

Holly Near at Kairos CoMotion

February 22, 2002

MADISON, WI - Holly Near performed in concert at the Kairos CoMotion event sponsored by Progressive Wisconsin United Methodists. Near sang and spoke in support of living with one another more caringly and inclusively.

Near reported seeing a three-year old being yanked beyond her slow walk by her parent. In remembering all the pain inflicted upon children over the years and the difficulty of changing people she was immobilized, but another, from across the street, intervened. So she sang, "Something changes in me when I witness someone's courage." The audience responded with recognition and through their applause affirmed that they were also being changed toward courage.

Reflecting on the everyday occurrence of bottled water, Near noted that, "the water coming out of our faucets frightens us." We so easily "adapt to horror," says Near. Another everyday experience is that of looking at billboards. Near says we need to "not ignore them, but to actually look at them and say, 'You're not coming in. I see what you are doing to me. You are selling sexism, racism, shallow thinking.' Though it is hard work, said Near, to actively stop them from coming into our consciousness, it is easier than "endlessly unlearning misinformation before it gets into my body."

This work, according to Near, will not fix the world in our lifetime but we can make a huge contribution toward a fix.

Near says that right now, "There is a great deal of weight on the side of pain and violence and cruelty and even if right now we are not going to make a full-time commitment to activism, just by stepping up onto the scale, on the other side, we can keep a balance happening on our planet."

Just as Bishop Spong had done in a previous presentation, Near placed an emphasis on the love side of the scale when she performed an old song in a new context: "Our Love Is Here to Stay."

"I didn't support U.S. foreign policy before September 11th and I don't support it now," said Near as she addressed another issue. She continued, "I think the cloud will lift soon. There has been quite an orchestrated campaign to help us forget who we are."

To help the audience see what she was talking about, Near recounted a high school experience with the old dress-codes as a way of trying to enforce security through conformity and fear. This was followed by recounting a college experience of thinking about how to effect social change and have the courage to speak one's mind and finding herself changed by the protest of others. So she proceeded to travel to the Philippines at the height of martial law and El Salvador while the war was raging, and joined the woman's movement, and came out as a lesbian to a world that couldn't tell the difference between a lesbian and a Lebanese. Each of those moments was frightening but she found new life by pushing through the fear.

Recently Near has dealt with not calling herself a Christian in a Christian environment. It doesn't seem to be ok to not be anything that has a word to attach to it. Near says this tends to make others nervous when they can't categorize you.

In remembering how often in history religion has been associated with war, Near expressed her appreciation to be with so many who are challenging this connection in the core of their own churches and asking how one can be a spiritual community without endorsing war and competition between beliefs. To emphasize this, Near sang, "I'm not afraid of your Jesus...I'm afraid of what you do in the name of your God."

Raising her voice in song, Near asked, "Why do we kill people who kill people to show that killing people is wrong?" Near went on to recognize the reality that "Kids are going to love who they damn well please." It is that shift from killing to loving that Near kept emphasizing in a variety of ways through the concert.

Near noted that hate crimes based on sexual orientation have more than tripled since the F.B.I. began collecting this information in 1991; and totals 16.3% of all hate crimes in year 2000. She spoke of the pain inflicted upon gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and questioning people by others who live in a very small world without much access to other information.

People keep equating homosexuality with specific sex acts while the real equation is with finding love, says Near.

it is out in the world; it is much better when we do this together.

Near spoke of her "coming out" to her parents saying, "That's great honey, bring her home." Today children of gay couples are saying that they are "straight" and the only response for the parents is to say, "That's great honey, bring them home." This reflected well the Kairos CoMotion sensibility of coming home to an inclusive and loving world.

Knowing that many still feel panic to the point of throwing up when they are in the presence of kissing gay couples because of the bombardment of culture saying this is wrong, Near believes it is important to deliberately confront this panic response to help people get it out of their systems so they can get better. Near looks forward to the time when we stop making each other sick, but we still have a long way to go in dealing with issues of race and class and gender and sexuality.

Being overwhelmed by the task still before us can lead to depression, said Near. It is important to recognize the reality of this response rather than to try to keep it a secret. Near helped the audience to "Breathe in, Breathe out" to move through the difficulties of life.

Harriet Tubman is a model for Near when she gets lonely or depressed. When things don't seem very effective in bringing change, Near goes through an exercise to remember those who faced difficulties so overwhelming they wondered if there would ever be another day - women in the middle ages, Jews, Gypsies, homosexuals in Nazi times, Africans on slave ships, Native Americans pushed and pushed off their land.

Imagining those early slaves who got up in the middle of the night and decided to leave and said, "Now," Near sees one soul at a time, not a movement. But the word got around and around and that motion became a movement that took on a name and leadership. All that had to go on first - before Harriet Tubman. Looking back we can see how this led to Nelson Mandela becoming president of South Africa at the height of apartheid. Near asked, "What will people 100 years from now say when they look back at us?"

To get caught, says Near, asking whether we are doing any good is to ask the wrong question. Near says, "All we have to do is live our lives with dignity and courage. All we have to do is to remember to get up in the middle of the night and say, 'Now,' one soul at a time."

The concert ended with Near being joined by the audience in the song "We are a gentle, angry people and we are singing, singing for our lives." Near concluded, "This song sounds nicer with lots of voices and that's how