

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

**Interview U-0567
Claudia Horowitz
September 16, 2009**

**Field Notes – 2
Transcript – 4**

FIELD NOTES- Claudia Horwitz

Interviewee: Claudia Horwitz

Interviewer: Bridgette Burge

Interview Dates: September 16, 2009 (Interview 1 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: September 16, 2009 We recorded in Claudia's cabin at the Stone House. It's a cloudy, warm day. I used the Marantz PMD 660 and an external microphone that Kathryn Stein, Heirs Project creative coordinator, loaned to me. We perched the microphone on the back of the couch we sat on. We recorded for about an hour and thirteen minutes. The sound quality is good. I meant to record ambient sound but hadn't plugged in the microphone so there is about 1 minutes and 23 seconds of silence at the beginning of the recording. I cut it out using Wav Pad. We are meeting again tomorrow for a second interview. Kathryn will join us tomorrow to take photos.

TRANSCRIPT – CLAUDIA HORWITZ

Interviewee: Claudia Horwitz
Interviewer: Bridgette Burge
Interview Date: September 16, 2009 (Interview 1 of 4)
Location: Mebane, Orange County, North Carolina
Length: 1 track; approximately 72 minutes

START OF INTERVIEW

Bridgette Burge: We kept turning up the volume. I'm really not hearing anything. It's so quiet out here. [Laughter]

Claudia Horwitz: It's so quiet out on the pasture. I just need to send Jesse [Vega-Frey] a text really quick. Are you going to re-do the something--?

BB: When you start texting, we'll get a little background noise again.
[Silence for about one minute]

BB: That's a beautiful card. What is that?

CH: Oh my god. Ellen drew it. It's for Gita's [Gulati-Partee, founder of OpenSource Leadership Strategies, Inc.] fortieth birthday. Did you know she's turning forty?

BB: This is the year, uh huh.

CH: Yeah, so she's having like this party in October, and I don't think she's even sent those out yet. I think that she just, a couple of us are helping her plan and she had Ellen [O'Grady, artists and activist] do the invite.

BB: It's so beautiful.

CH: [Laughter] Isn't it amazing?

BB: That is quite an invite.

CH: Yeah.

BB: In fact, we're talking about it. I'm going to get a picture of it. Is that okay?

CH: Sure. [Laughter]

BB: Oh my gosh. It's so beautiful. Ellen O'Grady's amazing, huh?

CH: Yeah, she is amazing.

BB: Okay, today is September 15th, 2009. And we are at The Stone House [a center for spiritual life and strategic action] in Mebane, North Carolina. This is an interview with Claudia Horwitz, with Bridgette Burge as the interviewer. This is the project Heirs to a Fighting Tradition, oral histories of North Carolina's social justice activists. And this is the first interview in a series with Claudia. So Claudia, will you please say your full name, today's date, and what was the phrase. "This is Claudia Horwitz. Today is September. I'm doing an interview as part of the project Heirs to a Fighting Tradition," something like that. It doesn't have to be--. Go.

CH: This is Claudia Horwitz. It is September 16, 2009, and I'm doing an interview with Bridgette as part of the oral history project Heirs to a Fighting Tradition.

BB: Is today the 15th or 16th?

CH: It's the 16th.

BB: [Laughter] Today is September 16, 2009. Thank you. Bridgette. So let's start with, I'm going to ask you why you agreed to be a part of the Heirs project, what comes to mind? What are some things that first come to mind about why you agreed to let us hear your story?

CH: I think it's always an honor when someone asks you to share your story because

I think it's sort of saying that there's something of value, potentially, in that story for other people. So that's powerful and humbling I think off the bat. And I think the project's amazing, so I think that was a big part of--. I think that I'm really interested in the creation of history and how history gets shared. And I've felt like my own understanding of history has been so limited, or at least in the early part of my education. I would say my understanding of history is so limited because of how we're taught things. So a chance to kind of broaden the mediums, like Heirs is doing, I think is like just a really vital tool. And I guess the third thing I would say is that I think--. There's something about the nature of activism or an engaged, committed life that can look a lot of different ways. And I think it tends to conjure up a very, sometimes particular image for people outside of the world of activism. And what I love, again, I think about the Heirs project is like it really looks at a lot of different things. And I think I'm one of many different expressions and if there's something helpful to other people about the way I've created a life for myself around the things I value and care about, then that seems useful to be a part of.

BB: So what do you think are some of the typical visions or images that arise for people when you think of an activist? And then how would you create a picture of what your life as an activist looks like?

CH: Well, I guess I would maybe have a hard time describing what people conjure up without sounding like I'm projecting, but I think that people tend to maybe first of all imagine just the protest politic angle of things, which I think actually is a really important and enlivening thread of activist work for sure, but I think there tends to be like some sense that there's a lot of anger and that there's mostly only anger in that. And I have never seen it that way because I just always see people's expressions of frustration and anger as being

really rooted in their commitment and love for something different that's possible in humanity. So I guess because my life has been so much about trying to really figure out what a more spiritually informed type of activism looks like, I've wanted, really by definition, to bring that root of love that I think actually every activist I've probably ever met has, wanting to bring that from underneath the ground, like up above the surface a little bit so that people can see it and taste it more and smell it and like feel the juice of that as well as the frustration and the despair that I think is part of the work, too.

BB: Jumping, I forgot to ask you sort of to describe the space, as kind of a descriptive.

CH: Oh yeah.

BB: As kind of a descriptive, like could you describe what's today like and a little bit of your cottage that we're in, just describe.

CH: [Laughter] The cottage. It's sort of a really--. I think it's kind of a typical late summer day in North Carolina in Mebane. It's pretty muggy actually and kind of cloudy. And we are sitting in my cabin on the land of The Stone House, and so the view from the sofa where we're sitting is our pasture and immediately it's some fruit trees, some apple and peach trees, which unfortunately did not give us any fruit this year because I pruned them, but anyway, it's good next year. And it's a sweet morning. It feels kind of still outside and there's just really birds and not much else. And my cabin's kind of small. It's eight hundred square feet, wood. I've painted it some really bright, not bright, but kind of like colors, which I like. And, yeah.

BB: There's lots of beautiful art.

CH: Yeah, I collect. I don't know. You know it's funny. I never would call myself a

collector, but Jesse [Maceo Vega-Frye, stone circles Program Consultant and co-founder of The Stone House], a few years ago, was like, “You’re a collector.” But I really like self-taught artist’s work. So not all of these works are self-taught, but the majority of them are, and like what people call sometimes outsider art, people that tend to paint out of their visions. And then that painting’s by our friend Ellen O’Grady. That’s a family she lived with in Palestine. I love that painting so much because I think it just portrays Palestinians in such the complexities of their lives, you know, gathered in their living room, their spare living room, as a family with this, like, hole in their wall from where the Israeli army stormed through looking for a suicide bomber. So that feels like an important piece of work for me. But I tend to--. I think a lot of the rest of my art sort of is more inspirational. Ellen’s painting’s inspirational, but in a different way. [Laughter]

BB: Thank you. Can I put my foot up here?

CH: You can do anything you want, Bridgette.

BB: Ooh, okay. Okay, you can choose. Would you like to start with a typical kind of, “When and where were you born?” Or would you like to start talking about, say for example, what this group of white allies and activists are trying to create around some of the racism today? So kind of contemporary or birth days? Whatever you’re in the mood for.

CH: Do you have a sense of like, what usually works better for people?

BB: I usually just start with the, “Talk about when you were born,” and then we move. That’s how most of them have gone, but then some of them, it’s just been like while we’re sound testing. “So Ajamu, how’s it going?” “Well, you know--.” And then we sort of launched into--. So really whatever, whatever--. Are you feeling a little more nostalgic and reflective?

CH: [Laughter] Are we still doing a sound--? Whoa.

[Sound of something falling.]

BB: Thank you.

CH: Are we still doing a sound check, or is this the interview now?

BB: This is the interview.

CH: Okay, that's what I thought.

BB: Hold on, yeah let me get that situated. Yeah, it's very informal.

CH: No, I love it. I thought that it was, but I just wondered. Okay, let me think about it for a second. I think maybe let's start with the contemporary.

BB: Okay.

CH: See how it goes.

BB: Yeah. Okay, so last Monday, Pam McMichael—no it was last Thursday—I got an email from Pam McMichael, who's the executive director of the Highlander Center [a progressive education and research organization located near New Market, Tennessee], sort of putting a call out to white friends, colleagues, that she kind of trusted that would be interested in raising sort of the collective voice and response and message to some real racism that's showing its head in different ways, based on what's happening. So will you describe a little bit about what you think that call is about, and where we're at?

CH: Yeah, I will. I actually think I put your name on the list, and I just want you to know you were like the first person I thought of. She asked for additional names of people, and I have to say that the first thing that comes up for me is a little bit of sadness because I realized as I was looking at who could join that call, that I don't know as many strong white anti-racist organizers and practitioners as I wish I did, or maybe thought I did. So I think

there's like grief about that, which is then of course connected to the larger grief of what's happening right now.

I think that the arc of history is pretty interesting and hard to discern while it's unfolding. So I think we still don't really know what's actually going on. My short analysis of it is that you know when President Obama was elected and then inaugurated, there was a veneer of global excitement that I think created--. I think the global excitement was real, but I think it also created like a veneer of almost like politeness, and it muzzled, for a little while, the more reactionary and racist voices in the country. And there's been, you know, a string of things that have happened over the summer, in terms of health care reform bills and all the misstatements about those, to the proposed address in the schools that was met with so much opposition, and just a series of things that I think has unleashed this kind of really just pure sort of hatred, that I would say is actually really rooted in people's frustration and fear about their own lives. And I think it's actually a real margin of society. I think it's a white margin of society, but it's a very vocal margin right now.

But what Pam, brilliantly, wanted to do was to gather white folks who are really committed to a different world that we know is possible. I love the kind of informal title of White People Stepping Up [Against Right Wing Racism] because it just feels really real to me, of like, yeah, that's kind of what we're trying to do, you know. And I think there's been multiple points through my life where, it's humbling to say this, but where I have been appalled and deeply like, you know angrily appalled by something that another white person or a group of white people has done, and my first inclination is to somehow gently provoke a person of color to respond, because I trust their response, right, more than mine or something. I think that they will have something more thoughtful to say or it will just sound

much more--. What's the word? Legitimate, coming from them. And I've been schooled on it a few times, and I've learned, you know, I think some really good, hard lessons about that.

I can remember being in South Africa in the townships in Soweto, with a mixed race group of people, and there was a white guy on the trip, a friend of mine actually, and he was taking a lot of photos in this one township. We had gone to meet a couple of small business people. And there was a way that he was taking photos that really, I found really problematic. I think he was doing it with good intentions, but there was an element of respect that I felt like was missing from the way he was doing it. And I said to this African American woman on the trip, another friend of ours, "I can't believe he's doing so." [Laughter] And I started like spouting out to her about it. And she was a badass organizer. She had worked for the National Organizers Alliance for a while, and she just was, you know, an elder in a lot of ways. And she just looked at me, and she was like, "Honey, you have to take care of your people." [Laughter] And she kind of like walked away. And I felt a burn, you know, for a minute, and then I was like, "Oh my god, she is so right," you know? And when we got back to the hotel finally, or maybe on the bus on the way back, I said that, "Dan, you know, that was kind of uncool, and here's why." And I just was able to say something to him.

So this feels like a much more collective moment, in a much more serious situation, obviously, where it has to be white people calling out racist rhetoric and politics and the kind of inflammatory, I think, really violence-stoking activity and rhetoric that's happening right now. It has to be people of color, too, but it can't just be people of color. So I think there's something really powerful about white folks coming together and figuring out, "Okay, what are we willing to do? And how can we put ourselves on the line, and then how can we be allies to all the--?" Obviously there's tons of amazing work going on around this, and it's

really interesting.

Just one more thing about this because the same woman, at the end of that trip in South Africa we were talking about the level of risk in each of our lives and work. And I have never felt like there's been a huge element of risk in my work. I certainly have taken some risks for what I do, but they've been fairly minimal. And I think about the situations that a lot of other people have put themselves in. You know, and I think about someone like Rachel Corrie [an American member of the International Solidarity Movement who was killed by a bulldozer in 2003 while attempting to prevent IDF – Israeli Defense Force - from demolishing a Palestinian home], and there's obviously like many, many examples like that. And one of the first questions I ask myself is like, "Would I do that?" I mean I would go to the West Bank. I've been to the West Bank. I haven't made incredibly meaningful contributions there, but I've gone. Would I stand up in front of an IDF tank? No, I don't know. I don't think I would. So it's just this question of like, what are we willing to go--? What are we willing to do, basically. And I was kind of mulling this over, and especially being in a place like South Africa, where there's obviously been so much risk by so many people, including a handful of really revolutionary white folks, but obviously way more black folks. And I was talking with this woman about it, and I think almost bemoaning the fact that I maybe wasn't taking the risks that I could be taking in my work, or maybe I was living in some false cloud of safety about what I was doing. And she just looked at me and she was like, "You are a white woman doing anti-racism work in the South. That's risky," you know? So it was like yet again like just one sentence, and I was like, "Oh yeah, that's actually true."

Like I haven't done a lot of explicit dismantling racism work, but I've had, I think, a

really long commitment to building work that is by definition like bringing people from different backgrounds together. You look like you want to say something. Oh, okay. And of course there's risk involved in that. And I know that, but you know you can--. The same way that it's easy to fall into a hierarchy of oppression, I think it's easy to fall into like a hierarchy of risk. And there's something real about it, you know, that I'm not putting my life on the line, but I think about the Stone House and where we're located, and some of the things that have happened at Highlander and the threats that they've had from some of more violent strands of the white communities around them. And it hasn't been, thank god, anything really serious, but it's been enough to really take notice of and be thoughtful about. So I'm certainly aware of what we're doing here and who's living here and how we're living and the work we're doing and how people might see us.

BB: Has Stone House experienced any pushback or threats or acknowledgement from white supremacist groups or hate groups in North Carolina?

CH: No, never, never. And stone circles [a progressive organization based in Mebane, North Carolina, that works to sustain activists and strengthen the work of justice through spiritual practice and principles, and which owns and operates The Stone House] never did, before this. I think the closest I came, which is different, but the closest we came is we've gotten, I've gotten a smattering of letters over the years. I probably wouldn't even call them hate mail, but from kind of right-wing Christian folks, sort of basically in a nutshell telling me that we're going to hell or I'm going to hell. And that surprised me, for sure, the first couple times you get a letter like that. [Laughter] As a Jewish girl from suburban Philadelphia, it's just not something I was expecting, but you know, it makes sense to me that we're here and we're doing what we're doing, and we don't get a ton of press, but when we

do, that it would spark people. I get that.

BB: What's a hope you have? One thing I meant to tell you is if you can, and I'll remind you a couple times, too, so you don't sweat it, but if you can repeat the question--.

CH: The question.

BB: Yeah, so it's like, "One hope I have that comes out of this group of White People Stepping Up is --."

CH: Yeah, sorry. That makes sense. I'm glad you said something.

BB: I forgot to say it earlier. Good sound. I can hear you swallowing. [Laughter] It's very good. And while we're on this kind of technical note, sometimes I'll just use my hand, because sometimes when people are thoughtful and thinking, they'll put their hand in front of their mouth, so I might--.

CH: Oh, do I do that?

BB: Just once. And then I forgot to tell you to say that. I forgot to say that. And I'm going to move the microphone a little bit.

CH: Closer?

BB: It's sounding good. Because, yeah, let's see if we can get it to balance well there, because there's kind of a distinct difference when you turn to look, but I know, I want you to be comfortable, though. So I don't want you to crane back, just if it occurs to you to kind of--.

CH: To stay straight?

BB: To stay sort of straight or that way. So now you're totally boxed in. And you're going to repeat questions awkwardly until it doesn't feel awkward. Okay, so what's the hope

for what might come out of this, the White People Stepping Up Against Right Wing Hatred?

CH: Honestly, I think from the moment I got the email about the call, my biggest hope is in some ways very practical right now, which is that we can come up with something, a sense of branding, almost, around a message. My hope for this effort of White People Stepping Up to fight the racism that's going on right now, is a lot about messaging, because I think that is a primary place where we continually lose the battle because we tend to put a lot of energy into specific issues and organizing around specific issues and trying to make progress on like concrete fronts, which makes a ton of sense, but there is like a bigger struggle being fought right now, and as ugly as it is, the messaging is very clear, I think, for some of the kind of right-wing reactionary activists right now. I'm using that word activist in quotes. So that's my biggest short-term hope is that we can come up with a really clear message about who we are and what we stand for, and that it will be so clear and compelling that many, many, many hundreds of thousands of other people around the country will see themselves immediately in that and connect with it.

And I think it was the beauty, in some ways, of the Obama campaign, in a very short-term political kind of way, is that for a very little while, he became a symbol of something that I think a lot of people want. He became the symbol of the kinds of changes that I think a lot of us want. And I think a lot of folks on the Left never had a false hope that he was going to create all those changes, but for me, the ability to be able to join at a larger level, so that we can see how many of us there are who are sane, loving people that have a respect for humanity like feels very vital right now to me. So that's my hope. I think they'll be a lot of other things that will come out of it. I think there'll be a lot of other probably really good

juicy organizing. I think there's a real need for a lot of counter-demonstrations at what's going on right now. I think there's a lot of need for media work. I think a lot of that will happen, but the messaging feels paramount to me right now.

BB: Will you describe the process for crafting a message? And you just think like fifty years from now, when people are going, "How did they go about with the technology they had and sort of the process?" Like how do you go about crafting a national message?

CH: It's not at all my area of expertise, so I don't feel like I actually have a ton to say about it, but I think there's something to be said for something short, you know, a few words that is just, right away you're like, "Oh, that's me." And then it just goes out through these different--. I mean there's so many potential channels in social media right now, and I don't think any of them should be left unturned. I think it's really easy, particularly for maybe those of us who are thirty-five and older, or thirty and older or something, to say like, "Oh yeah, Facebook [social networking website], yeah." To put it in a context where we can easily--. I think, okay, in terms of strategy, those of us that are a little bit older than I would say like thirty, can easily undermine what the potential impact is of social media, just by not paying it enough due or marginalizing it a little bit. We get it's important, but we don't really, we haven't really learned how to use it, I think. So I think there's just a lot there, but it's not my primary, like, skill set or even interest, so--. And this is one of those places where I think for me the whole notion of what it means to be a spiritual activist or to be engaged in spiritual activism gets really tricky because there are almost two different ways of being in the world. And they're not incongruous at all, but the question continually arises of how to best integrate the energy and the strategy of two potentially different worlds, in a way.

BB: Say more about the two worlds.

CH: Yeah, so it depends quite a bit on what your root tradition is, or the tradition that you're practicing in, in terms of spirituality or religion or faith, how that comes alive in the world. So for example, I think that--. Okay, I'm going to take--. I just want to pause for a second.

BB: Sure.

CH: I just want to think about where this is going, because I don't know if it's going to be useful the way I'm approaching it. I think it's important for me to say something about this, but I don't think I want to come at it from the White People Stepping Up angle. Is that okay?

BB: Yeah, let's hold that, because I don't know what you mean by two worlds.

CH: Yeah, it's just the spirituality and the activism. I want to kind of unpack that more, but yeah.

BB: Okay, great. Is there anything else you want to say about, right now about the White People Stepping Up activism work?

CH: I don't think so.

BB: Okay. Anything else today or in this period of a few months, that's kind of alive and taking a lot of your sort of work and mind energy? What piece of work is--?

CH: Yeah, so I would say what's most alive for me right now is that we are just approaching the second anniversary of The Stone House, which means that we've been on this piece of land, this seventy-acres out in Mebane for almost two years, which stone circles purchased as an organization after doing work for thirteen or fourteen years around the country. And so it's a period of like real reflection for us about how we're stewarding the resource of this place, and how it is that we are really creating a revolutionary space, a retreat

training gathering place for activists that is like steeped in a sense of spiritual connection and what we call radical hospitality. So for me, I have been really thinking about impact and strategic impact, because I think for the past two years, we've done an amazing job on a lot of levels of getting this place up and running. We have a ton of different kinds of programming happening here, from afternoon workdays to day long practice retreats to longer retreats for folks to some strategic leadership work to having the space available for groups to rent for their own purposes. We're growing a lot of our own food and feeding that to folks, and I think really changing the way people think about food and what they'll eat has been really fascinating. We've laid down a lot of systems that are allowing us to run and to run fairly smoothly. And we've been focused also on raising money, not just to sustain ourselves, but to ensure that we can make this place available to whoever needs it, which is a really core value for us to make sure that--.

My friend Annie Lanzilotto, who's a performance artist and activist, she talks about this work of spiritual retreat for activists as being--. That there's a need to make sure that people who need it the most, but get it the least, are receiving. And so I think about that all the time. And it's really woven in to what we're doing here. So there's just been a lot, you know, that has happened. And I think what's really up right now is like what are we going to accomplish in the world? What is the value of having this place on the rest of the planet, the rest of the country, the rest of the Southeast, the rest of North Carolina, the rest of the Triangle, the rest of western Orange County, you know? And I think you have to make choices, like when you're involved in anything, you know, whether it's raising a kid or running an organization. There's choices to be made about use of time and energy. So it's an exciting time for us because I think that we want to continue to be like a real catalyst for a

different kind of activism, one that's really rooted in values around sustainability and authentic relationships across lines of difference, and some type of deep practice that really allows for like a real sustained awareness of what's real. And I think it'll be really interesting to see what directions we choose to go in and where we put our efforts. So that's really up right now for me.

And the only other thing I would say is that I'm going to be spending the month of October in silence. So I've never done that before. I've done shorter periods of time, and I've never done it in the context of working. And so I'm really excited to see what that feels like. I'll be on retreat half of the month, but the other half I'll be here working on some writing projects, like doing our curriculum and a longer-term vision and business plan. And I have craved extended periods of silence for such a long time, since probably my first introduction to yoga, which is like my primary spiritual path, and hearing about Swami Kripalu, who was basically the saint that my yoga tradition was named for and inspired by. He spent about eighteen years of his life in silence, and since hearing about that and being around other folks who have done that, made commitments to silence in smaller chunks, I have been so blown away by the amount of just like goodness and kindness that bubbles up. And I'm a really introverted person, in a very extroverted role, so the chance to kind of honor that part of myself here feels really important.

BB: I'm happy for you.

CH: Thanks.

BB: It's good to do that. So you talked about your friend Annie. Will you say, in your mind who are the people that need it the most and get it the least? Who are those types of activists or people?

CH: Yeah, it's a good question. So the people who need it the most, but get it the least, I think probably fall into a few different categories. I think they--. So some of those folks are people that just don't have a lot of money to spend on retreat or vacation or the many other things that I think, for example, myself now as a middle-class person with a decent chunk of disposable income, not raising a kid or whatever. You know, like I can go get a massage if I need to go get a massage. If I want to go on retreat at a retreat center, I can afford it, you know, once or twice a year. A lot of people just don't have that margin in their budget. So that's one thing that's just very practically, folks who don't have the economic resources, because retreat, spiritual retreat centers tend to be not inexpensive in this country, which is a shame when you think about the tradition, particularly in like Buddhism and yoga. Those traditions are born out of monastic communities, ashram communities in the East. And the idea is that they're available to anyone who wants to be there, practice there, live there. We don't have a lot of those spaces in this country.

I think another example of people who need it the most, but get it the least, are folks who just psychically don't think they deserve it or can't figure out how to take the time. And those are two different things, but I think there are folks who don't feel like they have the luxury of time, that there's such a sense of urgency in their work, and there's constantly another deadline. There's another policy that needs to be overturned, or there's another--. You know, there's just always something, and so I think part of it is about just illuminating for folks that there's a real value to stepping back, and to help people give themselves permission to do that, whether it's just for a day or ten days, you know, whatever that is. And then I would say folks who I think, you know, need it the most, but get it the least tend to be people who are doing a lot of care taking of other people. I think it makes it really much

trickier to take time for your own inner work when you're raising children, care taking elders. I don't have a lot of answers for that, but I'm really aware of it and really wanting to support those folks, really wanting to support parents more. We're trying to do more childcare out here during our things. So that's how I think I would describe that.

BB: Yeah, thanks.

CH: Yeah.

BB: So what is spiritual activism in your mind?

CH: [Laughter]

BB: In four words or less--. No. [Laughter] As long as it takes. How do you, when people say, "What is that, Claudia? What do you mean by spiritual activism?"

CH: It's interesting about the term spiritual activism and how I would define it because I think some things have stayed constant over the last fifteen or twenty years and some things have really shifted. I think what has stayed constant is that I think at a very basic level, it is a deeper integration between inner and outer work, between the kind of inner realm of being and the outer realm of doing. And more specifically, I would say that it's about how we can harness the power of spiritual practice, spiritual tradition, spiritual community, ritual, ceremony, prayer, meditation, how all of the juice of that gets harnessed, and really almost directly applied to the work on the ground of creating social change and creating more social justice in this country in particular.

So for example, I think, and this is not super specific, but I think taking, for me, there's these very clear pieces of wisdom that emerge when people are steeped in some spiritual, some element of spiritual life. There are pieces of wisdom that emerge from that. It might be for a radical or progressive Christian, it might be a sense of what it means to have a

prophetic voice, because that's a theme in the Christian Bible, and actually the Hebrew Bible as well, obviously, that is just so beautifully articulated, you know, what it means to set yourself apart, not by choice, but because you have a truth that needs to be spoken. And I think that for folks who practice those traditions, who study those books of the Bible, and those prophetic witnesses that have come before us, not just in those sacred biblical texts, but in the other texts of social history, I think that there's a lot there to glean and to learn about what it takes to be able to do that, and to know that you're not alone, and to know that there's like a foundation that you're standing on. So what does that mean to then bring all that into a particular issue or campaign?

I think that even like a brief study, for example, of prophetic justice in a biblical text has the potential to radically transform an organizing campaign, and similarly from my own traditions, if I think about like these practices of yoga and meditation and what emerges through those practices, there is such an amazing experience of just pure mindfulness that emerges sometimes just for a second, you know, and then it dissipates, but you can get so clear for a second about how you relate to reality and what our own patterns or conditioning is around how we judge, how we label, how we reject certain experiences and want more of other experiences. [Laughter] So to take all of those teachings and to think about: what does that mean to me as an activist or as an organizer? Where am I judging? Where am I labeling? What am I rejecting? What do I want more of? I think that's really powerful.

And one really specific teaching that I love from yoga is this teaching about sort of watching the wave of experience. So when something really unpleasant or painful occurs, the more aware you are, the more you can actually watch that experience start to build, increase in intensity, peak in intensity, and then begin to dissolve over whatever period of time. It's

different all the time. But what often happens is that something unpleasant or painful will start to arise, and our inclination is to jump off the wave of experience, and rather than actually witnessing the unpleasantness, we go do something else. And that tends to be, like we might resort to addiction. Most of us have some form of addiction or distraction in a maybe more diluted form. So we go do something else so that we don't actually have to be with the pain. I think a powerful example of this, just for people to really understand it, when you're in labor, which I haven't been, that rise and fall of each contraction is something that is really hard to like distract yourself from. You know you can't from watching a couple of friends go through it. [Laughter] You can't ignore the wave of a contraction.

And what I think is so powerful about deep spiritual practice is this notion of becoming a compassionate witness of your own experience, so that we get better and better at being able to stay with the wave, rather than numbing ourselves out from it with television or another drink or a new dress or sex or food, which is my drug of choice, or whatever, you know. So that to me is like such a potent teaching that I feel so, so strongly about wanting more activists to be--. Like I want us to have the capacity for that on a collective level. I want us to be able to like stay with pain as it's arising in the collective soul of a country or a community or a household, to be able to be a witness and to be in it, so that if there's an intervention that's required, we know we can afford the wisest intervention or interruption.

If it's just a witnessing that's required, we know we're not going to turn our heads away from whatever it is, because more and more I'm just, I'm amazed at how much history of violence, of repression, of oppression has basically gone--. It has been so easy for humanity to turn away, and so it just creates this--. It's like a poisoning of the soil for the next year's planting. I feel like it's like poisoned soil, like metaphorically, everywhere, you

know? We're just growing new communities of people in poisoned soil because we haven't been able to stay with the pain. We haven't been able to really witness suffering. We haven't been able to bear witness to that in a way that we need to.

I think sometimes people think that spiritual activism or the integration of spirituality and social change means that it's just about being kind and not being angry. And I think that's total bullshit. I think that there's a huge role for anger, and that whoever--. Many people have said this. It's like if you're not angry, you're not paying attention, I think is just a fundamental truth. I think it's about how you use the anger. And I think Myles Horton [American educator, socialist, and co-founder of the Highlander Folk School] talked a lot about this, that anger can be a fire that totally burns you up, or it can be fuel. And we know that, and I think more and more activists know that. Like I've really noticed a big shift in my work over the last fifteen or twenty years where, in the last three to five years, so many more grassroots activists are like, "I don't want to burn out. I don't want to be in this place of anger and frustration all the time. I do want to take better care of myself. I do want to be in the movement ten or twenty or thirty years from now." So I think there's been a big change, because I think it's a question of how you relate to your anger, and are you going to let it basically act like a clenched fist your whole life. There's a lot of energy that gets trapped in a clenched fist. And a clenched fist can be a really powerful and important symbol and weapon at particular times, and the reality is, to leave your fist like clenched for your entire, for the duration of your lifetime or the majority is really debilitating. And it means that we don't really get the best of people, that people have to offer, I think.

So I'm just, I think that it is about kindness and it is about a different form of human relationship, and it is about an element on non-judging, but it doesn't mean that there's no

analysis. And it doesn't mean that there's no anger. And it doesn't mean that there's not clarity about what we're trying to change.

I think I have one more thing I want to say about this right now. I might need to stop for a second to get to it. [Pause] I'm not sure that I've actually really articulated this before, but I think in almost, in the depth of my gut, I think that--. I don't know if I'm going to be able to get to it. [Pause]

I think that the work of social justice has been unnecessarily a marginal experience in this country in modern, post-modern times. And I feel like there's the potential for it to be actually a very mainstream experience. And I think part of that is about bringing more radiance to movement work. And what I mean by that is that there are people who are--. And this is obviously my perspective. There are people who are so steeped in their faith or in their practice that the way they are able to radiate a sense of goodness and love, not at the expense of truth, but in service of truth, is like overwhelming. And we don't have nearly as many of those folks as I would like to have. And they're out there. I've met them. And I think in some ways, one of my deepest hopes for my life and our work that we're doing through stone circles is that we help people deepen their own radiance and their own ability to project that kind of love in the service of truth in such a way that creates just like this really different field of being and possibility for people. And I look at my own journey, my own ego suffering. And I'm like, "Oh my gosh. I have such a long way to go." And I've put a considerable amount of time, you know, into it, and I don't think that's a coincidence, you know? So it's like I'm very motivated to keep going, and it's also a little bit daunting, like, "Wow. Is that possible?" [Laughter] How long does that take, you know? But I think the more of us there are that are engaged in that in some way, and I know it's probably sounding

a little bit abstract, I think the easier it gets. There was this article, which I haven't even finished yet, in the New York Times magazine this past weekend about contagion, contagion of happiness, how different, like, social networks become, things become contagious within those social networks. And I'm just really super curious about how radiance and goodness, that kind of inner power that makes anything possible, how that can become like more contagious. I'm really intrigued by that. And I don't know, but I think it's possible.

BB: I'm very moved by that. I think I want us to sort of hold that up as a hope for the Heirs Project, like one more tool for infusing radiance in the work through our stories and through capturing snippets of people's passion and fire and their deep love, how so much of so many of the organizers and activists, that is the root. And it gets there through a story that over and over comes out through a story. It's very beautiful. It's a beautiful way to think about it. So I've heard you tell this story a couple times where you really framed what brought you to the work of spiritual activism as kind of a matter of life and death. You've talked about it a couple of times very beautifully. I'm wondering, because you don't know what's in my head about what I remember, but I think that probably--. But do you need a break or do you want to take a minute? Or how are you doing?

CH: I'm doing fine. I'm just--. Do you know what time it is?

BB: It's been fifty-six minutes.

CH: Oh, okay.

BB: It's 11:13. So you want to go fifteen more minutes or so?

CH: Yeah, I was thinking the next--. Is that okay?

BB: Yeah, that's great.

CH: Okay.

BB: So that kind of how you came to--.

CH: I think I came to this phase of my work through this realization, which was subconscious at first, and then I articulated it consciously a few years ago, that I felt like we were dying and we weren't winning. And I remember the first time it occurred to me and how tragic it was, and the reality is that I have lost a lot of people in the work. And the reality is that I think most people have lost people in the work. And there have been literal deaths and figurative deaths. And I think we don't talk about it enough, and I think that's one of the reasons why I talk about it, not because I'm special and I've had more loss, because I know that's actually not true, but because I think there's a lot of grief. And I think there are some really systemic conditions that have led to the loss of some really significant people. So there were literal deaths for me along the way. I've lost colleagues to suicide, to undetected heart disease, to violence, to political violence. And those are obviously the most painful. And then there are the more figurative--. I don't know what the other word would be, but symbolic deaths of people hitting walls that have really made it hard for them to continue doing the work.

And I definitely had that experience in probably a fairly mild form compared to a lot of people, but I definitely hit up against my own wall of depression. And this was more than fifteen years ago now, where it became hard for me to envision any future, let alone a future that I could help create. So I have my own memory, like cellular memory of that, and I still struggle with that. And I have to be really vigilant about not falling into the pit. And I notice now that it tends to be more short-term waves of anxiety that I can watch, so that witnessing, I'm more in a spirit of witnessing when anxiety starts to build around something that's going on in the world. I have some greater sense, I think from having done a lot of practice, that

everything's temporary and that it's going to have many phases, and I have a greater sense of my own agency and the possibility of other people's agency in, you know, in any story and the capacity to create change in any story.

So that's significantly different, but for a while, all I could see was people dropping out or limiting their own effectiveness. And a lot of that had to do with addiction, I think particularly like ten or twenty years ago when I was younger and I was surrounded by a lot of young people, and also a lot of poor folks who were doing organizing work. And there was just a lot of addiction that we were all battling on different fronts. And there's like no judgment in that statement at all. It was just real. And I think it is really real. I think the pain is, it's really a lot for people to handle, and I think people look for different ways of facing it. And for some people, that's about sleeping around. And for some people, that's about doing a lot of drugs. And for some people, it's about spending money you don't have or eating too much food or watching too much television or whatever it is.

And I think what happens in some maturation process is that people make decisions, consciously or unconsciously, to live. And that means deciding to get help. That means deciding to take a different path. That means deciding to hang around with different people. That means deciding to find a different economic base for your own life, because it's too stressful. I mean I just, I think people make all kinds of choices, really smart, beautiful choices about their lives. But it can take a little while to come to those choices, and so I'm just interested in how people get support to choose life in whatever ways that they need to. And I think, it's fascinating to me because I think if you look at the world of activism, or the life of an activist, someone who's really committed the bulk of their working hours to their own sense of mission around that, there's one way to look at that and say like that is the most

sustainable life you could possibly lead because you are so in line with what matters and you're living out, you know, your dharma, your path. And I think there's, it's easy to look at it from another direction and be like, "Wow, that's a burn-out job," you know? And so it's like anything. It's like you can go either way, and just how we help people create the more sustainable road, you know, as they keep going. I think that's mostly what that's about. Is there a story that you, another story that you were thinking of?

BB: No, that was it. Yeah, those were the stories. And then maybe we could finish--. Unless, do you have an interesting question that you'd like to get up, that you're thinking of?

CH: I don't think so.

BB: That's been . A couple of times people have been like, "You know what? I've been thinking about--?" It's like so much better. [Laughter]

CH: Maybe I'll have something tomorrow.

BB: So I was thinking about also at the workshop that you led a couple of weeks ago, or last Wednesday in Raleigh. You said, you sort of told that story, some similar themes in that story, and then you said you feel like right now you're at a place where there are a couple of non-negotiables that feel really sure to you. So if you want to share a little bit about--.

CH: Did I say what they were?

BB: You said--.

CH: Just that I don't remember the context of it.

BB: You said a piece around silence or practice, whether it's a walk in the woods, I think you've talked about that some. It's very related to what you've been saying. That was one. Community was definitely another one, and then the capacity to relate more

authentically, so that exercise that you led us through, which was very deep and challenging and rich, and I've thought about it a lot since then.

CH: Oh, cool.

BB: And to talk to you about, ask ways, if you'd feel okay for us to use it for something coming up, anyhow, those were a couple of things that you mentioned.

CH: It's interesting that you just used the phrase non-negotiable. Do I say it that way? I did. Interesting.

BB: That really struck me, too.

CH: Yeah, and I was talking about for my own life at that point? No I wasn't. I was saying something more--.

BB: I didn't hear it like that. You might've been talking your own life, but it really struck me as like, "Wow, that's a giant thing to say." If you feel like for the survival of the movement and humanity, there's some givens.

CH: Oh, yeah.

BB: There's some non-negotiables.

CH: Yeah, okay, I think I was going out on a limb a little bit, and I think that's good. Normally when I talk about non-negotiables, I only talk about them for myself, because I think it's like really presumptuous to say that for other people, but I really believe that I said something similar to what you're saying. Okay, so when I first started talking about the role of spiritual practice in activism, I felt really unsteady and unsure. I was very new in my own journey and did not, was so hesitant about claiming any sense of authority or wisdom about those things. And there's still a part of me that has a big reluctance, although I have to say I have been pushed so much by people in my life to own my own wisdom more. It's a little bit

staggering. And I would say primarily it's women of color in my life, some of my closest friends and allies, they tend to be a little bit older than me. And I'm sure other people have pushed me as well, but those are probably the voices that I tend to like really hear and respect in a certain kind of way, because I just feel, I'm held in this web that is really potent when I think about it as that. It's really kind of overwhelming what it is. So I say that because I am really curious right now, at the age of forty-three, having been a spiritual practitioner for twenty years and a yoga teacher for almost ten, I'm really curious about at what point you or I take up authority when there's not an external process of anointing. So I have a really close friend who's an Episcopal priest, very radical Episcopal priest. And when she became a priest, there was a huge ritual around that, and I was one of the people that got to go up, you know, with the bishop and help put the stole around her neck. You know, it was very clear to everyone in that church that something very significant was happening in that ordination.

BB: Do you mind saying who it is?

CH: No. It's Arrington Chambliss. I do not mind at all. She's from Winston-Salem, North Carolina, actually, though she's lived in Boston for the last fifteen years. I've had nothing like that. There's been no ordination, no anointing. There was a sweet graduation ceremony at the end of my yoga teacher training, and there was a part of that--. There was a split second moment with my teacher that felt like what I would say was an initiation, but it was so fleeting and there's so little ongoing context around it. So, I think that's all really important to articulate, because I think it lifts up a couple of important points, which are, one: the challenge of taking up spiritual authority in the role of guide or teacher when you are outside of a mainstream institution, when you're outside of a lineage, when you don't have a teacher. Like I have many spiritual teachers, but I don't have one teacher that I'm in a

relationship of accountability with. And I'll say I think there's a particular challenge that I think white women have around taking up levels of authority, so I think that my own identity plays a role in that. So I'm at this interesting point, and it's a point I've been at for a little while. It's had different stages, but I'm at this interesting point where I am getting more willing to articulate these things that I think are really important for people to pay attention to. So occasionally I might call them non-negotiables. [Laughter] I think the way I think of them in my head are like these are the pro-practices for our collective survival. These are the practices for our collective survival. And what I've just seen over time is that it really helps when people have some practice of awareness, like a deep mindfulness practice. It can happen through a lot of different doorways. I think there is a non-negotiable skill that's required for activists, for anybody interested and committed to social change, to be able to build authentic relationship across lines of significant difference. I think that's not--. There's another word for non-negotiable.

BB: Essential?

CH: Yeah, it's not something anyone can avoid being good at. It's like we have to get better and better at being able to do that because the work that is required in building a just economy, an anti-racist society, a non-violent society, that work by definition is rooted in relationships of solidarity. And they can't be fleeting. They have to be sustained over time. And so, you know, that's a skill, how those relationships get built and sustained. It takes practice and ongoing examination and commitment. So I feel really strongly about that, for sure. I think there's one more thing, and like, my brain is spacing out. Was there something else that day that I talked about?

BB: Those were the two that stand out for me now. I think there was a third.

[Laughter]

CH: There was a third. I have it written down somewhere. My brain's too foggy, but maybe if we talk tomorrow, I'll remember.

BB: Okay, great. So, I'm really curious--. I want to ask you more about the challenge of women taking, white women taking up levels of authority.

CH: Yeah.

BB: And what you've thought about around that, but we'll come back to it. So anything before we kind of close out today and that we move onto?

CH: Uh uh.

BB: So what are you about to do next? What's happening in half an hour or so?

CH: Oh, it's going to be interesting. We have a woman that Jesse and I have been working with, this woman, sort of around organizational development, our own communication as a leadership team here at The Stone House. And she's coming in to do some work with the whole staff around how we communicate, how we make decisions, because we're really trying to bring more transparency to that and more shared understanding of how we make decisions. So that's what we're about to go do.

BB: Good, nice snapshot of y'all's work right now.

CH: Yeah.

BB: Well, thank you Claudia. And we shall, should the fates allow, meet again tomorrow, right?

CH: Yeah.

BB: Ten o'clock.

CH: Yeah.

BB: And we'll do the second interview.

CH: Yeah, planning on it.

BB: Okay, thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW