Sacred Communion: Recovering Self in the Environment, History, and Community in Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*

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Gloria Naylor is well known for her use of literary allusion to create powerful representations of African-American history and culture in her novels. Her novel *Mama Day* is no exception. *Mama Day* centers on the women of the Day family. The head of the family is Miranda or Mama Day, a feisty old woman who uses her vast knowledge of conjure (a mixture of spiritual and herbal magic) and mother wit to guide the island community of Willow Springs. When Miranda's grandniece Ophelia, also known by her pet names Baby Girl and Cocoa, brings her New Yorker husband George home to meet her grandmother Abigail and Mama Day, the wrath of a jealous woman endangers them all. Miranda must draw upon her powers and her connections to the earth, the ancestors, and the community to save Ophelia and guide her into peace with her identity.

At the heart of this story is an important piece of land known as the other place, which consists of an ancestral plantation home, a sealed well, a family cemetery, and a special garden. Much like the Garden of Eden, the power of the other place resonates on many levels. The other place offers a unique area for exploration of the link between land and identity for black women, a minority often denied both land ownership and identity, doubly damned by gender and race. The garden and the entire natural world are transformed into an ancestor for the Days. The connection between Naylor's characters and the natural world represents more than a deed and a design. The Days exist symbiotically with Nature. They do not separate themselves from the natural world; but instead embrace their intertwined identities. Communion with the land unites past and future, self and community, hope and pain. By allowing the natural world a speakerly voice, Naylor alters the relationship between the human and natural worlds, elevating it from mutual

subservience to mutual empowerment. While the significance of the other place is unique to Naylor's novel, the importance of land use in novels and in real life is a key factor in the creation and endurance of personal and cultural identity.

Naylor approaches writing with a heavy emphasis on revisionism, the art of redefining previously established boundaries and ideas, because traditional limitations fail to encompass the depth and possibilities of Naylor's craft. She has not only revised the lines between reader and listener, natural and supernatural, past and present, and individual and community, she also redefines the line between nature and culture through her use of Miranda as the means for communion among the ancestors, the environment, and the inhabitants of Willow Springs. Naylor constructs Miranda as a living conduit between history, the natural world, and the supernatural to secure the identity and well-being of Willow Springs as an island and as a people. Naylor creates Miranda as a truly multivocal character. In this case we must not only consider the multiple voices within the text (the characters, the ancestors, the environment), but also the multiple types of communication presented through a single character.

Miranda communicates even beyond the realm of words as the necessary link between the earth as an ancestor and the currently living generations, thus accessing the communal history of the island and people. Each relationship must be honored because "in African American folk healing, the cosmological view connects the physical, emotional and spiritual; ancestors with descendants; nature with humans; humans with one another and the Divine" (Mitchem *African American Healing* 113). Ultimately, Miranda allows Naylor to demonstrate the importance of rethinking our relationships with the human and natural world as we construct identity. Failure to recognize the importance of our communion with the ancestors and the earth endangers identity because "When you kill the ancestor you kill yourself" (Morrison 344). However by recognizing that "when we love the earth, we are able to love ourselves more fully" we may achieve a communion that engenders self recovery and wholeness (hooks 175).

Miranda's mastery of communion empowers her. Naylor clearly establishes Miranda's strength within her connections to the island which are manifest as place-connectedness, or place-sense. Place-sense is difficult to explain because geographers, historians, and philosophers, among others, all struggle to define place. In the spirit of Naylor's dedication to revisionism, I will examine place through phenomenological deconstruction. Deconstruction, based on the theories of Jacques Derrida, approaches meaning through the attempt to reduce a text (concept, argument, etc.) to its origins, which often reveals contradictions and ultimately seems impossible because of the complexity of such an approach. Every text then contains multiple interpretations that become inextricably linked but impossible to fully explore because of the limits of language. Derrida explores the limited nature of language through his theory of différance: "If words and concepts receive meaning only in sequences of differences, one can justify one's language, and one's choice of terms, only within a topic [an orientation in space] and an historical strategy. The justification can therefore never be absolute and definitive. It corresponds to a condition of forces and translates an historical calculation" (Derrida 70). Derrida argues meaning is phenomenological, constructed in part through human experience or phenomena such as memory or imagination, and is tied to history.

In the case of place, which is both a word and a concept, definition must be relative. Or in other words, place then becomes defined by both site and situation so that "to locate is to relate" (Lukkerman, qtd. in Casey *Representing Place* 266). The strongest relationships then occur on multiple levels such as the varied methods of communion Miranda practices with the ancestors, environment, islanders, and past. Place theorist and phenomenologist Edward Casey contends "where we are … has everything to do with what and who we are" (*Getting Back* xiii). He asserts that place has the "power to direct and stabilize us, to memorialize and identify us, to tell us who and what we are in terms of *where we are* (as well as where we are *not*)" (Casey *Getting Back* xv, emphasis original). Naylor certainly demonstrates the empowerment possible through connection with Willow Springs; however, it still remains difficult to define Willow Springs as a place.

Naylor confronts the difficulty of defining Willow Springs through George. When George was alive he felt frustrated with his inability to locate Willow Springs on a map. After he joins the ancestors he realizes reflectively that "there was nothing [Cocoa or anyone else describing Willow Springs] could have said that would have made any sense to me. I had to be there and see—no, feel—that I was entering another world" (Naylor 175). George's reaction demonstrates Casey's definition of place as "descriptive and phenomenological … we feel the presence of places by and in our bodies even more than we see or think or recollect them. Places are not so much the direct objects of sight or thought or recollection as what we feel *with* and *around, under* and *above, before* and *behind* our lived bodies" (*Getting Back Into Place* 313, emphasis original). George's reaction to Willow Springs demonstrates the strength of experiencing place phenomenologically through his description of the colors coating his nose and mouth as he "breathed in lungfuls of oak" and if he had the words, he "would have said it all smelled like forever" (Naylor 175). George's reaction also indicates the transformative yet familiar nature of the environment.

George's reaction proves place is both encountered and experienced. It is, according to political geographer John Agnew, "a matter of (social) 'locale,' (geographical) 'location,' and 'sense of place' [which] 'combines elements of nature (elemental forces), social relations (class, gender, and so on), and meaning (the mind, ideas, symbols)" (Buell 60). Or in other words, place has a fully constructed identity whose complexity rivals that of any person. Deconstructing place thus rejects "conform[ing] to existing rules of how theory should address 'politics', 'reality' or 'history'" in favor of an approach which "demonstrate[s] the necessary instability of meaning and the necessary fluidity of identity" (Barnett 277-278). Deconstructing place means fully recognizing the identity of a place, which can only be achieved through a developed sense of place-connectedness.

Place-connectedness requires understanding a place intimately. It encompasses "multiple dimensions [and] cultural significances" (Buell 56). Places become multilocal as they exist on multiple planes. Naylor clearly establishes Miranda's relationship with Willow Springs in multiple

dimensions, including the environment, the supernatural realm, and the human community both past and present. Those who are truly attuned to place-connectedness exhibit awareness of "landscape as timescape" (Buell 77). Casey contends that "every event happens in a landscape that straddles the uneasy boundary between earth and world, thereby engendering history as their middle term" (*Representing Place* 266). Thus Miranda's ability to bridge the past with the present through the environment of Willow Springs unifies nature and culture and furthers Naylor's revisionism.

Naylor's use of place to revise history demonstrates that the "alliance between geography and history is often implicit, thus calling for demonstration and interpretation" (Casey *Representing Place* 267). Naylor uses Willow Springs to rewrite the horrors of slavery demonstrating the potential for place to act in "politics of resistance [seeking] to reinscribe place-based territorial identity in opposition to … place eroding historical forces" (Buell 58). Sapphira's foundation of Willow Springs as a slavery-free and black-owned ideal community revises the displacement of The Middle Passage (the journey from Africa to slavery in the colonies). Theorists quibble over boundaries between place, space, and time but generally agree they are interwoven. Thus the history of a place must be contextualized because "places themselves are not stable free-standing entities but continually shaped and reshaped by forces from both inside and outside" (Buell 67). Through the land, Miranda accesses the past and the ancestors, but she also becomes part of the identity and history of the land.

The past remains accessible through the land because "actions become embedded within the landscape, surviving their actors and remaining in their original location" (Dodd 181). This connection exists within the communal memory and the natural world. Naylor demonstrates this bond repeatedly as Miranda interacts with the ancestors via the environment. Miranda literally encounters the past during Candle Walk when, as she walks beyond the family cemetery toward the other place: "a wind … starts whipping the dry weeds and bushes [leading her] to listen under the wind [to] the sound of a long wool skirt passing. Then the tread of heavy leather boots, heading straight for the main road, heading on toward the east bluff over the

ocean" (Naylor 118). Miranda literally encounters the memory of Bascombe following Sapphira when she left the island; "How long did he search for her? Up and down this path… Up and down this path, somehow, a man dies from a broken heart" (Naylor 118). His actions became absorbed so deeply by the land that Miranda could feel them one hundred and fifty-eight years later. So could the other inhabitants of Willow Springs, which is why they practiced Candle Walk.

Miranda eventually learns that in her grandfather Jonah's time Candle Walk "weren't about no candles, was about a light that burned in a man's heart. And folks would go out and look up at the stars—they figured his spirit had to be there, it was the highest place they knew. And what took him that high was his belief in right, while what buried him in the ground was the lingering taste of ginger from the lips of a woman" (Naylor 308). The description of Bascombe as a man who believes in right reflects his willingness to free the people of Willow Springs and to love Sapphira in spite of racial, cultural, and class barriers.

Bascombe's actions demonstrated great strength of character, yet his character was obscured by time. Several generations of islanders only know him as the white man who originally owned the island as a plantation and as the first recipient of 18 & 23 (18 & 23 refers to the year of Sapphira's assumption of control over Willow Springs and is also used as a metaphor for numerous concepts such as power, potential, revenge, justice, attraction, etc. 18 & 23 cannot be clearly defined or assigned a positive or negative connotation.). Bascombe's name and grave have survived, but his place in the cultural memory has been reduced to the role of Sapphira's dupe. The legends vary about the ways Sapphira murdered Bascombe: smothering him, stabbing him, or poisoning him (Naylor 3). However, these legends are colorful exaggerations because Bascombe was still alive when Sapphira left Willow Springs. He grieved himself to death—dying of a broken heart at only thirty-five years of age. Honoring a slave-owning white man fell away from the traditions of Willow Springs as slavery moved from everyday reality to memory. Once more, time revised history, relegating Bascombe from revolutionary to reactionary. Yet Bascombe also deserves recognition as one of the founders of Willow Springs.

Bascombe continues to exist as an ancestor, communing with the Days and George even though his voice is faint from the passage of time. He can be heard most clearly at his gravesite in Chevy's Pass. Naylor describes Chevy's Pass as "a right pretty place. Open and flat with the ocean breeze almost always whispering through the hanging moss on a big ancient oak, sitting right in its middle. With the wind in any direction you can smell the saltwater, but when it's coming from the east you can taste it … sorta like … dried tears" (206). Naylor's description demonstrates how history becomes embedded in the landscape. The ancient oak is the oldest tree on the island. It has not only witnessed the island's history, it continues to endure, even through the hurricane. The moss fosters communication with the ancestors and Bascombe so that "when the wind is right in the trees, you can hear him calling and calling the name that nobody knows" (Naylor 206). The eastern wind tastes like tears because it blows in from Africa echoing Bascombe's grief. Even Bascombe's tombstone is "facing due east and still standing erect" continuing his vigil for Sapphira's return after his death (Naylor 206).

George shows more respect for Bascombe than anyone else in Willow Springs. While Cocoa feels shame from a shared ancestry with a white slave owner, George considers it "a privilege few of us had. We could only look at our skin and guess. At least you knew" (Naylor 219). George cleans off Bascombe's grave when Miranda first takes him to Chevy's Pass. Later he returns to soothe himself after a fight with Cocoa. Just being in Bascombe's presence helps George feel better because he can identify with Bascombe's unhappiness. George considers Bascombe's feelings as a man instead of just thinking about him as a white man: "just look at that poor slob buried there—he gave her a whole island, and she still cut out on him" (Naylor 247). While the hurricane that represents Sapphira begins to churn the ocean in a "Tireless fury" that soothes George, he considers "There had to have been some days like this … when he stood here and waited for her" (Naylor 248). George's identification with Bascombe deepens their connection so that "as the oak branches swished even louder in the building wind [George hears] *Waste. Waste.* Yes, I looked at his monument; those leaves could easily be crying that. But legend or no, for you that wasn't her name" (Naylor 248, emphasis original). George hears the interaction between Sapphira and

Bascombe in the environment because of his ability to relate to people and his recognition that there are people behind every legend.

Miranda hears Bascombe and Sapphira, and the other ancestors, because she knows how to listen. Miranda experiences the deepest communion with the island and with the ancestors. Miranda uses the environment to access the ancestors by listening for their voices in the wind and the trees. Miranda hears Bascombe following Sapphira under the wind, and after Abigail eventually dies she "turns her face up into the warm air—You there, Sister?—to listen for the rustling of the trees" (Naylor 312). At the family cemetery, she deepens her connections by wearing moss in her shoes. The moss allows her to clearly hear the ancestors although they also speak through the plants such as the ginger vines on Bascombe's grave.

Naylor frequently uses connections with the land to foster communication. Plants can communicate history because, as Hans Jones explains, "with its adjacent surroundings, the plant forms one permanent context into which it is fully integrated, as the animal can never be in its environment" (qtd. in Casey *Getting Back* xii). The perpetuity of this connection allows the land to bear witness. Casey claims that "a plant, having no place to go, is never lost" (*Getting Back* xiii). It makes sense then that accessing the natural world helps those who struggle feel rooted again and aids self recovery. bell hooks asserts the healing power of connecting with history and the environment in her claim that "recalling the legacy of our ancestors who knew that the way we regard land and nature will determine the nature of our self-regard, black people must reclaim a spiritual legacy where we connect our well-being to the well-being of the earth" (181). Naylor affirms hooks' theory repeatedly with *Mama Day*.

Naylor demonstrates Miranda's devotion to the earth and the ancestors through her caretaking of the family garden. After the 1920 hurricane destroyed the family garden, Miranda "claimed that garden back, inch by inch, handful of soil by handful of soil" but it had taken her so long she worries "if it happens again … I ain't got another sixty years" (Naylor 228). Yet she prepares herself by "walking to remember in case nothing's left" (Naylor 242-243). The Days must preserve their land and garden in order to

endure. Miranda ties her well-being to the well-being of the land instead of to other forms of comfort or convenience. Her first action after the hurricane is to test the soil: "crumbling a fistful of earth and then licking at her fingers, she knows there's reason for hope … there's no salt" (Naylor 254). It is clear, however, that if the hurricane had salted the land, Miranda would have begun the process of reclaiming it again, thus demonstrating her devotion to the land and the ancestors.

Naylor demonstrates the spiritual legacy connecting personal and environmental well-being in the closing lines of *Mama Day*. Miranda approaches Cocoa while she communes with George next to The Sound: "Under a sky so blue it's stopped being sky, one is closer to the circle of oaks than the other. But both can hear clearly that on the east side of the island and on the west side, the waters were still" (Naylor 312). The circle of live oaks encloses the family cemetery and represents the transition from the living generation to the ancestors. Naylor deliberately chose live oaks to encircle and embrace the dead who actually continue to live as ancestors. However, the more important environmental and ancestral feature is Naylor's description of the waters as still. The water on the east side of the island represents Sapphira, her departure from the island, and the breaking of Bascombe's heart. The water on the west side of the island is The Sound, where Miranda's mother, Ophelia, drowned herself. Both women were denied peace and broke the hearts of the men who loved them. George's heartbreak differed from the sufferings of Bascombe and John-Paul because George willingly sacrificed himself for Cocoa so that she could be "given the meaning of peace" (Naylor 312). The stillness of the water represents the peace restored to the Day family. It reflects the joining of the past and present, the east and west, and heartbreak and peace. The still waters suggest a wholeness, which could not be fully realized without communion among the living, the ancestors, and the environment.

The strongest site for communion and empowerment for the Days is the other place. There Miranda communes most deeply with the ancestors. The physical memory of the ancestors remains present in the design of the house and garden and through their belongings. The spiritual presence of

the ancestors interacts through the wind and through dreams. Miranda's connection with the other place allows her to cross spiritual, natural, and temporal borders because "the Days were all rooted to the other place" (Naylor 285). Miranda must reconnect all of the broken relationships throughout the Day legacy in order to restore peace and heal Cocoa, thus supporting Stephanie Mitchem's assertion that "From a black cultural view of life, human existence is not carved into separate compartments of body and soul, sacred and profane. Instead, all the assorted pieces overlap into a cosmos that is understood as integrated and whole: each portion of life is interwoven, interrelated, and interdependent" ("Healing" 185). In order to heal Cocoa's body, peace must be restored to her soul.

When Abigail comes to the other place seeking help for Cocoa, she says "The Baby Girl is sick, Little Mama" (Naylor 262). Abigail begins the process of reconnecting the past and present by using old family names. Before Miranda became Mama Day, she was Little Mama; and before Cocoa can grow into the matriarch of Willow Springs, she will have to embrace being the Baby Girl. Miranda looks into the fire to access the family past: "staring … past the birth of Hope and Grace, past the mother who ended her life in The Sound, on to the Mother who began the Days. She sees one woman leave by wind. Another leave by water. She smells the blood from the broken hearts of the men they cursed for not letting them go" (Naylor 262-263). Miranda recognizes the pattern of heartbreak, realizing "It's gonna take a man to bring her peace" (Naylor 263). Miranda's power will not be enough. She must also draw from George's strength.

George must participate in Cocoa's healing because "Baby Girl done tied up her mind and her flesh with George" (Naylor 265). Their relationship has become so strong that "He's a part of *her*" (Naylor 267 emphasis original). This binding of health and flesh reflects the "view that each human life is interconnected with the other—living and deceased and unborn—as well as with nature and the divine. These relationships have a compelling reality that demands honor and action; failure to do so constitutes a form of sin that damages the physical and emotional, thereby creating illness" (Mitchem "Healing" 185). Cocoa cannot heal, no matter what Miranda and Abigail try,

until George helps too. Miranda does not learn how George can help, until she participates in communion with the ancestors, nature, and the divine.

At the other place, Miranda begins her communion by recalling happy memories even though she does not have many. Recalling happier times becomes imperative: "it's the good times she's gotta call up, or there weren't no reason to come here" (Naylor 278). There must have been times when the house still held peace and those are what Miranda must access. Naylor allows Miranda to make a physical connection between the past and present by discovering Bascombe Wade's ledger and the bill of sale for Sapphira. However, Sapphira's name did not survive the ravages of time, causing Miranda to attempt to force the name from the magic of the other place. Miranda fails to complete her communion because "a gift is something that's given, not demanded" (Naylor 280). Miranda will not be allowed to commune with the ancestors, the natural world, or the divine until she is open to their message instead of her desires. Miranda feels the absence of Sapphira's name as "a loss that she can't describe … a missing key to an unknown door somewhere in that house. The door to help Baby Girl" (Naylor 280). Thus the other place takes on yet another dimension as a metaphoric portal to healing. Miranda can only access that portal through her dreams where she "opens door upon door upon door" until she finally meets Sapphira (Naylor 283). Miranda never learns Sapphira's name, but Sapphira greets her as "Daughter," thus healing Miranda's loss of her mother and her childhood (Naylor 283). The comfort of finally being a daughter begins "to fill up the spaces where there was never no arms to hold her up, no shoulders for her to lay her head down and cry on, no body to ever turn to for answers" replacing the loss of Ophelia (Naylor 283).

Naylor portrays Sapphira's nurturing as a revisionary flood melting away each of Miranda's titles: "Miranda. Sister. Little Mama. Mama Day. Melting, melting away under the sweet flood waters pouring down to lay bare a place she ain't known existed: Daughter" (Naylor 283). Naylor even renders Miranda multilocal by referring to spaces and places Miranda didn't know existed. The filling of those places leads to the concept of wholeness. Sapphira heals Miranda's soul and enables her to finally rest within her sleep before

telling her "to look past the pain [when she must] go out and uncover the well where Peace died" (Naylor 283). Miranda's communion with Sapphira links the past with the present, the supernatural with the natural, and the spiritual with the physical.

At the well, Miranda must root herself within the environment by placing "her feet tangled in the ground holly, her stomach pressed against the heart-shaped ginger" before she can "look past the pain" (Naylor 284). Miranda's connection with the environment supports bell hooks' assertion that "when we talk about healing the psyche we must also speak about restoring our connection to the natural world" (180). Only after she braces herself in "almost a hundred years worth of rotted moss and tangled creepers" is she able to access the past (Naylor 283). Even then, she must open herself to a spiritual experience by relying on communion with the ancestors: "with her eyes clamped shut, she looks at the sounds" realizing that "once, twice, three times peace was lost at that well" (Naylor 284). The loss of peace also resulted in separation from the ancestors. Not one single generation of the Day family remained whole.

The Days continue to honor their ancestors, but the loss of peace affects them all. According to Toni Morrison, the "happiness or success" of characters is related to the "presence or absence" of ancestral figures (343). Since "healing is effected in repaired and restored relationships, enabling a better future," Miranda and Cocoa cannot succeed until peace is restored to the Days (Mitchem *African American Healing* 113). In order to help Cocoa, Miranda must honor all of the relationships that helped to form her. As Miranda realized when she first returned to the other place, "All that Baby Girl is was made by the people who walked these oak floors, sat and dreamed out on that balcony" and all of those people and their dreams must be honored to reclaim her (Naylor 278). Miranda still doesn't know how to heal the past or Cocoa until she "opens her eyes on her own hands. Hands that look like John-Paul's" and realizes she must expand her emotions to consider the pain of the heartbroken men in the family, including the often ignored Bascombe Wade (Naylor 285). Miranda can only help Cocoa if she overlaps the entire family history and joins with George at the other place to create a metaphysical bridge in the ultimate act of communion.

Naylor, however, provides George with two ways to heal Cocoa. He can join his strength and faith with Miranda, or he can draw from "his own place within him" (Naylor 285). Either way, George's hands and his faith in himself are the key requirements to heal Cocoa. He must feel the same "hope [as Bascombe and John-Paul carried] in them that the work of their hands could wipe away all that had gone before" (Naylor 285). George already possesses great faith in himself. After growing up independent of family, community, or a sense of home-place, he can only believe in himself. Although Miranda attempts to join George with Bascombe and John-Paul through their ledger and cane, for George, "only the present has potential," so the symbolic quest is only a waste of time (Naylor 126). He can only laugh bitterly at "All of this wasted effort when these were *my* hands, and there was no way I was going to let you go" (Naylor 301, emphasis original). George's faith in himself heals Cocoa at the expense of his own life. Once George lays his hands on Cocoa, his heart bursts, but they both experience peace.

Naylor uses George to caution against spiritual independence and isolation. His sacrifice was unnecessary. George could have healed Cocoa by communing with Miranda and the ancestors at the other place. Miranda tries to lead George to trust her with his faith in himself, to give her his hand "so she can connect it up with all the believing that had gone before" spanning the past and present (Naylor 285). This connection can only happen at the other place: "A single moment was all she asked, even a fingertip to touch hers here at the other place. So together they could be the bridge for Baby Girl to walk over" (Naylor 285). Miranda could "guide him safely through that extra mile where the others had stumbled" over their own stubborn independence if he would only let her (Naylor 285). The magic of the other place, the multilocality of the other place, empowers Miranda to build a spiritual bridge to reconnect the men and women, the past and present, the hope and heartbreak of the Days. Yet George chooses, fatally, to save Cocoa by himself. Still, Naylor does not abandon him. He becomes part of Willow Springs. Each time Cocoa returns to the island, she returns to him. Her commitment to the island reaffirms her commitment to George and strengthens a communion among all three. Finally George belongs to a family, a place, a history, and a community.

Naylor's characters, and, one hopes, her readers learn the power of communion. Communion among the environment, the ancestors, the current generation, and self creates the wholeness necessary for a truly full and happy life. As bell hooks asserts, "self-recovery takes place when we begin to renew our relationship to the earth, when we remember the way of our ancestors" (182). *Mama Day* demonstrates the potential for self recovery and points the way to make it happen. By accepting our place within our environment, our community, our history, and ourselves, we can tap into magic. Naylor defines magic as "the flowering of human potential" (Cleage 65). That potential includes redefining space and history. It allows us to practice resistance from the margin as well as to transcend every border that ever attempts to confine us. When we finally banish nature and culture as a dichotomy in favor of accepting the earth as an ancestor, we transcend ourselves, completing hooks' idea of self-recovery: "When the earth is sacred to us, our bodies can also be sacred to us" (182). Through *Mama Day*, Naylor demonstrates the empowering benefits of communion with the natural world to recover the sacred within ourselves.

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