Meredith Watts

Interview by Carolyn Wood
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Carolyn: *Thank you, Meredith, for meeting with me. As you said, we're just going to have a conversation. I'm so glad that we can do this.*

Meredith, it seems like you've had several different paths in your life. Let's start at the beginning. I'm going to ask you questions that I might even know the answer to because I've know you for a little bit. But I'm sure there's a lot of stuff I don't know, so we'll just try to treat them equally. Where were you born and raised?

Meredith: I was born in the Mennonite hospital in Bloomington, Illinois. They have since torn down the hospital, and eradicated all traces of my having been there. [Carolyn laughs]

My parents were Illinois schoolteachers. They were a classic mobility example; they both were raised on farms, they both had ambitious parents, or convinced their parents, to send them to the University of Illinois, and they became teachers. So, they went from being farmers to teachers and then later my father moved us all more toward the Chicago area. But I spent my first few years in very small towns where my father was the school principal. My mother taught at first and then there were a couple of children to deal with.

Carolyn: *What did she teach?*

Meredith: Remember now, they graduated in the late 1930s. So, my father was a farm kid, and to pacify his father, he studied agricultural science, but also chemistry and English on the side. My mother—and this is what really dates the concept—studied what I think in those days was called "home economics", which is not something she ever taught but that may have been what the degree was. But she was also trained in English and was an avid reader, so I think that's where her education actually was.

Carolyn: *When were you born and are you the first born?*

Meredith: I'm the firstborn and that was in April of 1941. So, at the time we are talking I am 82.

Carolyn: *You had other siblings, you said?*

Meredith: I had a younger sister, a couple of years younger. She died five or six years ago of ALS. A long and complicated and very tortured disease. But she was trained as a teacher, raised a couple of kids, a bunch of dogs. Was kind of a tough cookie, she had some kind of insurance business where she worked with construction businesses in Chicago for her main profession for awhile. And then eventually entered a religious community.

Carolyn: *Oh, she did? You mean like kind of a monastic way of life?*

Meredith: It was a fundamentalist Christian community that did work abroad. They trained missionaries but they had a home in Zion, Illinois, where trainees, but especially returnees, would stay. She actually was more working in the U.S. with people, especially the elderly missionaries who were coming back from a life in the field and who were then living in this facility.

Carolyn: *Did you stay close to her?*

Meredith: Her conversion had an especially militant beginning. So, there was a time in which her conversion was something she wanted to pass on to all of the rest of the family, which led to some friction with my father. Not so much with me because I was the most tolerant of her. She was not the most tolerant of me. Because her faith gave her a simple answer to anything that might be troubling me.

Carolyn: *And why do you think it was that you were more tolerant?*

Meredith: I think she leaned on my father pretty hard because he was older and she wanted to get him before he died. And her sons considered it an intrusion, and a double intrusion when she tried to go around them and convert their children. So, it was a little different in my situation.

When she was dying--and dying with ALS takes a long time because it's a progressive shutdown of your muscles, and not of your brain, so you remain fully aware of your body's failure--she had the support of her religious community. She was in care at the end and eventually in hospice, but I was the only one who over the years had been willing to go to

these fundamentalist, essentially Pentacostalist, religious celebrations that became part of her life. And then toward the end of it, I would visit her, and she would mark the Bible and hand me the parts she wanted me to read. It was usually about Lazarus, and the resurrection, and optimism about the hereafter. So, I would read to her toward the very end of her life. This is probably the result of my having been a schoolteacher for so long, she would fall asleep while I was reading the bible to her. [Carolyn laughs] Because she had lost control of the diaphragm muscle which is very often what takes people when they have ALS. You can lose many muscles, but if you lose the muscle that pumps your oxygen, then there's not much left. She would be under such strain from the progressive failure that she wouldn't be able to sleep. So, my reading the Bible to her would give her a little rest. [Meredith and Carolyn laugh]

They wanted to give a eulogy--using the older word--when she had died and the family was faced with having one or the other of the boys give the eulogy.

Carolyn: *By the boys, do you mean the grandchildren?*

Meredith: Her sons. Or have somebody from this fundamentalist church. A quandary because the boys didn't want that, and they didn't want to do it themselves. She had had such a turbulent relationship with all of us, including her sons, that I agreed to do it with one proviso. That we have a family meeting, this was the night before, and I already had some thoughts about what I would say. And none of it was going to varnish over the fact that she was a stubborn, willful, pain in the neck. But everybody knew that, including her co-religionists.

I sat down with her two sons, who were fully grown and they had kids of their own, their offspring, so there were a couple of girls. And Simone was there and we had a talk, and I asked them all how do you remember Grandma Leslie? It was a time of real honesty because everybody had ambivalence, but typically you're not able to express it at the point at which somebody is being buried. I told them that I was going to give the eulogy, but I wanted to be faithful and honest to their experience. And I wanted them to tell me what their experience and their recollections were, and they told me good things and difficult things, and very problematic things.

They showed what we always know about somebody--a parent, say--who has passed; that is, kids and grandchildren raised at different times have different memories because the person in question was different. We talked about all of that, and they gave me what I needed to be able to speak to the Christians the following day. I felt comfortable representing my sister in ways that my family understood and had told me.

The worst that I had to overcome was the fact that it was part of their religious belief that Christ earned his place in heaven suffering on the cross, and that we earned our place in heaven by suffering. So, the suffering of her ALS at the end was so severe that my family was extremely troubled by the fact that she was getting advice from her religion that told her the suffering was good for her and good for them.

I finally helped convince her that for the benefit of the family, who couldn't stand to see this suffering, she had to go to hospice and we promised they would modulate the painkillers so that she would remain lucid and not lose touch with her religion. But it hadn't occurred to her that all the people who were telling her to suffer were shattered when they came out of the room watching her suffering. They could not sit there with us, with her. They would come in, sing prayers, read a couple of verses, and leave in tears. And it was her immediate family that was there with her.

All this relates to negotiating the religious differences at the memorial and trying to be honest with that. And trying to swallow the resentments and help other people deal with their resentments at some of the effects that they felt had happened during this last period.

Carolyn: *You mean mostly your family members that were resentful?*

Meredith: Yes, the family members were resentful at the effect of religion, not only in

having changed her behavior considerably for a decade or so, but also at having inhibited her from using any kind of hospice related care.
Carolyn: *Yeah, that's really hard to watch.*
Meredith: Yeah.
Carolyn: *Getting back to your life, you've had a non-conventional path, I think, to getting where you are.*
Meredith: You mean for the average Buddhist?
Carolyn: *Or the average person.* [Meredith laughs] *In terms of what you've done and where you've lived.*
Meredith: There are some spots I probably won't talk about. [Carolyn laughs] Please go ahead, I'll tell you if we hit them.
Carolyn: *Can you tell me about--and any ones you think of that you want to talk about, feel free—but I'll just start with a little bit of what I know: And that is, can you tell me about your path to becoming a professor and any other careers you've had?*
Meredith: I went to Lawrence College, and actually through happenstance, ended up majoring in German and Political Science. At that point--I was 19--my parents astonishingly agreed to my studying in Germany for that year when I became 19 into 20.
Carolyn: *Was that your junior year?*
Meredith: So, I lived and studied at the University of Mainz and left Lawrence University for a year. We technically called it a junior year abroad, but I essentially had put it together myself. When I returned, all my credits became German credits and Political Science was in there somewhere, but I went on to study and finally finished my degree work at Northwestern. There were stops and detours along the way, but the Ph.D. degree work was finished at Northwestern. Then I taught here for a year--here being the University of Wisconsin Milwaukee. Then had a tour of military duty and then came back.
Carolyn: *You were here at UWM one year and then you were in the military.*
Meredith: Yeah.
Carolyn: *Were you drafted or was that voluntary?*
Meredith: That's a complicated story that I rarely tell, but I'll tell you part of it. While I was in Germany, I got to know my cousin who was an Air Force pilot, who was always on constant alert, expecting Russians to march across the border from East Germany into West Germany, from east into west, and a group of army intelligence people whose job it was to listen for signs indicating troop preparations along the border. So, I had these contacts with people who were in the military who were talking about an incipient war. It was about the time of the Cuban missile crisis, which dates me, but clearly there was a very powerful feeling that anything could happen. And they used to say that the only thing keeping the Russians out of West Germany was having enough boots.

So, when I went back to college, I decided rather than get drafted, which was the most likely thing happening to everybody, that I would take a commission in the Air Force. I spent three years in the Air Force. When I went to Northwestern, which was essentially a leave from the Air Force, I had colleagues drafted away from the seminar table day after day. But it wasn't the war that I thought might come, it was Vietnam. Since I was fluent in German, I was expecting to be called back into the military and sent to Germany. I did it in the Air Force, not anticipating the war in Vietnam, which changed everybody's pattern.
Carolyn: *You were never called back?*
Meredith: I spent my time at the headquarters of the Air University.
Carolyn: *The what?*
Meredith: The Air Force has a number of major commands, one of them was Air University, which was responsible for the professional education of enlisted men, especially non-commissioned officers, and then several levels of college, going up through those who are on the path of becoming generals. So, I was teaching in those schools.
Carolyn: *Where?*
Meredith: It's in Montgomery, Alabama.
Carolyn: *When did you come back to UWM?*
Meredith: I did a three year tour and came back. They had held my job open for me at UWM. And with a number of notable breaks to live abroad, I was in the job at UWM for 35

years.

Carolyn: *Oh, you were? I told you before that I was a student of yours for Political Science 101 or something in the lecture hall at Bolton150 back in '73 or '74 when I was a freshman.*

Meredith: I had returned to the university in '70 and taught there until I retired in 2000. Probably shows a lack of imagination. [Carolyn laughs] But in between, I had guest professorships at a number of places in and out of the country, so I was very often not actually in Milwaukee.

Carolyn: *Well, I think I was working in--just student help—in the [Political Science] office, and I don't think you were there at that time. This was later, like in 1978 or something.*

Meredith: Yeah, my colleagues noticed that as well.

Carolyn: *That you were gone a lot?*

Meredith: But I taught periodically at the University of Duesseldorf a couple of times, the University of Siegen, both in Germany, taught at a London program, taught at Hebrew University in Jerusalem. I had guest professorships at University of Connecticut in there somewhere and a few other places (including Northeastern University in Boston).

Carolyn: *Wow, and did you teach in German when you were in Germany?*

Meredith: Yeah.

Carolyn: *Oh, so you're pretty fluent in German.*

Meredith: Was.

Carolyn: *Did you like to travel? What led you to go there?*

Meredith: I had friendships and roots in Germany from when I had been there when I was young. I had met a number of people academically who were based in Germany. At one point there was a Fulbright award, there was something from the German academic exchange commission, so I had lots of support to go back to Germany. So, through the '80s and the '90s, I developed close friendships and professional partnerships with Germans and worked with them, lectured various times at a couple of different universities. I travelled under the umbrella of Fulbright; you know, when they support you to stay in the country and do research. They also have connections with different groups around the country, so I travelled a lot in Germany giving speeches about the United States and whatever they wanted from me. There were various sabbaticals and Fulbrights involved, but during the Fulbright is the year that I spent interviewing "street workers" and neo-Nazis in East Germany.

Carolyn: *Oh, so you were allowed to go into East Germany?*

Meredith: Yes, after 1989/1990.

Carolyn: *You said street workers.*

Meredith: The "street workers" were a special category of people who at that time in East Germany were not, as they say, "qualified" academically for social work. There was no program of qualifications or degrees for street workers. Who were they? The street workers that adopted me were a former member of the Communist Youth in Cottbus and a former neo-Nazi member from Cottbus. The two of them had left the scene and were working to try to help other people get out of this violent neo-Nazi, Communist Youth, scene. And it was tough because people were fire bombing each other's cars and houses, doing significant damage to people. So, these two street workers adopted me and were my guides through East Germany, at least in much of the East, particularly in the city of Cottbus, which was an old industrial city that was ravaged by the rebirth of neo-Nazis.

Carolyn: *When you said "street workers", I was thinking one of two things; street maintenance people or prostitutes.*

Meredith: Yes, that's right, but at the time it meant something else. They used the term "street workers" because they were essentially volunteer social workers who worked on the streets to get young people out of the violent scene. The term was a neologism, it had no formal status. But that's what they were.

Carolyn: *Who did they get paid by? Were they paid by the government?*

Meredith: Very mixed. There were often civic funds or other things. Some were volunteers. There were a variety of ways for funding the work. Sometimes they worked directly with

formally trained social workers. But these were people who had a commitment to helping young people exit the violent scene.

Carolyn: *Interesting. It's really fascinating to me that Fulbright would—you must have submitted a proposal to them to study this—and that they would...*

Meredith: My proposal was to study neo-Nazis. But to study neo-Nazis I was also within the framework of the street workers, who were the ones who were doing the work on the ground with them. It wasn't possible for me to walk in, knock on the door, and give a Hitler salute. I was older, I had enough of an accent that they would know two things; one, that I wasn't German and, two, that I wasn't a cop. Once I got access to the neo-Nazis, then I could interview them and spend some time with them.

But it is like doing research or photography or social work with any marginalized group; they are highly protective, and suspicious. The street workers who adopted me were the people who would say, "This guy is okay." And to get to them, I had friends who were former youth researchers in East Germany who said, "This guy is okay." Because you can't just walk into these very particular scenes without somebody to do more than make introductions. They have to say that you are trustworthy and you mean them no harm and that you are not a cop.

Carolyn: *So, it is through other people you knew before that put in a word for you. So, what years are we talking about?*

Meredith: This was in the mid-90s. It was shortly after the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the period of the greatest disillusionment of young people as the system that had nurtured them collapsed. And with all the opportunities they also lost all of the social supports that had sustained them and guaranteed them a future of education and work. That all disappeared.

Carolyn: *Overnight, huh?*

Meredith: Yeah. As that bubbled up by the early '90s when I got there, a great deal of this had taken the form of neo-Nazi and xenophobic attacks on foreigners. So, that's what I was studying, xenophobia, neo-Nazis.

Carolyn: *When the people you say adopted you, they really took you under their wing and through them you met other people and you did interviews and so forth?*

Meredith: Yeah.

Carolyn: *Oh, so you've been doing that for a long time.*

Meredith: I wasn't very good at it then. I didn't understand enough about or have the equipment to do proper interviews and to know how to evaluate the interviews. I had tremendous access, but I didn't have the methodological training or wisdom that I think would have helped me be a little better at it. For example, I had an interview with the head of the East German, East Berlin, officer in charge of monitoring, arresting, suppressing neo-Nazis. He had been an old socialist, serious Nazi hater. I had worked in the area long enough that he agreed for me to interview him. But I didn't have a tape recorder, and I didn't have a way to reliably represent what he told me. So, that's what I mean, I just didn't have the equipment or the training to do that. It was remarkable because he was in the headquarters that had been a former military barracks--an officers' barracks--that had been the center for the plot against Hitler in 1942. This is German history. So, here's Meredith walking the halls where the plot against Hitler took place in the '40s. Germany is weighted down with its past.

Carolyn: *How long were you there doing that research?*

Meredith: Well, that was a year, but most years I would go back for a month or two.

Carolyn: *So, you continued it, over a number of years?*

Meredith: Yeah. It's tapered off, most of my German colleagues are no longer there.

Carolyn: *You said you were also in Jerusalem and London. Did you teach in Jerusalem or did you do research?*

Meredith: I taught at Hebrew University in Jerusalem. I was teaching, oddly enough, a German politics course, and a political psychology course focussed on youth. The German politics course was the one I expected the most complexity in. It turns out, there is

such a diversity of people there; there were Americans who had gone to Israel to experience another form of their identity and their past and their history. But there were very modern people as well, there were some Orthodox Jews, and Sephardic Jews in the class, and I had several guys who I think were most of the German desk in the foreign service because they had real practical interest in contemporary Germany.

Carolyn: *How long did you teach there?*

Meredith: Somewhere in the middle '90s I was there for six months. Maybe a little longer. It was hard to tell, there were a lot of holidays.

Carolyn: *Then in London?*

Meredith: That was a university program where University of Wisconsin would recruit and send students to study in London. They were monitored by a director and a staff. They had an office there and I was the director of the office for a semester and taught a couple of courses.

Carolyn: *Did you say you taught in Germany also?*

Meredith: I taught at the University of Duesseldorf and I taught at the University of Siegen.

Carolyn: *When you taught there, was it about American politics or other?*

Meredith: Well, one was more of a theory course, and one of the classes was on violence and extremism in the U.S. and Germany. It was the biggest, most raucous, first day of class I've ever seen.

Carolyn: *How so?*

Meredith: German students do a lot of shopping. They are not required to be in courses, but they experience a lot of things in the first week. As I opened the door, the room was absolutely filled, well over 100 students, and they were sitting on the floor and leaning in the halls, and jostling each other, and tussling for a place in the room. They thought I was going to be a lot more interesting than I was. They sorted themselves out later and I taught what was essentially a normal course. But there were a lot of passersby who wanted to see the German speaking American talking about violence in the U.S. and Germany. That had a certain kind of caché.

Carolyn: *Interesting.*

Meredith: That is well in the past.

Carolyn: *Did you teach and do research in other countries as well?*

Meredith: I travelled a lot in Eastern Europe; notably Poland, Hungary, Eastern Germany. But aside from having academic friendships and other friendships in those countries, those were never part of my academic work.

Carolyn: *Were you publishing your research at that time?*

Meredith: Yeah, those things are all, with respect, forgotten, I think, which is the way of academics and probably a good thing. [Meredith and Carolyn laugh]

Carolyn: *At that time, several years into your career, were you married at the time, having children at the time, and so forth?*

Meredith: The only relevant fact is that for much of the '80s I was a single parent. You can imagine it was complicated and turbulent and there weren't any single male parents that I identified anywhere. So, I had two boys, one was four and the other was fourteen.

Carolyn: *Four and fourteen, it's quite a gap there.*

Meredith: Yeah. So, I had the two boys with me who left at various times. When I started that longer period in Europe, it was only after the two boys had left home.

Carolyn: *So, you raised them here in Milwaukee?*

Meredith: Yeah. Everybody's life has certain major inflection points, where decisions are made that alter everything else, and the decision to get custody of the two children and raise them was one of those points that very much defined my life for ten or fifteen years. And ever since, because my relationship with the boys, of course, goes back to that period of time. So, I was the custodial parent.

Carolyn: *Wow, that was really unusual at that time.*

Meredith: I didn't know any other single male parents.

Carolyn: *Did you have any support network at*

all?

Meredith: Hardly. But my son was in a day care center at the university. At that time, I was Assistant to the Chancellor. I would drop my son off at day care, go to work in the Chancellor's Office, walk over and check on him at lunch, and when the day was over, I would pick him up. So, the biggest support, of course, was the day care center. The other boy was in school. Through the day care center, I met wonderful people who were teachers, but also the people who really understand single parenting. These were the women who were students, but who were keeping their children in that day care while they went to classes.

In comparison to them, I had a good job, I was Assistant to the Chancellor, I was not having trouble making the rent. So, in that sense I was really very much privileged compared to most of the female students who were dropping off children. What they knew and shared with me was simply an awful lot having to do with raising kids. I never got to be good at it, but I got to be better at it because these wonderful people helped me along.

Now there are support groups for men and there are people who teach you a little bit about how to do it. In those days, you threw yourself on the mercy of anybody who would help you. I can remember that one of the things that is hardest to absorb is how inadequate you feel. And these wonderful women would say, "Yup. That's the way it is." It is really a difficult balance. They were kind enough not to say it this way, but they said, in effect (they must have been thinking), "Now you know what it is like." And I did.

I had friends who were married and had kids and they reminded me; they said, "Don't think that feeling inadequate is limited to single parents, it is a parental thing. But it was one of my very first trainings in understanding the goal of a bodhisattva. Because within the Buddhist tradition, the bodhisattva is one who hears the cries of others and who identifies and feels compassion for others. After this experience, I had much more compassion for single parents and women who are carrying those burdens. It was an education for me.

Carolyn: *It was a multi-year education, you raised those boys until they were adults!*

Meredith: Yeah.

Carolyn: *You didn't have joint custody or anything.*

Meredith: No.

Carolyn: *You had a third son, didn't you? Was that later?*

Meredith: That was later. He lives in Germany. And he and his partner just had a grandson about three months ago.

Carolyn: *Your grandson?*

Meredith: Yeah. So, I have a grandson living in Germany.

Carolyn: *Nice. You've seen him haven't you because you were just in Germany?*

Meredith: I was there to see him, he was about a week old. It was important, I mean I wanted to see him, my son Julian, and his partner Olivia. They were all ready to take the picture of Grandpa Meredith with Baby Cooper but Grandpa Meredith had COVID!

Carolyn: *Oh!*

Meredith: I tested clean on COVID on Monday morning, so we spent Monday afternoon together; took pictures, I got to sing to my grandson, taught him a little Sanskrit, read him some Nietzsche. [Carolyn laughs]

Carolyn: *What a lucky kid!*

Meredith: I left town the next morning. So, it really was a Hollywood finish, to be able to get to see my son and his wife, and my grandson.

Carolyn: *Oh, boy. He's your only grandchild?*

Meredith: There are a couple more, but they are grown. Those are other stories.

Carolyn: *You mentioned taking pictures; when did you get involved in photography and did you use it for your research?*

Meredith: Oh, I think from the time I was in my 20s I always had a camera somewhere close by. But I began using it more actively when I was traveling. Much of my travel was professional. Most of it was related to working in Germany or Hungary or...So, I would carry a camera with me and a lot of the use was pedagogical. It was taking pictures of stuff I wanted to teach about. So, when I talked about

the Berlin Wall, I had pictures from both sides of the Berlin Wall. And when I wanted to talk about the hyper-steroidal heroic statues of Lenin and others, I had been there, I had the pictures. I still use them. So, I was taking pictures in a kind of functional way.

Well, I continued taking pictures. I was going to say that I didn't actually become a photographer, but I still don't think of myself as a photographer. I'm just a curious person who takes a lot of pictures.

But a new phase of that was when I began taking pictures of my wife Simone's choreography. A big portion of what I have shot has been dance choreography and a good 20 years of that. So, progressive changes in equipment and skill. At the same time, I joined together with two other people in something called "For Good Photography." I wasn't the lead in establishing it, though I think technically I might be vice president, for whatever that might mean. But we explicitly founded the group to do work on social justice projects. And we've never done a project that wasn't.

Carolyn: *When did that start with you?*

Meredith: It's been a good decade ago. And there have been a number of projects. I mean, certainly I have posted our photographic work on our trans family project.

Carolyn: *Yeah, I saw that, that was great.*

Meredith: We have accompanied an Anishinaabe women's water walk across part of north central Wisconsin. Any demonstration we could manage to get to we shot photos. Kept in touch with the trans community as well.

Not quite as much recently, but all of these projects were the result of basically some older retired guys who had a little bit of skill, who still wanted to have a voice. It just turned out that with the skill of photography, we were able to use that voice for a few projects. And we still do. I saw a t-shirt not long ago that said something about still photographing at the age of 70, or a I saw an article recently that said it is unusual to still be photographing at 70. Well, we are all in our mid-70s and I am in my 80's, we're all still shooting pictures and looking for projects. And I shoot a lot of choreography as well.

Carolyn: *You're being very modest about the group, because I went to the exhibit on the trans families and it was really terrific!*

Meredith: We had support from a number of LGBTQ organizations including the Cream City Foundation. We had a gallery exhibition at UWM that had about 300 people the first weekend.

Carolyn: *Yeah, I was there.*

Meredith: It was opened at the UWM Gallery in the Kenilworth. Indeed, in fact, we took on the project in part with the agreement of some of the sponsors that we wanted to be able to produce this before the election of 2016. This was so far back in time that we were grumpy about North Carolina trying to pass a bathroom bill! Since then, we've had hundreds of bills discriminating against trans persons. And trans persons have become a kind of particular target for certain parts of the community and especially politically, but they've been instrumentalized and demonized.

It broke our hearts to see this, but two changes have happened since then: first of all, our show came before the 2016 election for whatever good it might have done, and travelled a lot and we spent a lot of time at schools and churches giving talks. It wasn't that we were experts on trans persons, but this series of photos provided an occasion for trans persons and counselors and parents, and a wide variety of people to come together. So we were not so much teachers as simply the people providing an occasion for some groups to come together.

Some of the visits and talks were very touching. In one case, we were invited to a high school and there was a party—kind of a letter club, athletic club, dance going on. The people who were supporting trans and gay students and non-binary young people, had another event for "the rest of us" and our pictures were posted. And Jeff and I showed up and we simply hung around and talked with young people.

We gave a show at Lawrence College; it was the same way. Touching moments of any of this project were when young people would come up to us and say, "I've never seen myself treated with respect like that before." Or a young Black transgender person said, "I've never

seen anybody like me before." And our pictures had some identification points there. So, although we don't claim major impact, we were happy in adding our little drop to the ocean.

Now 10 or 12 years later, there are so many trans artists and trans photographers, what we did is really just something that rests now in the past, and we're not actively showing that project any more. But we're tremendously happy that certain things have happened in spite of the fact that there has been so much repression. There's also been a concomitant growth of support and identification and political action.

Although my powers of prescience here are not very strong, I believe the political instrumentalization of trans people and non-binary folks will eventually lose its steam. And what it will leave in its path will have been an organization of people who used this adversity to stand up for themselves, to organize themselves, to create art, to create institutions. Now I'm saying that not because I can predict it, because I hope that's what's happening, and I see signs of it happening. So, I'm hoping that this oppression of trans people and other marginalized groups, is one side of the dialectic that's creating the opposite side of the dialectic, which is the power for identity, dignity and self-representation.

Carolyn: *Let's hope, for sure.*

Meredith: That's more an article of hope than it is a prediction, but I believe there's a path.

Carolyn: *Yes, we would hope that it would be stronger for it.*

Meredith: Some of the photo work, and I'll close with this, is that Simone and I have been working together for 15 years photographing what's called in northeast Brazil "cultura popula"--popular culture—but it means culture of the people. It's a lot of traditional cultural forms and we've been photographing that for 15 years. I must have 20,000 photographs in an archive so far.

But we have a new phase where we are interviewing and podcasting members of communities--women--who are serving as cohesive leadership power within communities. And this includes Afro-Brazilian, spiritual leaders, political leaders, labor organizers, people in the struggle for more equitable land distribution. This last trip we were able to make contact with several indigenous people. "Indigenous" is the word used in Brazil for "first peoples" or "native peoples" or "Amer-Indians." Through those contacts have a number of interviews now, especially with one particular tribal group. We're hoping to keep that contact alive to make a special study and series of podcasts about the contribution of these women to the integrity and defense of their communities. We're hoping there's a chance to spend more time with them, since most of their demarcated territory--which might be called reservations in the U.S.--those demarcated territories are under threat from loggers, hunters, miners, merchants, lots of people. And a lot of people with guns. So, the level of violence associated with indigenous territory is very high--second highest in all of Brazil. So, we're hoping to go there and spend more time in a community.

Carolyn: *You've collaborated with Simone on this for, you said, 15 years? So, it isn't only dance that you're studying, you are studying some dance there, or is it mostly not dance?*

Meredith: It never was just dance. It was performance, and more technically said, the ethnography of performance. That is, the structure and creation, the leadership, the funding, the actual participation. So, we have endless videos of performance. We began doing interviews with leaders. We have a lot of interviews with female leaders, which is what brought us to the current podcast project.

Carolyn: *That's wonderful.*

Meredith: So, it always had a sort of focus. That's not entirely true, because at the beginning, we simply walked into this environment absolutely dazzled and ignorant. With only one question, "What's going on here?"

We began to learn and make contacts, conduct interviews, meet with local culture intellectuals, meet with culture producers, meet with students, people who are doing or writing research. We began extending our knowledge by locating the people who are generating

knowledge and who are generating the culture. So, our first contacts probably came in our first visit, but really developed after that.

Carolyn: *Wow! That seems like really important work and so nice that you two can do that together.*

Meredith: Well, it has always been a joint project. It began because of her connections in Brazil and her enthusiasm for finding out more about traditional cultures. I was interested. So, we had to start learning.

Carolyn: *When you do that, when you go together, Simone conducts the interviews and they are in Portuguese, right?*

Meredith: Yes, it is her mother tongue. Even though her accent is distinguishable from the people in the communities where we are working, she is really the chief of logistics and interviewing and arrangements and most of the social things. I've always been there as the photographer. As my Portuguese would improve, I could talk a little, mostly just to show that I was a friend. But I never had the command of the language to do credible research, though I can read Portuguese reasonably well.

Carolyn: *I imagine you help with the recordings and the photography.*

Meredith: It's better, it keeps improving. But the project is really dependent on Simone's enthusiasm and her motivation and her skill. I'm her research assistant.

Carolyn: *That's a great thing you are doing, you two. The podcasts are being broadcast already?*

Meredith: About 10 or 12 of them are available on Spotify. They are 40-60 minutes apiece. At last reading, 400 or 500 people had listened to them. They are all in Portuguese, so they are not available to American researchers yet. But we offered them as our contribution to helping them find a voice.

We have about 60. Which means we have a good 45 or 50 audio files that we have not yet processed into podcasts. Frankly, it is much more fun to interview people than it is to sit in an attic room editing the audio. We are much better at that, and it's the interpersonal part that gives us so much pleasure.

Carolyn: *You have more research to do, right?*

Meredith: Well, we'll go back every year as long as, you know, I have teeth and Simone can get me from one place to another. With the years my mobility has changed a little bit, so I'm not able to photograph in the more active ways I used to. But I'm still the photographer, the audio person, and do such other things as are useful.

Carolyn: *Are there other art forms or interests that have been important to you for you to become who you are now?*

Meredith: Not as a participant or a contributor. I've always had enthusiasms for, as you see, books and literature.

Carolyn: *Art?*

Meredith: Whenever we're traveling, and whenever I would travel before Simone and I were together, art museums were always on the list. As you can see from the pictures around here, we have a mix of art and photography. Most of the things lying around us here are in the old sense of the word "dripping with karma." They all represent things and places we've been to together.

There are a lot of native crafts and arts here as well. A number of pieces of pottery, I'm very fond of pottery. If you notice the piece in the center of the fireplace and this one up here, those are hand formed without using a lathe or a wheel by Quilombo women in the interior of Maranhão in a place called Itamatatuía and they've managed to monetize this skill.

Quilombo is a community that has been recognized as a piece of land or a community essentially of black peasantry. There's another concept that sees it as related somehow to the history of slavery and the refugee communities. The very earliest Quilombos in Northeast Brazil were places of refuge for escaped slaves. That part of the history dates back to the 16th century. As soon as there was slavery, there were slaves escaping and there were Quilombos. The Quilombos date back hundreds of years, but there is not an unbroken line of occupation of most particular pieces of land. So, rather than trace the Quilombo's heritage only to the slave

period, it's also to traditional communities that are based on the culture, economics, of black peasants. So, Itamatuía is a Quilombo which uses traditional community economics of cattle and goats, and fishing is critical. They tend to be on rivers and some of the rivers have tremendously rich supplies of clay that can be worked into use objects and eventually then objects for sale. But when I mention "dripping with karma", these are things that came from our travel and from our research with essentially marginalized black peasants in northeast Brazil. They are full of meaning for us.

Carolyn: *Can you tell me how you got into studying and teaching yoga?*

Meredith: Well, I'll tell you what happened to Professor Watts.

Carolyn: [Carolyn laughs] *Please!*

Meredith: He doesn't exist anymore. Not long ago I bumped into a student, former student, successful attorney, now retired, who greeted me (now lives in Shorewood) "Professor Watts!" No, there's no such person anymore. In Germany, the word "professor" becomes part of your official name and it gets chiseled into your headstone. For me, it is a period of my life that's no longer present. So, there is nothing of that identity.

It is very likely that much of the behavior and the way I speak and the way I act comes from the formation of having been a professor, but I don't identify with having been a professor as an ego attachment. There was a swirl of activity that went on for 35 years, and it stopped. Because I had started teaching so young at UWM--my first appointment I was 26--by the time I was in my 50s, I had already filled all of the technical requirements for retirement. I was what they call "fully vested." I continued teaching until I was 60 while I decided what to do, and took another guest professorship or two while I was working things out. Taught in Boston for a little while. But I was actually finished with that career when I was 60, and either I was going to move to Boston where I had taught, or to San Francisco. San Francisco it was. I had trained in yoga a bit in the Midwest.

Carolyn: *You mean here in Milwaukee?*

Meredith: I had started yoga here in Milwaukee. In the very early days before there was even a yoga center in the city, although you know some of the people, many of the people, who were involved in those early classes. So, I was there among them, you know, the stiffest and grumpiest of the whole bunch.

When I went to California, I started going to the Iyengar Yoga Center which they said was, I think, the earliest teaching center for Iyengar yoga in the U.S. Suddenly I'm taking courses. I was also thinking of writing a book about something that never got done but in continuing some research on hate crime. Well, none of that ever materialized in San Francisco. But yoga did, and rowing did. So, I became a member of a rowing club and spent my time rowing and doing yoga.

Carolyn: *What took you to San Francisco?*

Meredith: What got me there?

Carolyn: *Yeah.*

Meredith: I had two close friends, they were lifetime friends, whom I had visited often. And when I had visited, I had begun training with somebody at the Iyengar yoga center. So, I had begun with some connections to the yoga community there. But I didn't think of just landing in a city where I had no place to put my feet down, so I went to San Francisco. People helped me find a place to live. I began training in yoga, joined the swimming, rowing club and became an avid rower, and then gradually the person who became my foundational yoga teacher there began saying, "Look Meredith, you're here all week anyway, why don't you join the advanced studies program?" And I said, "I'm too old" and he said, "We've got older." I said, "I'm too stiff." "We've got stiffer." And I tried a few more excuses, and he finally said, "Well, let's sign you up." So, I actually signed up under pressure from these wonderful teachers and friends there, and became part of a cohort of people training at the advanced studies program. It was the Iyengar Center and these were all Iyengar certified teachers of various ranks, and I became a little bit involved in the yoga community there. At the same time I started meditation at the San Francisco Zen Center.

Carolyn: *At the same time?*
Meredith: Yeah. Very strict, Soto Zen, Japanese form. So, that was a kind of major inflection point of my life because I hadn't been thinking of teaching yoga, but I was a stiff older guy at that point and I needed some help. And as they told me, we all come to yoga because of some sort of pain. My suffering was just what I had done to my body through years of tennis and running and jogging and racquetball and rowing. My body needed something else and something non-violent. You know, a martial art like karate wasn't going to work. So, I began training.

Eventually when I came back to Milwaukee, which was because I had met Simone, came back here, and we were married. But the Milwaukee Yoga Institute was just starting and I was one of the few people in the city who was actively training in the Iyengar system.
Carolyn: *So, who ran the Milwaukee Yoga Institute?*
Meredith: That was Susan Goulet who founded the center.
Carolyn: *Oh, you mean the yoga center that is here now?*
Meredith: Susan and I and several others whom you know were part of that original early Iyengar yoga class. When that teacher left the city, Susan and some others developed the Milwaukee Yoga Center. That changed form and some of the people left and did other things, but when I came back I was training in the method and I began training again here at the Milwaukee Yoga Center. Indeed, I think I had always been doing some kind of teaching since I was about 27, so I probably didn't know how *not* to teach. But learning how to teach something physical like that was so different from the kind of cognitive manipulation of being a stand-up talking head [Carolyn laughs], that was really a major change in my life.
Carolyn: *You became a certified Iyengar instructor here in Milwaukee then?*
Meredith: My certification came while I was teaching, but I was continuing training and I went to Puna, studied in India twice, and eventually became a certified teacher.
Carolyn: *What year are we talking about here?*
Meredith: I was certified as a teacher but I was about 65. I came to everything late in life.
Carolyn: *Except for being a professor.*
Meredith: Well, that's the wonder about living a long time; you have time for an awful lot of different careers. And I do believe the Tao statement that says to live until you die is to live long enough. But I seem to be still active in a number of things. And the older idea of retirement was that you quit and clipped coupons and checked your Medicare and hung around your grandchildren. But that, of course, was a stereotype that was long dead by the time I retired. So, my technical retirement was at 60, but I never thought of it as retirement, but rather just leaving the university for something else to do. And what came after that was yoga and photography and research and these other things we've talked about.
Carolyn: *Yeah, really fascinating stuff. You went to the Zen Center in San Francisco. When you came back to Milwaukee, did you attend any Zen or Buddhist other places?*
Meredith: I went shopping. I loved the Soto tradition and it's represented in Milwaukee with the Milwaukee Zen Center, but there was also the Great Lakes Zen Center, I think it was called, which was in the Korean tradition of Zen Master Seung Sahn. There was the Mindfulness community which was available by then, since the mid-90s, and the Shambhala Center, and I tried all of them. I was also a member of the Unitarian Church. As you probably know, a number of Unitarians find the Mindfulness Center a congenial place, because you know Unitarians like nothing so much as a good argument at a committee meeting. [Carolyn laughs] And the sangha, the Mindfulness community, has a tremendous emphasis on individual participation in your own spiritual development. Which means you engage in reading and talking and participating in sangha activities.

At the Zen Center, which I liked very much here, they would have 45 minutes of sitting, 15 minutes of walking, 45 minutes of sitting, a dharma talk and then you'd clean up

the Center. But you wouldn't talk, other than asking a question of the teacher. That was wonderful, the teachers were wonderful, but given my history, the number of hours I had sat around seminars, and teaching, it seemed more congenial and a more comfortable outlet to be in a sangha in which the sangha members participated more actively.

Carolyn: *What took you to the Unitarians?*

Meredith: Well, I was a Unitarian member back in the mid-90s. Probably when I came back from Germany. The Unitarian Church has always been very open to people who are transitional in their life stages or in their spiritual development, and I didn't have a place and an anchor for that kind of development. The Unitarians are such a big tent that there's room for all manner of beliefs and there's very little pressure toward orthodoxy.

Carolyn: *So, you started with the Unitarians before you were at the Zen Center in San Francisco?*

Meredith: Yeah. So, I had been in the Unitarians when I left Milwaukee for San Francisco. I was involved in the Unitarian Church there, and had some experience with the Zen Center in San Francisco. So, these things all went side by side, but it wasn't until I came back that I became much more involved in the Mindfulness Center here in Milwaukee. And then Simone came along to the mindfulness practice a little bit later. My engagement was a little earlier than hers, but then she became much more deeply involved.

Carolyn: *You don't go to the Unitarian Church much anymore, but you've been there recently, right?*

Meredith: COVID had an effect. But also there was a time when I had the feeling, at least for my case, that the Unitarians were a wonderful place for committee meetings and arguments, but they were not a good place for the kind of spiritual practice I was ready for. So, the practice that came from studying the dharma and working on the sangha was what I felt I needed at that point. And I became much more engaged with the Buddhist practice. But many people in Buddhist practice are also cross-connected with the Unitarian Church. It is just a kind of truism about the Milwaukee spiritual community.

But the height of my involvement with the Unitarian Church was a period where I was what was called a "pastoral care associate." This is a several year period you spend where people who are in need of support can contact or be identified by the church and you can volunteer yourself to spend time with them. People usually in transitions; there may be divorces, deaths, very often the loss of somebody close. So, I was engaged in that.

Two of the people who got me involved were Steve Lowry and Jeanne Lowry, who were also sangha friends. That connection with the sangha also supported me there, and Steve had a great deal to do with the kind of assignments that I would get. He would hand pick assignments that he said were for Meredith, about which I had very mixed feelings, because they were usually pretty complicated situations. But Steve and I became close friends and when the church decided he needed a pastoral care associate, they were insistent on assigning one so he said, "Okay, get me Meredith." So, I became, from the Unitarian side, Steve's pastoral care associate, which meant that we would meet for lunch once a month and he was more pastoral care for me than I for him, but we were good friends and support for each other.

After being a pastoral care associate, there was a change in the leadership of the church, there was an interim minister, and at about that time, I gravitated back to the sangha and to the Buddhist practice. And never quite reestablished my Unitarian connection as strongly as it had been. But they have recently started something called a "trans-inclusion committee." And the person running it asked me if I would sit on the committee, and it was partly in recognition of my having done that photo project, because Jeff, my co-photographer, was also invited so that the two of us are the resident geezers on the project, we are the two old guys.

Carolyn: *The wise guys*.

Meredith: Yeah.

Carolyn: *So, were you raised with any religion*

or spiritual practice?

Meredith: I was never baptized. My mother and father had some differences, and they decided to let me choose. My father came from a Southern Illinois Baptist background, later became a Methodist. My mother was essentially German heritage Lutheran. There were enough differences there that they decided that I could decide for myself. And during my teen years, when you normally make those decisions, there was a community Protestant church which was a big tent. If there had been a Unitarian church that would have been the next step. The community Protestant church also included lots of participation by members and that's where we landed. And that's where I stayed until I decided I wasn't going to go through the stages of commitment to the church.

When I came to the Unitarians, came to the Buddhist practice, I had actually been a long time without any kind of formal affiliation. I had been through all the normal college successions of being an agnostic, being an atheist, being an ethical humanist, being a wannabe Unitarian, back to being an agnostic. You know how that goes, when you are just flopping around in spiritual territory, not quite finding the place where you fit.

Carolyn: *What attracted you to various religions and what didn't you like about them?*

Meredith: I had begun to develop a meditation practice, so I knew that the practice in which I was involved would involve a depth of personal practice, something that is not part of many institutionalized religions. But it was certainly part of the Buddhist practice. Now I'm aware that there are meditative traditions in various churches, but that isn't where I ended up. I needed a personal practice.

I had also had another strand of development; I had begun practicing Aikido, which is the softest of the martial arts with the exception of Tai Chi and "push hands", and I was trained in the Ueshiba tradition, which is very circular and has an understanding that you protect your opponent or partner. They use a terminology like uke and nage, and in every technique that's practiced, you alternate so you would alternate a blow, the person would counter and throw you. Then they would offer the blow and you would counter and throw them. It is a practice not only in learning how to fall, but also in how to take care of your partner so they are not hurt, or so that you don't hurt them.

C*arolyn:* *Your partner is the person you're interacting with?*

Meredith: You practice in twos and you change throughout the session, but compared to karate, for example, where you're actually landing sharp blows, or judo where you are subduing an opponent, in this one it is a ritualized attack and defense, which can be made hard if it is done for real. But it is done in this context as a kind of spiritual connection. Not everybody feels it that way, but that was my path toward nonviolent spiritual practice.

Carolyn: *When did you study that?*

Meredith: That came before yoga and Buddhism. I reached a stage where to progress to the next level in Aikido would have been hitting the mat a thousand more times. My body was asking for relief, I didn't have a thousand more landings in my body. I think there was a guest professorship somewhere, maybe Boston, anyway, it was hard for me to get to the dojo and after a year of not being able to practice, I didn't get back to Aikido.

That's what brought me then to a choice of Tai Chi or yoga. I went shopping for both, ended up in yoga and looking for a spiritual tradition of practice. I don't know if you'd call this unconventional, but I would rather call it what the mathematicians call "a random walk", where you set out without a particular goal and for some reason you take a right turn, then a left turn, and then two more rights, and eventually you find yourself having gotten to a place you had never anticipated. And it's because the end state is not predictable from where you started. It is only predictable from a series of smaller steps taken along the way, none of which is likely to have a long term rational planning behind it.

Carolyn: *Interesting.*

Meredith: So, in my case, what came together

in the end was, you know, a touch of Unitarianism, the Buddhist practice, and yoga. It finally became a package.

Carolyn: *I wanted to go back to something you said, when you were meeting with Steve Lowry. I think of you two as being quite learned with Buddhism, sutras and stuff. So, your meetings together must have been pretty deep and fascinating.*

Meredith: Steve, although he wasn't that many years older than me, was very much my elder dharma brother. We would talk about things. Sometimes he had things to talk about as he understood that his disease was progressing. There would be talk about that, and about death, about which he had astonishing equanimity. But he worried about Jeanne, his wife. That was a topic often.

We talked a lot about literature and books and practice. He was known in the Vietnamese Buddhist community in Bayside, so he would actually practice there sometimes with this Vietnamese Buddhist group. He said that he didn't understand anything, not the words, but the rituals, of course. But, yes, Steve and I, I would always leave with a list of books to read. And very often that would be things we would talk about the next time we would see each other.

Carolyn: *Nice. Are there any sutras that you particularly like or that you especially think have had an impact on you?*

Meredith: Oh, sure, many. I'm not a sutra scholar, but there are a number of them that are really foundational for me. In my practice, especially the way I'm trying to bring together some of my yoga training with some of my Buddhist training, the most important documents are the...I'm looking at the book called *Awakening of the Heart*. First is the full awareness of breathing and it carries the title here *The Sutra on the Full Awareness of Breathing*. Let's see *Anapanasati Sutra.* That's also foundational in the Vipassana tradition, I understand.

The second one is also foundational for me, which is the sutra on the four establishments of mindfulness and that is called the *Satipatthana Sutra*. Those are basic, they are included in Thich Nhat Hanh's book *Awakening of the Heart*.

There are two more there. I love the sutra on *Knowing the Better Way to Catch a Snake.* This is about a conflict within the Buddhist sangha, with a kind of renegade or alternative monk who had a different interpretation of the Buddha's words, or different interpretation of the doctrine, and he would not change. As I understand the narrative, it went on for a year, a year and a half, and it split the community. The sutra on the better way to catch a snake is a warning to people who speak of the dharma, but they may have caught the snake by the wrong end. That is, their misunderstandings of it may cause harm to themselves or others. The name of the person is Aritta. I identify with the character Aritta because he thinks he knows a lot more than he really does. [Carolyn laughs]

A couple of others; the Diamond Sutra, of course, which is dense and difficult to unpack, although I last read it in 50 degree weather in a sleeping bag up in Madeline Island a few weeks ago. But it is an admonition to all of us to see the emptiness of our notions of a self or a person or a living being or a lifespan, all those things we use to establish identities for ourselves. It is a difficult but thorough destruction of the notions we have of ego and identity. It's densely packed, so you can read it over and over.

In fact, it's one of those sutras, like the *Heart Sutra*, which are so basic yet they are so obtuse often that you don't learn them in your head, you learn them by repeated contact and eventually developing a feel. The feel can be fleeting, so it's not an intellectual exercise, but it's a matter of continually letting them rain down on you. And as you read them, sometimes you can review things you've been reading, but you can't fight with them or argue with them, at least in your first contacts because the meaning only comes slowly. If you recite the *Prajnaparamita Sutra*, the *Heart Sutra*, you'll find that you repeat it many times before you get a feel for how positive and instructive it is about

the notions of form, feeling, perceptions, consciousness, all those things in which we base our identity, none of which have an independent reality.

If I tell myself those things intellectually, something in me fights with it. But if I just allow it to be sent to me sometimes through my own recitation, I begin to have a feel of what it might mean. In that sense, it's a little bit like a Zen koan because the koans are not meant to be puzzled out intellectually. A koan brings understanding, but it doesn't bring an intellectual discourse.

There are a couple more here. I'm infatuated with the sutra on the *Eight Realizations of the Great Beings* and the book about it by Phap Hai. The *Heart Sutra*, of course. And then there's one more--the *Sutra on Knowing The Better Way to Live Alone*. Which is not at all about living alone as a matter of physical contact with people, but if I understand Thai's commentary, it is about living freed from the burdens of past, freed from anxieties of the future, and freed also from entanglements or current attachments. So, living alone doesn't mean sitting in a hut by yourself, although the sutra is addressed to such a person. It is not telling you to get out of your hut and get involved with people, although that's implied. It's the admonition--if you can make it as simple minded as this--to live in the present without attachment to the past, the future, or even to the turbulence of the present.

Carolyn: *Interesting.*

Meredith: So, it's an absolute favorite of mine.

Carolyn: *You have several that you really like.*

Meredith: Yeah. There is one more, and that doesn't show up in these sources. It's often called the *Maha-Rahulovada Sutra*. Rahula was the son of the Buddha, but never got to know him as a father; he was a small child when the Buddha left. He then joined the Buddha as a bhikshu, a devotee. There are several sutras delivered in the tradition by the Buddha to his son Rahula. The last one, I think, when Rahula was about 19, Rahula asks him, "How do I practice in the body?" The Buddha gives him several ways to practice in the body, one of which is the identification of the body with the elements of earth, air, fire and water, and sometimes space.

I went back to that for the retreat we held in the Christine Center. I did not actually cite the sutras in what I was doing, but I was trying to follow the advice to Rahula in identifying the earth elements of the body, the water elements of the body, the air elements of the body, with the understanding that those elements are a gift of the earth, which we will one day give back.

This is what fascinates me about green burial, where you're buried in an open plot. It's not like a garden, it is an open field and you are wrapped in burlap and placed in the ground, but there is no memorial marker for your body in it's resting place. There is a marker or a stone or a tablet to say who all is resting in this place, but your body returns to the elements. It is not protected by embalming or any enclosure. You are wrapped in burlap and placed in the earth. I had this image in my mind when I talk about the body as a gift to you and it would be a gift when you give it back.

Carolyn: *That's really interesting. Would you like to have that green burial for you?*

Meredith: Simone and I have talked about it, and I like the idea, but her family traditions are different. We discussed quite a while between a traditional burial and a cremation and we are now resting on acceptance of a cremation. That's the way I will return my elements to the earth. That's not the same as planting my body under a tree, but that's how far we have progressed in our thinking.

Carolyn: *I've filled out the forms to give my body to the Medical College of Wisconsin. So, if I die in Wisconsin, that's what they can do. Where then they use my body for a couple of years and then they cremate and give it back to the family.*

Meredith: I used to think of that, never got to that point. As I get older I think "Good lord, what would they want with this body?" [Carolyn laughs]

I suppose the only thing I've thought of now is, of course, how they will recycle all of the artificial joints I have placed in my body. I'm

sure I've told you this story, but I asked at the medical hospital, the orthopedic hospital, when I had my last knee put in, "What happens to the knee when I'm cremated?" They all claimed ignorance, and they never thought about it. One said to me later, "We had a lady who, when she died, her children said 'We spent a fortune on that hip, we want it back.' "

Carolyn: [Carolyn laughs] *They did?*

Meredith: Yeah. That may be an apocryphal nurse story in the elevator, but the most valuable part of my remains will be those pieces which they'll melt down and be able to use again for somebody else.

I suppose the question would be, "Why have I lived so long?" I've had various diseases, I've had knees getting fixed. I had a long period where I abused alcohol but I haven't had a drink for over 40 years.

Carolyn: *How many? 40 or 4?*

Meredith: I've been sober, alcohol free, for 42 years. And who knows what a liver looks like after that. I have no idea what they might look for. They might check my bones and joints, but I think what will happen is that my friends at the sangha will sing Namo Avalokiteshvara 21 times and my ashes will get spread by my request in one of the Wisconsin forests or streams or lakes that have given me so much pleasure. In other words, they can dump me on a bicycle trail somewhere.

Carolyn: *Yeah, my Steve was cremated and he wanted his ashes to go off the beach where we were married by Lake Michigan. In fact, it was Back Bay Beach in Whitefish Bay.*

Meredith: A close friend of mine at the rowing club in San Francisco died, was cremated. Of course, it is illegal to dump all these ashes in the water as you probably knew, but they were rowers and Phil was my rowing partner. I wasn't there to row Phil out into San Francisco Bay but somebody was there and they rowed the box out into San Francisco Bay, and left him there, for the minke whales and the seals, the sea lions, the fish. I like that.

Carolyn: *Are there any books that have had a significant impact on you, or is it mostly the sutras?*

Meredith: I varies a little with the kind of projects I have in mind. I'm with a group of men mostly my age, and we make a habit to read our way through the Pulitzers or the Booker Prizes or various literature. We are now reading Saramago. We read Hiruki Murakami and also there's a lot of lighter stuff. Basically, I guess you'd call it literature, but it's a group of people who all contribute, so there's not a single thread through that.

Carolyn: *Do you meet here in Milwaukee or via Zoom?*

Meredith: We did meet with Zoom during the COVID but we meet here, my house. I have a couple of groups that meet here with me in the home during the week. But the book that I never have very far away from me is, of course, *Awakening the Heart*. I have a version on Kindle, and then many of the pieces of that have been separated into separate books. I have most of those. The standard reading I usually have with me is Thich Nhat Hanh's *The Heart of the Buddha's Teachings,* a basic book that dates back to the '90s with some updates. I have a copy of that in Portuguese that I usually carry with me when I'm in Brazil. Or sometime when I have time, I'll read a section first in Portuguese and then I'll read it again in English so that the vocabulary in English is current for a discussion. For example, there's a group here in Milwaukee called Going Deeper, and we're currently reading *The Heart of the Buddha's Teachings*. Typically, I'll read it once in Portuguese and once in English.

Carolyn: *Oh, good for you!*

Meredith: I can read Portuguese much better than speak it. I also have a kind of a reading list in German and it started when I was going back to Germany back in May. I realized that my active vocabulary and my sense of tenses, and verb endings, and cases and genders have lost some of its nuance, so I began reading German again. Most of that is trivial or popular literature. I haven't the heart to read Thomas Mann or Franz Kafka in German anymore.

[Carolyn laughs]

I've done that, I've read Kafka and Mann in German. As an old swami said once, "I've

done this once, it's not necessary for you to all do it." Of course, he was advising one of his devotees who was setting out to do mantra japa. There's a mantra japa as repetition and he was setting out to do 250,000 repetitions. And his guru said, "I've done that. I've done it for you." [Meredith laughs]

Carolyn: *Oh, he did, so the person didn't do it?*

Meredith: Yeah. So, I figure somewhere on this earth, somebody is reading Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks* in German for me. [Carolyn laughs]

Carolyn: *There you go! Are there any Buddhist beliefs that you've had trouble understanding or that you disagree with?*

Meredith: There are so many Buddhist beliefs and traditions. Both yoga and Buddhism have hundreds of variations. The variation in which I have training, and in which my heart rests, is the Mahayana tradition. Although when we read sutras that have come through the Pali tradition they may not all be originally Mahayana, they may be one of the other traditions and background. But there's this whole set of Buddhist beliefs called Tantra, and they're mostly within the Tibetan tradition and they involve mantra and yantra and tantra and visualizations and those are paths I haven't followed. Those are forms of practice in which I was not trained and in which I don't have a teacher.

My practice is meditation and sutras, not mystical or esoteric practices. Or, as the Tibetan monks do, creating medallions out of colored sand and then sprinkling them into a river as a sign of impermanence. However beautiful that tradition was, it isn't something that I was trained in or would do, let alone be a monastic in the tradition.

Please remember that when I speak of sutras and practice, I am only talking about the present stage of my own development. I hope my understanding of the sutras and practice will continue to deepen, but I am speaking about the provisional state of my understanding.

So, my own tradition is Mahayana. But there are things in that tradition that are harder to follow. I do not have an immediate intuitive understanding of shunyata, emptiness, or non-self, let alone nirvana. It is enough for us to understand the six paramitas and learn how to practice dana (generosity), virya (force and determination), concentration, all of the practices. That's where most of us, I think, work to understand and have a feeling for the four noble truths; that there's suffering, there's causes of suffering, there's cessation, that there is a path to cessation.

This is a practice that is oriented toward a simple question: what is the next right thing for me to do? How do I conduct myself in a way that reduces the suffering of myself and others? There are practices--even though sometimes they may be a little bit opaque or hard to take to heart at first--to reduce suffering, that are the ones that become part of my path. That, of course, is part of one of my other favorite sutras, which is the sutra of the Kalamas. These are the villagers who asked the Buddha which teachings are true. I can't represent the Buddha's answer, but the answer for most of us are those things that are wholesome and reduce suffering. So, that's the practice. It sounds simple enough, doesn't it?

Now what about the other detritus, all the other stuff that goes on around it? I already said that I don't practice or have not been trained in the practices of tantric Hinduism and the incredibly elaborate and beautiful teachings about bardo and passages in the Tibetan tradition, the kind of tantra practiced by the Dalai Lama. These are simply not things in my experience, that I follow.

There are other things, I've had people say to me, "I couldn't be a Buddhist, I don't believe in reincarnation." That has nothing to do with my criterion and the Kalamas' criterion of practicing a path that reduces suffering. Whether or not I believe in karma, or believe in reincarnation, is not be the central feature in my practice.

Often people are looking for some doctrinal reason to say, "I don't believe in this, so I can't do that." Well, I don't have to believe in all the elements of the many worlds of Buddhism to do the practice that gives me spiritual stability. And I don't have to do

250,000 mantra japa, and I don't have to engage in the Hindu tantra practice of dissecting myself mentally into tiny little parts and watching them moulder and disappear in order to understand impermanence. I could talk to my joints, my knees can tell me about impermanence! I don't need to sit in a burial ground watching bodies waste away. These are very deep and exciting and important practices, but they're not practices that are part of my own. I have great respect for them, but it's not the path of my training.

If somebody says to me, "Do you believe in karma?" I said, "Well, what do you mean by karma? Do you mean something trivial, like 'what goes around, comes around', or do you mean something more subtle?" For example, in the five remembrances, the very last of the remembrances is "I cannot avoid the consequences of my actions. The actions are ground on which I stand." That statement, "I cannot avoid the consequences of my actions," is a pure statement to me of karma practice. Because every action I take has an effect on me, others, too. But every act of anger makes me a more angry person. Every act of compassion makes me a more compassionate person. When I forget that practice, I drift away from compassion and equanimity. When I engage in actions that reinforce that action, I come closer to realizing the path that says at the end of that remembrance, "My actions are ground on which I stand." So, my understanding of reincarnation is not an active thought or practice to me. My reaction to karma is that I can understand it in terms of what happens to me and my character and the suffering I cause myself and others. That to me is a practical understanding of karma, even though that's not a very lofty dharmic interpretation of it.

Carolyn: *It's a good one.*

Meredith: Now, are there other things in the practice I should understand that I don't? And the answer is definitely. Sometimes I can feel the nature of emptiness, shunyata, in my heart. At other times it's more ephemeral. The same is true with the notion of nirvana, which, at least in my partial understanding, is the overcoming of ego-driven reactivity to the world, becoming able to see the world unclouded by personal afflictions and false perceptions. It is a wonderful aspiration to be able to see the world free from greed, desire, anger, jealousy and other hindrances. In that sense nirvana is not a theoretical concept but the possibility of greeting the world with complete clarity and equanimity. But if that's what nirvana would be like, then it's going to take some more work to experience it for more than an instant of time, a tiny little flicker in the normal stream of ego-driven consciousness.

Carolyn: *Can you tell me what your current daily practice is? Like yoga, meditation, pranayama, dharma study?*

Meredith: It's a little bit variable. Since COVID, oddly enough, pranayama has been a much more important part of my practice, because you know the breath consequences of COVID.

Carolyn: *So, you do that also for the healthy benefits to your lungs?*

Meredith: I think that was one thing I had in mind, but the elements of my daily practice--which are not always there everyday--they're a series of prayers or gathas, that are part of my practice. They will be there most days. But that's discursive, that's the mind talking. But those are reminders to myself. It's not so different from prayer, except they are not being sent to anybody I think can grant them to me. They're being sent to my heart, hoping I'll remember them and do them.

Pranayama is part of virtually every day's practice. And that comes up all day. For example, I often use it various pranayama techniques prior to meditation when I have trouble settling. I use pranayama as a kind of broom to sweep away some of my irritation or distraction.

I will also use it in a deeper meditative sense. There are certain practices that take you deeper. Some of them, I won't call them superficial, but they are straightforward enough that they can be treated as an extension of your meditation breathing but just a little more thoracic engagement, if I can put it that way.

There are a variety of techniques that I don't use always, but I use often enough, that are more vigorous and they have a stronger effect on the nervous system and on the mind.

I no longer do the practices that come with the warnings and safety caveats. For example, there are certain breath bandas, restraints, especially in the mid-section that may bring a little more strain on the heart. On the other hand, certain postures done with a great deal of retention, pressure in the lungs, can be troublesome to people that have glaucoma. There are a variety of bandas to control these things, but there are things that are quite vigorous that I used to do. If I can use some yoga terms, the term rajasic is often used in yoga to mean vigorous, fiery, active. The term sattvic means softer, brighter, more enlightened, associated with light rather than the fire of rajas. My practice in yoga and in pranayama have become more sattvic over the years.

I remember Geeta Iyengar, the daughter of B.K.S. Iyengar, the head of the tradition, who was an absolutely astonishing yogi in her teens, twenties. But she had some internal physical difficulties, and later in life, toward the end of her life, she had great difficulty, physical mobility problems. She would enter the meditation hall in Puna and be teaching a class and she'd be propped up with an elaborate set of pillows and braces and supports. She would teach brilliantly without being able to do the poses. She had all the knowledge of the poses in her body, she could retrieve them from her mind and body, without doing them. That's a very advanced stage of yoga. She would say, "If you can't do asana—postures--do pranayama." I watched her and I believed it. If you can't do asana, do pranayama. And if your asana becomes more sattvic, more peaceful, more relaxed, more meditative, than so does your pranayama. So, that's what led me to my own particular combinations of pranayama and meditation and movement.

Carolyn: *Do you have a routine? Do you start out with the asana practice and then move to pranayama?*

Meredith: The advice in most traditions is not to do postures before pranayama. Pranayama is on the way to meditation. Asana is an earlier, more physical stage. Although it may have other benefits in meditation, in focus, and there may even be a form of meditation that can be achieved through bodily movement, the advice is still that pranayama should follow peaceful resting and might be followed by meditation. The advice also is not to follow pranayama with asana until your nervous system and body have had a time to settle, or rather to return from whatever peaceful state that pranayama has brought you to.

This is a couple of assumptions; one is that your pranayama practice is fairly developed and fairly effective, and actually brings about changes in your breath and in your nervous system and your mental system. That has a spiritual effect on you. If you do it with enough time--and it may be five minutes, may be 10 minutes--till you find a release in it. The release that comes from pranayama has some of the same characteristics I feel with the release that comes in meditation, as if a grey cloud or a grey curtain has just slipped behind my eyes and without putting a name on it, there's been a change in consciousness, however small. So, if the pranayama does in fact produce some effects, then you should wait awhile before doing asana. But you can go from pranayama to meditation because that's a natural progression.

Carolyn: *Do you typically do pranayama first thing, or do you do the gatha study first?*

Meredith: My sitting in the practice in the morning, typically begins with, if I settle, straightforward seated meditation. If my mind is a little restless, or my body, then I'll begin with pranayama. And that's most of the time. I didn't come to any of these practices as a natural mystic, let alone a natural meditator. Like most people, I had experiences that I couldn't put a name on until I had some training. But these were not the kind of experiences that are so extensive and natural, like the so-called saints in India. For example, Sri Amritānandamayī or others who at an early age, 7 to 13 or so, would fall into spontaneous meditation and meditative trances. These were often taken by the Indians

as a sign of sainthood. They're not so common either.

Carolyn: *Common, you mean in India?*

Meredith: Yeah. But very often people in advanced spiritual paths describe mystical experiences that happened in childhood and their teen years. Visions, trances, a variety of things that others may find possible with training. They may be in the realm of human possibility, but they don't happen, or don't happen without a lot of training. For most of us, when did we start going to school? My mother dropped me off at school when I was 6 years old and I didn't leave until I was 60. That's a lot of years of practicing discursive knowledge in your head. The kind of experiences we're talking about don't happen in your head. Your head can block them. You can use your head to block incipient experiences you may find frightening. That's another story, but the number of natural mystics is relatively small and the number--and a large proportion of them have it educated out of them--or they are pressured or mistreated in the course of their religious or conventional education.

Carolyn: *Or thought to be mentally ill maybe.*

Meredith: Yeah.

Carolyn: *So, you typically start out with pranayama and then you meditate. But you also do pranayama other times of the day?*

Meredith: Yeah, often. For example, my breath practice is part of my bicycling, it's part of my exercise. When we were paddling, kayaking up in Brunet Island, we got into a tough go with a lot of headwind. I was paddling and my shoulders and body had not been conditioned to that for a couple of years, and the only way to get beyond the focus on the discomfort was to breathe with it. With a paddle you do alternate paddling, so my entire paddle back was done with ujjayi breathing. It was the breath that has the physiological effect of oxygenating you and giving you more breath and circulatory power, but it also gives your mind something to do other than worry about how your shoulders feel.

That's one of the early advantages with certain pranayama techniques, which is that they give your mind something constructive to do. It's like meditation. You might remember the early Thich Nhat Hanh book where he describes having a breathing room in the house. He was not talking about meditation. He was saying have a room where people can go to breathe. If they will go to breathe, of course, that's the start of meditation. But the breath comes in many variations. And the more powerful the breath, the more powerful the effects on your physiological, mental, even spiritual system.

Carolyn: *So, you use "pranayama" broadly to mean a lot of different breath techniques to use as you need them throughout the day.*

Meredith: Pranayama has hundreds of practices. The most extreme practices are in fact the ones that advanced yogis use to stop their hearts and stop their respiration. Let people bury them in the ground for an hour. These kinds of extreme yogic acts have their foundation in breath work.

But when you and I sit on the cushion and do alternate nostril breathing (nadi shodanam), we're much more peaceful. We can do it because it has an effect. I use nadi shodanam and a variety of these simpler techniques with seniors, because, number one, they can do them, number two, it is a vacation from your mind. So, at the very bottom level of effectiveness of breath work, it's to give your body and spirit a vacation from your mind.

Or, put another way, we believe in the unity of body, breath and mind, which is one of our gathas in Buddhism, but it is also the essential meaning of yoga. Yoga comes from the word "yug", which means union. Union of what? Body, breath and mind. The goal of bringing the intelligence of the mind and the spirit to the body, means telling the mind to stop shuffling cards and worrying and making plans, and wondering if you turned off the stove, and wondering why somebody hasn't called you back, and thinking about the next thing you have to do. Minds are built to worry about stuff. Then they have lots of other uses, but if we don't do anything to direct them, they will just worry. They'll spin their own stories. They'll invent conversations. They'll have conversations with people who have been dead for 20 years.

[Carolyn laughs] They'll dredge up shames from things you never did. They'll dredge up shames for things that are 30 years ago. Your mind does this stuff unless you redirect it. Thich Nhat Hanh in that basic discussion, said, "Wouldn't it be nice if everybody just had a breathing room?" You just watch your breath, not your to-do list.

Carolyn: *Can you explain how your pranayama and your meditation practice affect you differently?*

Meredith: When I don't do them, all of my afflictions become stronger.

Carolyn: *When you don't do either one. But do you have a noticeable effect from pranayama as opposed to meditation or are they so intertwined for you?*

Meredith: Well, I'll say two things about this. One is formalistic, which is, in most traditions, not just the occult traditions, it's a practice not to talk about your experience except with a teacher. For example, I've had visual and spiritual experiences that I don't share with people, but I'll talk with a teacher because all of this needs someone who says whether or not that's normal and whether or not you can work with that. And that it is not a sign you are going crazy. We all need guides; this is proven in drug experience and spiritual practice of all kinds. If we're going into new territory--mentally, physiologically, psychologically--we need some backup, somebody to tell us you are not going crazy, this is a normal consequence of the behavior, this is what you have to look forward to. So, I have things that I've shared with teachers that I wouldn't talk about otherwise. That includes talking in detail about specific reactions I've had to pranayamas or meditations.

In a more general sense, pranayama and meditation flow into each other. But pranayama is a sharp instrument, but it is more blunt than meditation. In other words, if I'm working with a physical state, pranayama is a more immediate and active and vigorous approach to it. If I'm feeling upset, deep pranayama breathing will get me farther faster than meditation, because it will shut off the mind for me faster. Then once I've wrestled the affliction into a manageable form, then I can use the techniques of meditation which are for me the further stages of integration and healing. But this is my own use and my own interpretation.

So, while upset, and one of my afflictions, kleshas, is attacking me, or rising in me, then I'll find physical effort, asana, a bicycle ride, breath work. These are ways that my body knows how to cope with them. Meditation is not the first thing because I need to shovel out some of the mess first. Now some people are natural meditators and can be meditating right away. But if you ever find yourself in meditation finding that your mind is a storm of aggravation and afflictions, you are normal, I think. And that's the time at which I use other techniques to try to manage the storm.

Once the storm is quiet enough so it's not blowing off the doors, then I can sit down and begin to work with it. And at that point, the standard tools begin to make sense. For example, recognizing and accepting that it's there. Anger, shame, has arisen in me. Accepting it, I am of the nature to feel anger and shame. It is now with me, it has arisen in me. It is not me, but it has arisen in me. Why? The next step to investigate why is that anger and shame causing me so much suffering?

So, try to examine that. Not by examining all the incidents in my life of anger and shame, but examining the feelings of shame in my body, the feelings of anger. Then as it gradually relaxes, which may not happen in the first sit, it may take months to detoxify that feeling. I may not be able to live with it very long before I have to put it back on the shelf, and say, "Okay, you sit there and fester, I'll talk to you again when I'm stronger." Okay, now let's bring it off the shelf and, oh, there you are again. My anger, that recollection of that terrible thing I did.

Carolyn: *Hmm, that's interesting.*

Meredith: It doesn't help to remember *what* I did, but to remember *why* I did it and if I have the power now not to do it anymore. The healing part is in making the step, if you understand what it is in you that made this happen. That sounds like the power is outside you, but it's not. What is it in you that allowed this thing to arise?

In our tradition we talk about watering the seeds of anger. What watered these seeds of anger? How do I deprive them of water now? What do I do? So, that healing stage comes, and it may be a process of a half hour, 30 minutes. It may be a process of 30 days or 30 months.

You know, dealing with the loss of someone you cared about, that's not an easy thing. Whatever is lost there is too close to the heart to let go until you've worked with the pieces, and the elements, and the healing that's inherent in you. But it may not happen for a long time. I've lost many friends, I go through this every time. I get very unhappy sometimes with the impermanence of my body. I have to remind myself that, yes, my knee hurts, or the other knee hurts, or something else doesn't work, but I woke up this morning and I'm breathing and there's action I can take.

It's back to the hindrances of meditation. The five hindrances (attachment, aversion, distraction, doubt and laziness) are always there in some measure. Our attachment, often given as desire or something sensual, but it's a desire for something you can't have or don't want to lose. Aversion to something, anger, something hurt. I don't like this feeling, how could they do that to me? How am I going to get even? That ruins your meditation. A third one is irritation or distraction. Millions of reasons for that. But it affects all of us. Laziness, well, that's not my biggest problem if I'm sitting down I probably overcame the laziness, at least I'm there. The last one is doubt.

If I were listing them in order of the way the afflictions, or the hindrances, affect me, I would say attachment, aversion, doubt and irritation, distraction. Every one of those hinders meditation. You can sometimes introduce your meditation by saying which of these is sandbagging me right now. A more common thing is for me to, depending on how intense it is, to do some yoga practice. To do some other physical stuff, it may be a bike ride. And then maybe we can get to pranayama and meditation.

I see the body work as a continuum, and sometimes all you can do is body work to distract you, to give your mind something to think about other than how awful you feel about yourself. I can feel better about running or doing the best trikonasana I've done this week. There's a progression that depends on how natural a meditator you are. Going back to the yoga terms, how sattvic. If you tend to be a rajasic person in the yoga language, rajasic means fire, energy, power. If you are of a rajasic temperament, active, committed to action, committed to externalizing yourself, you may say, "I am filled with rajas, I think I'll just sit down and leave it on the mat." And the answer is, it may not leave so easily. You may need stronger medicine. Now I mention the Hindu and the Buddhist tantrics with all kinds of techniques of visualizations of deities and complex practices. They have practices for everything. Why shouldn't we? I'm a common Mahayana practitioner. But why shouldn't I include, as part of my practice, the role my body plays, and make that a conscious part of the way I treat myself.

It's more interesting for me to look not at the past but at what's in the future. And I think of three things.

The first is my yoga practice. I've been an instructor in the Iyengar tradition, where I've trained there for a couple of decades and more. As my body has changed and I've aged, I find that my practice changes and that I use a number of different props to support my practice. I don't see this as a source of resentment or aggravation, but simply as an accommodation to the impermanence of life and changes in the body. It is also a way for all of us to continue doing many of the things that we deeply love well into the later years of our lives.

It is great joy to be able to teach yoga, or what I often refer to now as mindful movement, to mature and senior practitioners. I've done that for well over 15 years and I'm delighted to be able to share anything I learned working with my own body to be of assistance to others, particularly for people who might think that because of age or stiffness or injury or some other medical condition they might not be able to do yoga. But of course they are just hindered

by some version of yoga and may not be aware of all the possibilities they have working with their bodies as they are now. In that sense yoga is a model for adaptations we can make in our lives that support an active engagement in the world all through your life.

Secondly, I'm delighted in being able to carry on my photographic work. I recently had an exhibition called "Embodied Devotion" which featured work from the 15 plus years of research my wife, Simone Ferro, and I have done in Northeast Brazil in the state of Maranhão. The photographs are a very small selection, perhaps only 20 pieces, of thousands and thousands of photographs we have of the way in which people engage their bodies singing, chanting, and playing music in devotional practices that are often much more engaged and charismatic than is common in many American spiritual practices. I expect to continue that work as long as we're able to be useful in sharing the wonderful stories and lives of these remarkable people in Maranhão.

Part of that research is also photography work, often shared with other photography friends, in accompanying Simone's choreographic work. That involvement in dance movement has allowed us to see and photograph the choreographic work and movement development of other people in the community. So, photographing dance has been an exciting long term occupation and will continue well into the future.

My next photographic project will be giving visual accompaniment to Simone's development of a choreographic piece with a ballet company in São Paulo, Brazil. It is a complicated dance work that will feature women drummers from Northeast Brazil, a unique form of devotional practice by women drummers (called caixeiras) in Maranhão. She will be finding a way to merge that traditional art with a movement work of a contemporary ballet company in Brazil.

I also have vast archives of photos, some good, some not so good, that I would like someday to continue developing and perhaps making available to other people so that when I pass, someone won't simply press the delete key and they'll all be lost.

The last thing has to do with the personal resources that actually sustain my life. The nurturing of friends and spiritual work, my relationship with my wife, with my family, all the spiritual connectedness near and not so near that makes life sensible and sensitive and filled with feeling and meaning. A central part of that has become my work within the sangha and in trying to deepen my practice in the Buddha dharma. Although I've spent a number of years in the mindfulness center, I still consider myself to be very much a beginner and very superficial in my understanding of the dharma. So, I've begun working even more intensely on practicing and learning the dharma to be more effective in taking the thoughts, feelings, impressions, and spiritual development that has been so valuable to me and to try to find a language to communicate that more effectively to other people. I don't see myself as a dharma teacher, although I've been a teacher in political science and yoga and other things all my life. I feel a need to try to share whatever I've been able to learn, but I have a deep feeling that I have to learn much more before I can effectively share it.