constantly upstream in

sludge around just like physical energy, and realizing there's no magic bullet.

BB: Damn it.

CH: Yeah, damn it. And I think what's been so humbling about it for me is realizing that there's other areas of my life where I have set my sights on something and been able to make it happen. And that was in one of my transcripts of the other interviews. And this is an area where lots of effort intermittingly and not, to very little effect, or that's what I would say. It's actually probably not true. When I make the effort, there is effect. But what I want is to be able to make the effort and then have it get off on the good road and not have to keep drudging up my motivation.

BB: You want a permanent linear trajectory. You want progress. [Laughter]

CH: Yeah, with effort, but not like--.

BB: Sludging uphill through mud.

CH: Yeah, exactly.

BB: That's deep. There's a lot around that.

CH: Yeah. I'm not sure I have much more to say about it, but I bet you have another question.

BB: [Laughter]

CH: This is so interesting. What an interesting turn to take. I think it's--. Well, one other thing I would say is I think I'm fascinated by the stories that we then tell ourselves as a result of our relationships to our bodies. Like I have definitely--.

[Interruption due to dog barking, tape is turned off and back on]

BB: So I think we got a good clear bark on the recording.

CH: Yay.

BB: You were saying that you, here, you're curious or interested in the stories we tell about our relationship to our bodies, tell ourselves, especially.

CH: Oh, right. Yeah, like I think I've had this--. I don't know. This is feeling very personal. I think I'm okay with that. Anyway, this is probably going down a road I can't, like I don't have the brain cells to go down, but yeah, those stories. Eve Ensler has a new piece about girls. It's incredible. I saw an excerpt when I was at the TED conference.

BB: The TED conference? [TED: Ideas Worth Spreading, www.TED.com]

CH: Yeah. And oh, my god. Talk about women's relationship to their own bodies, boy. So I think there's something about--. Well, it's cool that you asked because breaking the isolation around the stories I think is really important.

BB: And there's a cultural silence, right?

CH: Yeah.

BB: Around women talking about their bodies and their relationship to their bodies and the wounds from a million and one things around it, sexism to violence to patriarchy to body image to being commodified, all that stuff, but it's like so deep and so prevalent for every female-identified person I've ever had a remote conversation with.

CH: A relationship with, yeah.

BB: That I think it's fair to assume for pretty much every person in the United States, at least. So thanks for--. I know it takes some courage, and it's just not common practice. So there's a cultural silence around this.

CH: Yeah, which is why--. I mean it's a little odd to talk about it in the context of

this interview, but I think it seems important. Yeah, I could probably say more next time about it. I bet it's actually really affected my work. Maybe I'll say one more thing and then we could pick this up, too, next time. I do think that the ways in which we choose to work in the world are partially motivated by our own ego formation and the developmental nature of that, which by definition includes how we deal with our insecurities and how we become more of the kinds of people we want to be in the world. So there's probably a very direct relationship between body image and over-work, in my case, like if you don't feel great about yourself in one realm or you have--. Not just great about yourself, but it's like, oh, you're not going to get attention for this. I think there was an initial, very subconscious, like I wasn't aware of it until later, but initially I think a very subconscious thing of like, "Well, I'm not one of the beautiful ones. I'm not one of the thin ones. So I better be one of the hard working ones or the accomplished ones or the whatever." I think that's very common. I just thing it's--. You don't understand it until later. You know, like I didn't really get that until later, so, yeah.

BB: Thanks.

CH: Sure. [Laughter]

BB: So glad I'm on this side of the microphone.

CH: Yeah, I was going to say. [Laughter] We're going to all get together in a room, all the Heirs, and we're going to put you in the center of the circle. [Laughter]

BB: Watch me freak out. Okay, so do you want to talk about how the transition from stone circles to [The] Stone House, a little bit about that, how that came to be? Or--?

CH: Yeah, give me another option.

BB: There are two questions we ask all the Heirs, which is sort of nice. What sustains you and nurtures you in this work? And what shuts you down?

CH: Oh, let's do that.

BB: Let's do those two?

CH: Yeah.

BB: Go for it.

CH: Can I talk about what shuts me down first?

BB: Yes.

CH: So, it's an interesting question about what shuts me down. I think there's the physical places of a lack of sustainable practice in my life that leads to exhaustion and illness. So that definitely can shut me down. I think there's the overwhelm of feeling like there's so much to process. It's interesting. I'm really noticing this more and more. I'm not great at just taking things in and saying, "Oh, that's so interesting," and just letting it settle into my system or my brain or whatever. I feel--. I get full and I have to--. It's like if I can't have--. If I don't have time to make a little bit of sense or reflect on it, then I can get shut down. So those are all the internal, I think, more internal things. And then externally, I have a big trigger around feeling disrespected. So that's like a big--. If I feel like I'm being disrespected, I get shut down by that.

BB: What does that mean, disrespected?

CH: Okay, so I think that I have a fairly facilitative style of leadership and I'm good at that way of leading. And so what that means is that I don't spend as much time directly putting out what I think and the wisdom I have to offer. I think it comes through in other

ways, but it doesn't really manifest explicitly in my day-to-day roles. So I take responsibility for that dynamic, first of all, and I think what that means is that the shadow side of facilitative leadership is Cinderella, where you're just always behind the scenes. It's really not so much about recognition. It's something else. It's sort of not being seen for who you really are, I think. That's what makes me feel disrespected is when I'm not being seen for who I really am. And there have been a number of situations, and some of them are very current right now, where I feel like I've put so much work into creating the conditions for other people to do their best work, and it bites me in the ass. And that is a big shut down.

BB: I see a little grief on your face.

CH: Yeah, I'm trying to like--. It's more of a kind of amusement about--. I led some people that had been in a--. Oh, do I even need to get into this story? No, I don't need to tell this story. But recently, I just, I asked a group of people to move themselves up to the ceiling because they were involved in a very, a situation that was very tense and tricky and hard and painful for them. And so we processed through a lot of the stuff of that situation, and then I asked them to sort of go up to the ceiling and see what they saw in the situation from a different perspective. So I think I'm actually trying to do that now with myself around some of what's going on, and it seems useful.

BB: What does it mean to "go to the ceiling?" Sort of dissociate and try to look at it as if you were an outsider?

CH: Yeah. I wouldn't use the word dissociate, only because that has--.

BB: Psychological.

CH: Yeah, a psychological connotation, right. But I would say--. In yoga, the term is

like a witness consciousness, where you're able to observe without being of something, a dis-identification is a better term, probably. So those are all the things that shut me down.

BB: A question just occurred. It probably changes over time for us, right? If we think about phases of what used to really shut me down, it doesn't bother me much. It's another--. I'm thinking out loud.

CH: Yeah.

BB: So any more about that? Or do you want to talk about what sustains and nurtures you?

CH: I have a couple more things to say about what shuts me down. Something about not seeing movement or progress, either within my own growth or the work I'm leading and doing, or probably maybe most particularly, the society as a whole, I think that I'm constantly making decisions about how much I want to know about some of the political realms of our culture because I know that if I know too much, yeah. It's like I could watch or hear a little bit about a more right-wing reactionary perspective on the world, and if I'm in a good place, I can take that in as data, and maybe even get to some compassion around what somebody's life must have been like or be like to get to that world view. But mostly I think I take it in as data. If I'm not in a really good place, listening to that is just, can be devastating, not just because of what it means for this political moment or this current struggle, but because of like, right away it becomes this deeper question for me about humanity and the direction we're going. And that's just a lot to take in on an ongoing basis. I think we have to be connected to that, but I think we have to be careful, too. Yep, I think that's it for that. I know you know what I'm talking about.

BB: Yeah.

CH: And what sustains--.

BB: What sustains you?

CH: Yeah. It's funny. This is obviously a question we ask people so often in our work, and it's such an important question, and I probably have answered it a million times in different ways, and I probably have some sense that I have a lot of clarity about it, but this is one of those things that I'm like, "Oh, could I tell a new story?" Like, what's the new story or the new--. Or even just, "Oh, today, how would I really answer it?" I think probably the most important thing for me is quiet, having the periods of time where I'm not being called to engage with the world. It's interesting, on the Myers-Briggs scale, I'm an INFP, which I've known for a while, but what is new information for me about that is that I spent like eighty percent of my day operating in the types that are opposite of mine on all four levels, which is really mind blowing. I mean I knew about the introvert-extrovert dynamic. You know, that I'm kind of an introvert operating in an extroverted world, but on the other three series of letters and the types that they represent--

BB: Say what they are.

CH: Yeah, so the second one is "intuitive versus sensing." And in the sensing type, you really are using a lot of data from direct observation. So I'm doing that a lot here. The third pairing is "thinking versus feeling." So feeling is my dominant type, but I have to spend a lot of my day thinking, operating from that. And then the last one is "perceiving versus judging," and I think that one has to mostly do with how you make decisions. And that's one I won't be very good at explaining. So there's a lot of just deep, deep exhaustion that goes

along with that constant--. So the sustaining nature of my life is when I get to be who I am, and not--. Were you going to say something?

BB: Oh, there's just so much that that brings up, but I think that the danger is it feels like we could sort of have fun with a little psychoanalysis at this point. You know, like I'm struck by the relationship of this to when you're feeling disrespected, and it's again about not being seen for who you really are in those places, and the frustration about how, in some ways, you feel like it's useful for that not to show up, like those core, real pieces of you would be more unilateral or more personally focused instead of facilitative and you're trying to do your work in a sense of generosity and helping other people create space, but it's just so--. There's so much to think about there. That's so interesting, and I wonder what that's like. Is that a trend for other organizers? Would a lot of us say, "Who I need to be in this work feels like---. I feel like there's a dichotomy about some core pieces of my personality."

CH: I hope not, but probably.

BB: What is that about?

CH: Well, it's about a lot of things, actually, and it's pretty fascinating. And I think that it's about the culture of work. It's about the culture of movement building. It's about the demands of movement building. Yeah, it is. It's a deep question. I think what's sad to me about this question right now is that I don't think a lot is really sustaining me at all. And I think that's just real, true. I think definitely being with Zak, my dog, is very sustaining, in a certain kind of way. And the ocean, being at the ocean is like a real--. Like I have to be in that energy field periodically or I start to get very--. My system starts to feel very off, like when you haven't had the nutrients or something your body needs. So that is real, but I don't

think there's a lot else. My practice, but only sometime, so I don't have really very much good to say about this right now.

BB: So what does it look like when you get to be your full self? Maybe it's a memory or maybe it's just imagery or something, but what do those faces look like?

CH: Hmmm. I think I'm done, Bridgette. I'm sorry.

BB: It's okay.

CH: I think it's really--. It's a good question, but I can't--. My system's like, can't go there.

BB: Tuckered out. Right, now I want to be in the--. [Laughter] It feels, yeah, I'm not laughing at it. I feel it's clear that you're full of some tough spots now, some tough spots.

CH: Yeah, and just my physical health today, and then having just popped that pill, which is like now working its way through my system.

BB: You feel it, huh?

CH: Yeah.

BB: So, yeah, let's stop. Thanks, Claudia.

CH: Yeah, and I really, I do, I am really willing to--.

END OF INTERVIEW