



Photo: Marlies Bosch

## JAN WILLIS and dreaming me

*What makes a fifty-two-year-old academic write about her own life? A professor who teaches Buddhism at Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut, Jan Willis has authored four academic books, all on Buddhist topics. After publishing *Enlightened Beings* she was ready to focus on finishing the job she had been working on for nine years: her family history. The project was interrupted by the decision to write a totally different book: a memoir called *Dreaming Me; An African American Woman's Spiritual Journey*, due to be published in April 2001. Jan Willis spoke to Marlies Bosch.*

I had been working on my family history project off and on for nine years. For a long time I had tried to write about the lineage of my ancestors with an academic objective approach when I finally realized it was my family I was writing about. I couldn't leave myself out. I was involved. Then, one day, I received a telephone call from Trace Murphy of Doubleday, telling me he had just finished reading *Enlightened Beings*, and asking whether I might be interested in writing up my life story for Doubleday. He sounded really interested. After I hung up I felt two emotions. First, I felt hurt because he hadn't seemed particularly interested in my family history; but I also wondered seriously if I could do a book on me. It would mean a lot of "I" and "me". I didn't know if I could put myself at the very center of a book. When we met in person, in a really trendy New York restaurant, Trace Murphy advised me to get an agent.

That meant entering a totally new world for me. Academics don't usually have agents! Well, since *Enlightened Beings* had been published by Wisdom Publications, I had heard of an agent, Ike Williams, who occasionally worked for them *pro bono*. It somehow felt like the circle came together: Lama Yeshe had founded Wisdom, I had published my last book there, so contacting their agent looked like the normal next step.



I contacted Ike's office, we made an appointment and from the first moment of our meeting I knew that I trusted him. He had a Tibetan Buddha on his desk, and quilts all around the office, which seemed to connect my two backgrounds, one being an African American Baptist from the south and the other being a Buddhist scholar. Another auspicious sign for me was that he wanted to read all I had written on my family history. So I was really thrilled when his office let me know that "Palmer and Dodge would be honored to represent me." In fact I grinned from ear to ear.

I ke presented the outline of the memoir to other publishers and, in the end, Riverhead Publishers offered a deal I could say yes to, wholeheartedly. I have to confess that I did feel very confused and conflicted to know that I had signed a contract and actually would get paid for writing about my own life. Apart from feeling challenged, it also put a lot of pressure on me. I postponed starting to write, until, while I was teaching at the Vajrapani Institute in California, I broke my ankle. It was a clear sign to me: sit down and write!

It took me three years to complete the manuscript. First, I had to find the format of the book. It didn't take me very long to see that a series of recurring dreams I was having about strong and powerful lionesses could serve as the framework as well as the basis for the title of the book.

I found it extremely hard to write about my childhood and my family. It was completely new for me to be the object of my own writing. Childhood traumas came flooding back to me, and it was difficult to describe my family's situation without feeling that I was betraying them. The family history was meant to be a gift to my family; this felt more like an exposure, maybe even a negative one.

At times I was torn apart by doubts, but during the process of writing I also realized that writing about yourself makes you get a sense of who you are. Still, I found it very difficult and without the help of some of my best friends I wouldn't have been able to complete this book. One friend in particular, a writer and editor herself, stood by me the entire three years. She read every word of the chapters I produced and would tell me: "Skip these three pages, start your story here," or "Stop. Tell me the whole story. Now this is what's important," which enabled me to go up to the computer and actually write it down.

What is this memoir about? It is about a black Baptist girl from the south becoming a Buddhist scholar in the north. My editor at Riverhead warned me against making the part about my Buddhist teacher, Lama Yeshe too devotional. I know that is

a danger to every book about the so-called gurus of Westerners. However, I believe that everybody needs some guidance in their lives from a special person, be it a school-teacher, a mother or a grandparent. For me, it happened to be this Tibetan Lama, whom I met when I was about twenty years old. I was a confused young woman with a lot of anger, pain and very low self-esteem. It is a tribute to his teaching that I wrote about his ways of restoring my self-confidence. He would tell me over and over to realize and manifest the fact that I was a strong and intelligent woman who had something to contribute to this world.

I didn't want to make these stories sound too pious, but as I tell them in the book, it portrays him as he was during the time I knew him: a realistic and kind human being. That has nothing to do with guru-worship. My memoir is about a lot more than his influence in transforming my life. The story is, I hope, actually universal, and not just about the ego-trip of one person. After all, I am not the only one born as a black child in the Jim Crow south and growing up in

Docena, a mining camp. In spite of all the awards and scholarships, when I met Lama Yeshe I was still carrying a lot of baggage related to my childhood. He helped me to heal those wounds, by accepting the fact that sometimes "even the Buddha's mind was angry."

Although the scars of racism never really heal, knowing Lama Yeshe for 15 years helped me to regain self-confidence. That is why I like being a teacher myself. I like to know that I get a

chance to help students realize that they are all human beings, and that it is healthy to sometimes try on someone else's shoes. That makes them more compassionate human beings. Teachers are very important during the formative part of our lives.

Besides my meeting with Lama Yeshe, an important section of my forthcoming memoir is the decision I had to make at a certain time of my life, being a student at Cornell amidst the uproar of the Black Panther Movement. I had to choose between joining them or accepting the invitation to come and study in a monastery in Nepal. I know now that my decision for the latter was right: I have always been a person who wanted to reason, to deal with these issues in a peaceful way. The question was and is: how can a person remain strong and not feel a coward, working on peace, not violence. I have a lot of anger, still, but it always felt wrong to act upon this. I truly wanted to be humble without being weak, and I think this memoir is a reflection of that struggle inside myself. It is a struggle I think I am winning. ☉



*From black Baptist girl to Lama Yeshe's student.*