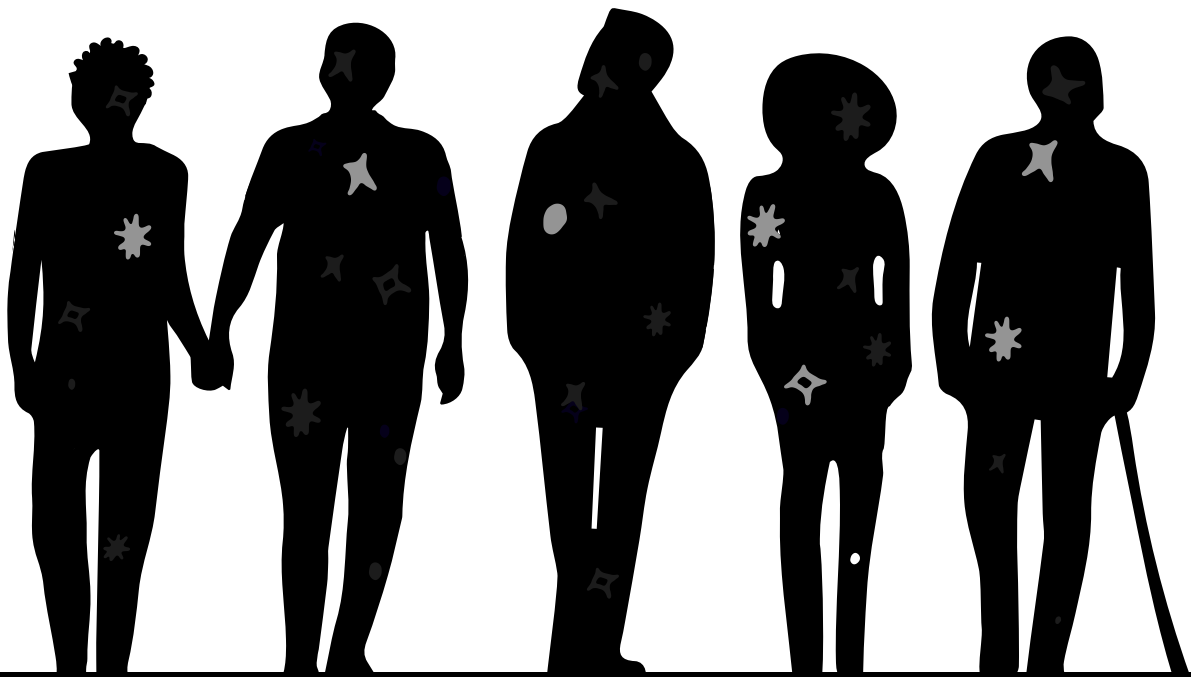


# THE COSMIC WE

Episode 3:  
Becoming Instruments of Grace  
and Compassionate Justice

with Dr. Rachel Elizabeth Harding



from the CENTER FOR ACTION AND CONTEMPLATION

Rachel Harding: We all have ancestors in this struggle who want a more compassionate, a more humane America, and we can point to them in all of our communities, there are all kinds of folks who have held on to this fugitive vision of what the US can be. And so that's exciting for me. Also, frankly, it's hard, hard work. It pulls on your spirit. You really have to stay connected with these students and what is it that they need to know so that they can stay believing in what's possible in themselves and in this country?

Donald Bryant: This podcast explores the mystery of relatedness as an organizing principle of the universe and of our lives.

Barbra Holmes: We're trying to catch a glimpse of connections beyond color, continent, country, or kinship. And we're going to do this through science, mysticism, spirituality, and the creative arts.

Donald Bryant: I'm Donald Bryant.

Barbra Holmes: I'm Barbara Holmes, and this is Cosmic We. Our guest today is Dr. Rachel Elizabeth Harding. She is Associate Professor of Indigenous Spiritual Traditions in the Department of Ethnic Studies at the University of Colorado Denver. A native of Georgia, a writer, historian, and poet. Rachel is a specialist in religions of the Afro Atlantic Diaspora and studies the relationship between religion, creativity and social justice activism in cross cultural perspective. She's a Cave Canem Fellow, holds an MFA in Creative Writing from Brown University and a PhD in History from the University of Colorado Boulder.

Dr. Harding is author of *A Refuge in Thunder: Candomblé and Alternative Spaces of Blackness*, as well as numerous poems and essays. Dr. Harding's second book, *Remnants: A Memoir of Spiritual, Activism and Mothering* combines her own writings with the autobiographical reflections of her mother, Rosemarie Freeney Harding. And it's all about their family history and the role of compassion and spirituality and African American social justice organizing.

Dr. Harding is an ebomi (elder initiate) in the Terreiro do Cobre Candomblé community in Salvador, Bahia, Brazil, where she has been a participant for over 20 years. It is so good to see you, Dr. Harding, welcome.

Rachel Harding: Thank you so much. It's my pleasure and my honor to be with you all today.

Barbra Holmes: I think if my memory serves me, I met you first at a meeting in Haleigh's Farm in Tennessee where Bernice Johnson, Reagan, your dad, Grace Bogs, and a whole bunch of others, we gathered for Movement Talk. And boy did it turn into something else, it turned into a moment of spiritual empowerment. I never forgot that weekend. Your friend from Brazil was also there. What was her name?

Rachel Harding: I believe that would've been Makoto Valgiena Pento, who passed a couple of years ago. But yes, she was one of my elders and mentors in the Candomblé tradition.

Barbra Holmes: And I met your dad after I became a professor, because theology was a third career for me. So it was during his latter years. And I know your mom from the book you wrote

together, but both of your parents were icons in the Civil Rights Movement. I mean, what was it like growing up in the midst of the movement? Who were the movement people sitting in your living room?

Rachel Harding: Yes. Well, sometimes it's hard to know how to answer that question because, of course, my childhood is the only one I had, so I don't have a lot to compare it to. But I certainly am aware and became aware, I would say by the time I was in my late teens and early twenties, and certainly by now, in my late fifties. I am aware that my parents, and their comrades, and colleagues, and extended family raised me and my brother and a number of the cousins who lived with us at different times, in a very special environment. It's one that, as I think about it now, I think of in terms of a certain energy of fugitivity, that these were people who had experienced and in fact had helped to create a moment in the history of the country that was allowing some new possibilities, some very depthful and expansive possibility for multiracial democracy, for new meanings of the human in the US context, they were a part of that.

And they believed so strongly in the potential of the country to be a good, compassionate, just, inclusive space for everybody who lives here. That even as the elites of the country began to be afraid of what this would mean. My parents and the people who they built community with held onto this vision and held onto ways of living with each other, helping when folks needed sometimes to send their children to us or my mom and dad sent us to other people. So Bernie Johnson Reagan, of course, is one of the first people that I remember because she and her family lived on the first floor of a house at 201 Ashby Street. The house no longer exists in Atlanta, at the corner of what was Ashby and Fair. I think the names may be a little different now.

But I remember hearing the sounds of, actually the groups that predated Sweet Honey and The Rock. Bernice, of course, had been singing all of her life and she had movement groups. I'm trying to remember the name, but it'll come to me. But I remember them singing and the sounds of the songs coming up through the floorboards. And so those were some of my earliest memories. And then, of course, lots of movement people, the Moses family, when we got to Philadelphia, Sonya Sanchez and her sons. So there were lots of people who were involved in the Southern Freedom Movement, in the Black Consciousness Movement, in the Black Studies Movement, who became very close colleagues and family members and extended family to me and my brother.

Barbra Holmes: Yeah. What's interesting is that even though there were different ideologies in the Black Consciousness Movement, that there was this connection, I mean from H Rap Brown, at the West End in Atlanta, to King and his cohorts, even though you weren't speaking the same language, there was a sense of neighborhood and community between you.

Donald Bryant: Oh, absolutely. One of the blessings of my life, and again, this is one of those things that you began to appreciate maybe the older you get and when your folks aren't physically here anymore. But both of my parents, my mom and dad had, I think, a wonderful capacity for non-dualism. And they just immediately were attracted to, looked for the places of connection in whatever settings they found themselves. And as

you may know, they traveled through, and in, and with lots of different kinds of groups.

My dad started in a Seventh Day Christian Church, which was, of course, the West Indian/African American version of Seventh Day Adventist's in New York. My mom grew up in a family where there were a lot of different Black Protestant tendencies, but the heart of her religion was what I like to call kind of an indigenous Southern African American mysticism that's grounded in Black Church understandings, but includes attention to many things that I later found were very much connected to other Afro Atlantic traditions, like attention to dreams and signs, the importance of music and movement and hospitality.

So this is where they started, but then they met in the Mennonite Church in the late fifties, when they were two of the few African Americans in the Mennonite Church. And they came into the Mennonite faith at precisely the time that both the Mennonites and the nation were really trying to figure out what does this racial justice stuff mean? What does it mean for the institution? What does it mean for the nation? And they then were able to convince the Mennonite Central Committee, this service arm of the Mennonite Church, to sponsor them, to essentially have a movement house, a movement base in Atlanta, the Mennonite House.

Which was the first interracial social service agency, we think, in Atlanta, certainly the first one in Mennonite circles, and the first one run by Black people. And it became a movement gathering space, and retreat space, and conversation space where people... Dr. Barbara from precisely these various parts of the movement would come and talk. So people from SNCC, people from SCLC, people from Core, the Black Muslims, folks from the HBCU campuses would gather and have conversations about, as my mom used to say, "What kind of country it is that we want to create."

Because, of course, in the early sixties, mid sixties, this is what people were understanding was possible now. That we could really rethink what kind of country we would have. And so those were some of the kinds of conversations that they helped host and participated in. And then once the movement began to... Well, specifically after Martin Luther King's assassination, when all kinds of other energies were moving in the country. First, just this tremendous grief and rage within the African American community and our sense that, "We have given you our best, and this is the way the country responds." Folks were like, "Okay, well all bets are off and we got to find some other ways to respond to this."

And then at the same time, they were all over the North and the West, Philadelphia, New York, Chicago, Detroit, LA, Denver, every city in the country at that time. I know this is a little parenthetical, but it's one of the things that I'm just fascinated about. How Black creative political arts community organizations were just flourishing everywhere. I'm sure Dr.

Barbara, you remember some examples from where you were living.

And so because of my dad's connection to the Institute of the Black World and his work in the founding of African American Studies, they were just moving all around the country, meeting, and talking, and planning, and working with people who were trying to look at what kinds of educational changes, in addition to artistic, political, other kinds of things. And then they got involved, when we moved to Philadelphia with the Quakers and with a number of the peace movements and the labor movements and the women's movement and the gay and lesbian rights movements. And then moving out to Denver, connected with Chicanos and Native Americans who were here. So my folks just were involved in all kinds of creative, compassionate, explorations of what another kind of America could be in the mid and late 20th century and the beginning of the 21st.

Barbra Holmes: I mean, they created such fertile soil for the next generation. It's really amazing. You, in your book, which I really enjoyed reading, memoirs, remnants. You say quote, "We all want and need and have the right to joy in this life. To avoid unnecessary suffering. None of us is more worthy than the next. None of us is less worthy than the next. We are all the same in this. We have all been each other's mothers." Can you talk about how mothering and activism go together?

Rachel Harding: So that statement, I think from the preface of the book was me paraphrasing my mom. My mother, I don't even know quite what to say. Again, this is one of those examples where I was just her daughter and I was raised with her and she was the model and the example I knew, and it wasn't until much later and particularly after she passed, that I realized really what an extraordinary... And I knew I love my mother, like many of us, all our mamas are the best mama in the world, right?

Barbra Holmes: Right.

Rachel Harding: That statement that you just shared, Dr. Barbara came, in part, from my mom's practice and study of Buddhism. She studied with the Dalai Lama and with other Tibetan Lama's and then just all of her life, again, in this spirit of non-dualism of inclusivity that she and my dad shared, with always looking for and interested in the mystic teachings of the world. And that foundation actually was from her mother who was born and raised in a little town in Southwest Georgia, Leesburg. And her mother, Mom Eliza, and then Mom Eliza's mother, Mama Rye, who we believe was brought to the US on one of the last shipments in the slave trade, that as she came as a young child.

And my mom always attributed this openness in her thinking to the African inclusivity. Most African traditions, certainly West, Central, Southern African traditions have a tendency more to find ways to include rather than to exclude. So even in terms of cosmological, religious, philosophical thinking, the effort is to find ways to gather in the different elements that may appear rather than to say, cut and dry. "This is what we believe and we are not going to change ever,

anything.”

So that idea of mothering, I would say is one that she practiced and that she learned from her mother and from the women before her in our lineage. Mothering as a practice of development, of helping people, situations, institutions, nations, become what they have the fullest potential to be. And to see mothering beyond the limitations of just, and it's not just, of course, it's a major thing to bring children into the world and to raise them and to give them ethics and guidance. And to see mothering as also the way in which we can do that on the scale of the larger collective as well.

And I think that connects in many ways to womanist theology to, of course, Alice Walker and others who help us understand mothering beyond sex and gender, but also just this powerful nurturing, and guidance, and wisdom. Wisdom that comes from the lived experience of women.

Donald Bryant: And Dr. Harding, I was going to say thank you for being inclusive in sharing the idea of mothering as a concept that transcends gender. For many of us men, oftentimes when we hear certain gender specific terminologies, we tend to just disconnect from the conversation. “It's not about me.” And so I really appreciate bringing in the learning in the scholarship that says, “No, this principle of mothering is actually universal.” So thank you for that.

Barbra Holmes: I think our stories intersect a lot because I lived in Atlanta during some of that period of time and I also was extremely close to my mother and slept in hospitals during her illnesses like you did. There is this way in which we are carrying our mother's stories in our own bodies as we move on. And in our current times, it's very clear to the world that this nation no longer gets along with its fellow citizens. We don't agree on anything anymore. Our goals and our purposes seem conflicted. And most of the purposes of the institutions seem contrary to the common good. And you talk about teaching Ethnic Studies as a help to the nation that doesn't seem to know what to do with this diversity. Can you say a little bit more about that?

Rachel Harding: Yes. There's so many things to say. For most of my teaching experience, I have been in institutions, primarily white institutions. And then to some extent, the school where I am now, the University of Colorado, Denver, is in an interesting transformative process because it is the Premier Public Urban University in the state. And over the past 20 years or so, it's had a growing number of immigrant students of Latino, Latina, Latinx students, first generation students. As an urban university, it has always had a number of first generation students. But there are many more students of color in the school now than there were 20, 25 years ago.

One of the beautiful experiences for me of teaching at the University of Colorado, Denver, is coming into contact with students who whether they are newly arrived in the US or whether they are from families, whether Black families or white families or native families or Asian families or Latinx families, who have been here for a while, they are at a point in their lives. And as you said, Dr. Barbara, living in the context of a country with, I think in some ways, where the schizophrenia of the nation is

highlighted. We've got this rhetoric around justice, and rights, and democracy, and et cetera.

And we have a history and a present that points to some very different directions. And the students are saying, "So what's really going on here? What's the real history of this place?" And, "Where do I fit? Where do I fit with the...?" Many of them come with deep concerns, humanistic concerns for their own lives and their families, but wanting to be a part of a country that honors and recognizes and has compassion for everybody who lives here. And so it's exciting for me in many ways, I love the desire, the interests of the students to learn.

They are also, almost without exception, unless they have had extraordinary learning before they come to the school, either from their families or sometimes from just a really good teacher, most of them have no idea of what the complexity of our nation's history. And for white students, often there is this process of having to both come face-to-face, maybe sometimes for the first time in a classroom setting in their lives, with looking at what white supremacy has wrought in the nation.

And so in those cases, I pay very close attention, both for their sakes and I think for everybody's sake, to highlight the white folks in our history who have had another vision of what the country could be. Who have had a more humanistic, a more inclusive vision. So starting from the Grimke Sisters, and John Brown, up to Anne Braden, and folks who have been in support of Black Lives Matter, it's just invigorating for them.

And again, for everyone to know that we all have ancestors in this struggle who want a more compassionate, a more humane America. And we can point to them in all of our communities, in class groups, in gender groups, in regions, in races, there are all kinds of folks who have held on to this fugitive vision of what the US can be. And so that's exciting for me. Also, frankly, it's hard, it's hard work. It pulls on your spirit, because it's not the kind of work that you can just like, "okay, just go into class, do the lecture, and then that's it."

You really have to stay connected with these students and what is it that they need to know so that they can stay believing in what's possible in themselves and in this country.

Barbra Holmes: Your parents were working and seeking justice during an extremely dangerous time. The Atlanta area must have provided some microcosm of safety. But in your book, you talk about a period of time when your mother was traveling and encountered issues of perhaps poisoning in her food in one place in Central America, of having been singled out by soldiers to be taken away from her group, of having a needle prick in an airport by someone who encountered her. Now, I know you don't know firsthand, but I don't put anything past Jay Edgar Hoover during that time period. And I know your parents were under surveillance by the FBI and others. What do you know about all of that?

Rachel Harding: Well, the experience that you're describing right now was after Hoover and would be more in the Reagan Bush years. But, of course, that's a similar kind of ideology. I'll

start earlier. You're right. In Atlanta as a child in the midst of the Southern Freedom Movement, there was a tremendous amount of just loving support, groundedness. I'm very, very grateful that I had that as my beginning space. And at the same time, because so many people were being killed and my parents as activists in the movement were very much connected to folks who were being disappeared, who were losing their lives. And as a little child, I remember Martin Luther King's assassination.

I have this image of myself standing in front of the window, the second floor of this house where Bernice and her family lived on the first floor. And looking out and seeing the grayness like a cloudy day, maybe a slightly rainy day. I don't remember if that's actually what the weather was like, but that was the feeling that I had. I remember feeling very alone at that moment. I also know that my dad took me to the viewing of his body, which I believe was at Sister's Chapel, in Spellman.

And I remember standing in line and going up and just being surrounded by people and energy of a combination of shock and grief, but also a lot of just this collective spirit. Even before that, I am aware that I was always frightened when my parents would leave. I did not like them to leave. And I don't know how they managed to have a relationship with each other, with me in that time because I didn't want to be away from them. I would be afraid and I would get in their bed at night. I didn't want babysitters to stay with me. And I think part of that was just not knowing exactly what was going on, but being aware of the dangers.

And then in terms of the experience that my mother had in El Salvador, which is where she was poisoned, miraculously, she was able to get out of that. After the Southern Freedom Movement, my folks got involved in lots of other organizing efforts for compassionate social justice. And I mentioned a lot of them, but I didn't mention Central American Solidarity, South African Solidarity. And so that experience that my mom had was in the context of some work with, Witness for Peace, that they were doing.

She didn't talk about it immediately. It was years later actually, when we were working on Remnants that she started giving me... I knew a little bit, but she gave me the full story at that point because she also, she had a thought, no exact proof, but an instinct that may have had some relation to her very strange illness that she got later in life and that she ultimately passed from.

But I think what stays with me most about that story, and I've had a few people when I do readings from the book, ask me particularly about that story. What stays with me most is how even those kinds of attacks and threats, my mom and dad were so deeply ensconced in this other understanding, not only of what the country could be, but of who they were, what the world was about, who and what God is. And they were so committed to working to try to bring some more beautiful way of being American into being, that it didn't stop them. It was hard. I'm not going to... You've read the book and it's not easy at all. But I think that there's just something about, particularly the way they understood, and I know that there are other understandings of what the African American experience is. But for my mama and daddy, it was being in this lineage of great vision and great resistance.



And they just understood themselves to be surrounded as my dad would say, “By the cloud of witnesses.” Which was the angels, was God, was the ancestors, family ancestors, our Black history ancestors. And they just went on and did what they needed to do. And again, you got to understand this was not easy for them, for family, but they were committed. And I’m grateful every day. I’m grateful for what they have given, not just to me, but to many, many other people, so that we don’t get afraid. We don’t get afraid because we all going to leave here. We are all going to leave here. To know that you are enveloped and encouraged and accompanied in the work, in the struggle, in the joys, in the life, gives you a way to continue forward.

Donald Bryant: Yeah, I think there’s a beauty in the vision that both your mother and father had in the term remnants. It really resonates here. It resonates on so many different levels. And I see it resonating in your work, your scholarship, but your work in the Ethnic Studies Department. This vision of non-dualism, this vision... And you mentioned something earlier that they were, as they started their journey, that they were attracted to connection and they looked for places for connection.

This concept of community and inclusivity, and you are mirroring that through your work, you’re reflecting that. What is your vision for the future, the next generation? What do you say to the next generation of remnants? How can we carry on this vision of non-dualism in such a way that’s unique to what you do?

Rachel Harding: Thank you. That’s a lovely question. As Dr. Barbara mentioned, I am a historian of Afro Atlantic Religions and a lot of my work, of course, is based in the African American experience. But I also give a lot of attention and energy in my life and receive a lot of energy from my work in Brazil. Particularly, with Afro Brazilian religions and more specifically with Candomblé, which is one of many religions created by Africans and their descendants here in the Americas during slavery, and in the years after the abolition of slavery, there were just in almost every country in the Americas, from Chile and Argentina to the South, up to the US and Canada. Black folks who were enslaved brought elements of their ancestral understandings of what life, and spirit, and the divine, and community, and our relationship to everything that exists in the world that came with us. They brought that with them.

And depending on what they found, whether it was Protestant, whether it was Catholic, whether it was a mining region, a plantation region, whether they had access to a lot of other Black people, whether they were by themselves, whether they were in cities, they created these new forms of religion, of holding on to spirit. And so, of course, African American Christianity is in that lineage, and you can look at it through that lens of the larger Afro Atlantic expression of spirituality in the context of this history. And Brazil has its own traditions and Candomblé is one of the older ones and is just this magnificent poetic, lyric, artistic, music and dance centered, woman leadership, centered in many instances it’s also very inclusive and there are many Candomblé communities that are led by men. But many of the oldest of the traditions, and especially in the Europe lineage of Candomblé, were founded by women and to this day are run by women.

And one of the things that I hope for, certainly for people of African descent in the

United States, but there are lessons in this for all of us. I hope that people will have opportunities to travel and to engage with indigenous understandings of the world. Whether they are in Mexico, whether they are in Venezuela, and Columbia, and Peru, whether they are in Brazil. And I include the African indigeneity when I talk about indigenous. I've been thinking, I was just in Brazil for about five weeks earlier this summer. And one of the things that I've been thinking about a lot in terms of the idea of reparations for African Americans and for Black people throughout the Americas who were impacted by the slave trade.

I've been thinking about the fact that one of the key experiences that marks our history, our life, and to this day, our identity as people of African descent in the Americas, is the fact that we were disaggregated from our families. That wherever we ended up, whether it was Barbados, or Brazil, or Mexico, or the South of the US, or the North of the US. Wherever we ended up, inevitably our families were stricken with this enforced and violent separation. And so one of my dreams for a meaning of reparation is for Black folks to be able to find family again.

And I mean, not just the searching that we are doing within the confines, for example of the US looking on ancestry.com or doing the DNA work. But being able to go too Jamaica, to go to Ghana, to go to Salvador Bahia, because in my experience, those travels have been a mnemonic device. They have been a way of remembering. I would not have been able to write, Remnants. My mom and I would not have been able to have the conversations around African-American indigenous spirituality, the mysticism, the mothering, if I had not been to Brazil, because it's not that it's not there in our culture, it's there. But I wasn't able to see it until I had been with the women of Candomblé.

And I said, "Wait a minute, this looked like my grand mama's kitchen. This sounds like the conversations I had with my mom and my aunties and conversations that Black women..." They have with their sons too. We have them in Black families, but we often don't have them outside of family context. Like the way we pay attention, there's always, in my experience and in my generation, your listeners can tell me if this is different for younger people. But for my generation and older, there's always somebody in the family who, when you have a dream, you can talk to about what that means. As African Americans, a lot of times we don't think anything of that.

Barbra Holmes: No.

Rachel Harding: But that is an essential element in Afro Atlantic spiritual traditions, in ways that we understand the wisdom that the universe is trying to share with us. You find that everywhere in Santeria in Cuba, in Voodoo in Haiti, in Candomblé, in Winti, and we have it here. And so there are things like that, and I could give you many other examples that I did not even see, even though they were in my face, until I got to a place where the structure to hold them had been maintained in a particular way.

So I just encourage us, we got to find the family, the family, the cousins in Brazil have stuff that we need and we have information and experience that they need as well. And so part of my vision for a future, it's a very specific kind of piece because it's what I'm

working on, is getting us reconnected with the larger diasporic family because there's so much wisdom about how to be human in a difficult world, that we can learn from them and they can learn from us.

Barbra Holmes: We're talking about Candomblé as if all of our listeners know what it is. I'm not so sure that they understand what the basic tenets are, the beliefs, practices. Could you just briefly share and what attracted you to it?

Rachel Harding: Ooh, that's a whole nother story, but I'll try to be brief. So yes, Candomblé like many indigenous traditions, if not most around the world is a religion of reciprocity and balance. It's a religion that's grounded in West and Central African traditions, particularly Yoruba from what's now Nigeria and Benin and Togo, the Dahomie traditions, which are also in Benin. Bantu based traditions from Central and Southern Africa. All of these, of course, were the primary places that people who were kidnapped from Western central Africa and ended up in Brazil, these were the folks who they came from.

In many ways it's a kind of panafrican synthesis of essential cosmological and philosophical understandings of what it is to be human in the world. And in my understanding and in my experience, central to that, as I said, is a spirit of reciprocity. So it's an understanding that human beings are here. It's like the Bantu based and also West African traditions have similar saying that, "I am a person because of other people, that our identity as individual humans is absolutely connected to the others with whom we live, from whom we descend, and who will be our descendants."

But not only other human beings we are related to, as my elder, the one that you met, Valgiena Pento said that everything that God put on this earth before human beings got here. So the water that's necessary for our life, the air, the animals, the plants, the minerals, the rocks, all of these living beings, everything that has life is related to us. And so one of the things that I love about Candomblé, and again that is shared with indigenous traditions of all kinds around the world, is the importance of ritual in acknowledging these connections.

Candomblé is a religion of rituals that acknowledge our connection to each other, and to the natural forces of the world, and to everything that exists. There's a language that talks about the energies, the various energies that exist in the universe as either [foreign language 00:41:52] in the Uruba language or [foreign language 00:41:54] in the Bantu based languages or in the [foreign language 00:42:00] or [inaudible 00:42:02] languages. I'm forgetting right now, but it'll come to me. Of course, in the Vodun tradition, it's [foreign language 00:42:08]. But there's another term that we use in the [foreign language 00:42:12] tradition of Candomblé.

But all of them represent the divine in the world, aspects of God. And we see that in fire, in water, in earth, in metal, in lightning. So all of what people might consider natural forces in the world are understood as part of God's being, as part of the divine, as part of the sacred. And we have relationship to them. And each individual person represents a different constellation of those energies.

So for example, my primary Orisha is [foreign language 00:42:58], who is the energy of sweet water, of rivers, and streams as opposed to salt water, which is another Orisha, [foreign language 00:43:10]. And [foreign language 00:43:12] energy is particularly associated with creativity and fertility, both in terms of birthing children, bringing new physical human life into the world, but also birthing ideas, birthing new connections. She is associated with abundance and with women's wisdom.

And so all of the Orishas have their areas of specialization or areas of focus. And all of us, as human beings, have different combinations of those energies. I also carry [foreign language 00:43:50]. I also carry [foreign language 00:43:53] the Orisha of peace. I also carry [foreign language 00:43:56] the energy of transformation's.

Barbra Holmes: That's mine.

Rachel Harding: Yes. And all of us have different combinations. They will often in the Candomblé context, be a particular one at your head. The others are also with you, helping you, guiding you, accompanying you, in this life. And so it's a religion of community, of community with the spirit world, of community with the created world that God made the plants, the animals, all that is here, that together sustains life and the community with other human beings.

Barbra Holmes: Yes. Well, while I was on a trip to Cuba, Sentara told me that [foreign language 00:44:40] ruled my head and then went about a ritual that proved it. The mystery. The mystery. Oh, if you don't travel, your world remains small only you don't know how small it is. It is in the travel that you begin to expand your viewpoint and your ability to embrace neighbor. As Christians, we say, "Oh, you're supposed to love your neighbor as yourself." Well if you don't know them, it's really difficult to embrace what you don't know. I would be remiss if I didn't ask you about this mystical experience. Tell us about the light and your experience with the light?

Rachel Harding: Yes. Well, again, the one that I think that you're referring to at the beginning of Remnants is my mom's experience. So again, she was raised in a family that, as she would say, understood that many things exist that we can't see and touch. And they are real and they impact us and we engage with them in different ways. And she had an experience, she was the youngest of nine. One of her older brothers, Uncle Bud, was her favorite older brother. And he was also someone in the family, as I of course didn't know him, but just remembering stories, her stories and other family stories about him, was just a very gregarious person, had a lot of energy, was very protective of the family. Someone that everyone loved. When she was about 12, he was killed in a bar room fight. And she says she remembers getting the news.

This time would've been in the early forties. Our very big, extended family who had all, many of us in the US, Black folks, had migrated North to escape the terrorism of the white South. And so we had a huge family, extended family, of aunts and cousins and everybody, and everybody was coming over to the house. And my mom remembers going into a room to just lie down and rest. And she saw at a certain point, her brother who had passed, come into the room and stand at the foot of her bed and just tell her, "It's going to be all right, everything's okay."

And she remembered that experience and carried that with her all of her life. And later when she was about 21, she had another experience in her bedroom of seeing a light. And she didn't know quite how to describe it other than that it was both very bright and very comforting and seemed to come from... I think we'll have to check the book to... I don't remember exactly if it came from the window or if it just appeared in the room. But it was just encompassing, it surrounded her. And she said she doesn't even remember how long she was in it, but by the time she became aware of herself and the light wasn't in the room anymore, she said she just felt like she was changed.

And she started at that point, she said she knew it was some kind of special or spiritual experience, but she didn't have the language for it. She wasn't someone who went to church regularly at that time. So she started looking for a way, a practice, a structure, that would keep her connected to what she felt from the light. And at that point, as she puts it, the person that she most admired and who she thought was the best example of a person living a spiritual life was her older sister, my Auntie Alma. And Auntie Alma had recently joined a Mennonite Mission church on the West Side of Chicago.

And so my mama started going to church with her sister, and that then led to her being able to go to college. She was the first one in our family to go to college through a scholarship to a Mennonite College, Goshen College. And then hooked up with my dad and they went South. And the rest is their story, our story.

Barbra Holmes: The rest is history. What a wonderful story.

Donald Bryant: Wow. Amazing.

Barbra Holmes: I'm sure you've had your own mystical experiences.

Rachel Harding: Yeah. Quite a few.

Donald Bryant: I'm glad you brought that story, the history of how your... Because I was going to ask how your mom and dad met in a Mennonite church. And again, this concept of non-dualism just keeps coming up, right? And I think maybe this is, The Way, in the book of Acts, this terminology used of, The Way. And maybe our culture and our institutions, maybe we have just, for whatever reason, self-centered, self-absorption, oppression, whatever the motivation, greed. We have architected something that is an alternative to The Way. And maybe there's a simplicity, maybe there's a wisdom in what the message... There's kind of a scarlet thread. And even the journey that you're taking that your parents took, there's a scarlet thread that, to me, resonates and it's a universal resonance. There's a cosmic resonance here. There's a vibration here that I think we're all being drawn to.

And maybe there's an opportunity just to listen, to hear, to rest in a sense and what this means to all of us. And I'm inspired because as I hear the consciousness, the awareness, the concern for the common good, the desire to heal, the desire to participate in a cosmic wholeness, a restoration of that which is good. That is something that we all should be drawn to, to be attracted to. And so there's some great wisdom here. Not just from an intellectual standpoint, but just from a human, just

from being, from an existence standpoint. And it's beautiful.

And I think the fact that your mom was the first generation to go to college at Goshen and met your dad there, and they were inspired by mission oriented people who saw something for the greater good, the common good, and wasn't just about trying to make people saved and go to heaven, but it was trying to make heaven here on earth, trying to reproduce something here. And I just think that is something that's beautiful and thank you for that.

Rachel Harding: Oh, thank you. I just want to correct just one little piece. My mom and dad didn't meet at Goshen. I'm sorry if what I said suggested that, but because Goshen was a Mennonite institution, and so my mom came into the Mennonites through that way and my dad came in another way and then they met. But absolutely, it was because of the Goshen experience put her in the circle of Mennonites.

And thank you so much for that. You know what you just shared, Dr. Donny made me think, if you all don't mind, there's a short... It's the very beginning of the preface of the book. It would take maybe a minute to read, but I think is an encapsulation from my mother's perspective of exactly what you were saying. Dr. Donny. If I might read it, would that be okay?

Donald Bryant: Absolutely.

Barbra Holmes: We'd be delighted.

Rachel Harding: There is no scarcity, there is no shortage, no lack of love, of compassion, of joy in the world. There is enough. There is more than enough. Only fear and greed make us think otherwise. No one need starve, there is enough land and enough food. No one need die of thirst, there is enough water. No one need live without mercy, there is no end to grace. And we are all instruments of grace. The more we give it, the more we share it, the more we use it, the more God makes. There is no scarcity of love. There is plenty and always more.

Donald Bryant: Beautiful.

Barbra Holmes: Thank you Dr. Rachel Harding for an amazing conversation.

Donald Bryant: Thank you.

Barbra Holmes: We are delighted to have talked with you.

Rachel Harding: I am so happy that you asked me and gave me this opportunity to share. Thank you both very much.

Donald Bryant: Thank you for listening to this episode. We'd like to leave you with a few reflections on our conversation.

Barbra Holmes: I really enjoyed our talk with Dr. Rachel Harding. And I think the reason it was so much fun for me was because I knew her father well. And I knew that the work

that he and his wife did to develop a multiracial democracy in this country was just absolutely visionary. The Bible says, "Without a vision, the people perish." So this conversation that allowed us to see behind the scenes. For here is Dr. Vincent Harding advising Martin Luther King Jr, breaking ground in Atlanta, taking dangerous trips out of the country, just assisting wherever civil rights was burgeoning and being born.

Donald Bryant: Yeah, definitely one of the takeaways, Dr. B, from the conversation was Dr. Harding's parents' influence on her in the area of compassionate justice, sacrificial consideration, and the contemplative aspect of that. You can tell that it truly has influenced her work and her vision of the world. And I really love the aspect of the conversation about the influence of the Mennonite Church from her parents and how that played a role in how she operates today.

Barbra Holmes: Yeah. She actually used the phrase non-dualism, that her parents are always looking for connections. And the other thing that was really powerful in that conversation was her reminding us of the residuals of African beliefs and practices that are tucked into the traditions of the Black church. To remember again, that religion is a language that reaches for connection to the divine and to the neighbor.

Donald Bryant: Yes.

Barbra Holmes: To heal wounds too deep for medical remedies, to offer solace for unspeakable joy and unfathomable sorrows. So to explore what she did was, when she realized that, she went back to her roots and that takes her to Candomblé. And I wonder for the listener, all of us are in one tradition or another, but what are your roots? If you're Irish, what did your ancestors believe? How did they worship? What was it about it that there are residual influences in your current life? That's a wonderful enhancement to whatever belief system you currently have.

Donald Bryant: Wow.

Barbra Holmes: So why not take a look and enrich it, just give some depth to your faith practices now by inviting ancestors, and history, and legacy into what you believe now.

Donald Bryant: Yeah.