# World Wheel

## *One Woman's Quest for Peace*

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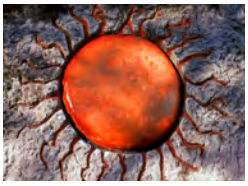
*To my mother*
***Lillian Melba Hamilton***

*and my father*
***Paul Hamilton***



*and to you*

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## *One Woman's Quest for Peace*

VIJALI HAMILTON

*with artwork by the author*

Introduction by Gloria Feman Orenstein



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*Upanishads: Breath of the Eternal,* translated by Swami Prabhavananda and Frederick Manchester, Hollywood, California: Vedanta Press, paperback edition, 1983, page 131

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What is our essence?

What is our imbalance—personally, communally, globally?

What can bring us, our community, our planet back into balance?

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS


*Introduction* ..... ix

CHAPTER 1 World Wheel ~ Spoke One ..... 1
*Malibu, California, USA*

CHAPTER 2 Invisible Sources ..... 16

CHAPTER 3 World Wheel ~ Spoke Two ..... 23
*Seneca Cattaraugus Reservation, New York, USA*

CHAPTER 4 The Vedanta Convent ..... 36

CHAPTER 5 World Wheel ~ Spoke Three ..... 46
*Alicante, Spain*

CHAPTER 6 Into the World ..... 53

CHAPTER 7 World Wheel ~ Spoke Four ..... 60
*Umbrian Forest, Italy*

CHAPTER 8 A Room of My Own ..... 70

CHAPTER 9 World Wheel ~ Spoke Five ..... 76
*Tinos, Greece*

CHAPTER 10 Kundalini ..... 88

CHAPTER 11 World Wheel ~ Spoke Six ..... 94
*South Gallala Plateau, Egypt*

CHAPTER 12 Winged Woman ..... 104

CHAPTER 13 World Wheel ~ Spoke Seven ..... 114
*Dead Sea, Palestine and Israel*

CHAPTER 14 The Amazon Jungle ..... 121

CHAPTER 15 World Wheel ~ Spoke Eight ..... 130
*West Bengal, India*

CHAPTER 16 Freedom ..... 143

CHAPTER 17 World Wheel ~ Spoke Nine ..... 146
*Shoto Terdrom, Tibet*

CHAPTER 18 Marriage ..... 156

CHAPTER 19 World Wheel ~ Spoke Ten ..... 159
*Kunming, China*

CHAPTER 20 Spirit Within Matter ..... 171

CHAPTER 21 World Wheel ~ Spoke Eleven ..... 181
*Lake Baikal, Siberia, Russia*

CHAPTER 22 My Sacred Mountain ..... 190

CHAPTER 23 World Wheel ~ Spoke Twelve ..... 199
*Tenkawa, Nara, Japan*

CHAPTER 24 Return ..... 207

Postscript Second World Wheel ..... 212

*Chronology* ..... 222

*Acknowledgments* ..... 224

*Photo Illustrations* ..... 225

*Endnotes* ..... 230

*Bibliography* ..... 232

*Books Featuring Vijali Hamilton* ..... 234

*Other Works by Vijali Hamilton* ..... 235

*Biography* ..... 236

*Sculptural Amphitheater* (detail), Pepperdine University, Malibu, California

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# *Introduction*

VIJALI HAMILTON'S *World Wheel: One Woman's Quest for Peace* is a unique narrative of artistic and pacifist pioneering. Her life-journey has been fueled by intense spiritual inspiration, introspection, meditation, and practice.

When I first met Vijali in the mid-eighties, we made what I then considered a pilgrimage to visit her sculpture, *Winged Woman,* in the Santa Monica Mountains in California. Along the way, I learned about Vijali's early life when she had lived as a nun in a Vedanta convent. This in itself, it seemed to me, was a most apropos beginning for an artist who sculpted rocks while living alone in a trailer in the mountains, and who journeyed around the world, carving faces into huge boulders at old and new sacred sites throughout the planet. We see in Vijali's accomplishments that she not only "talks the talk," she "walks the talk" of a global peacemaker and artist, weaver of the dream of a borderless world.

The Surrealist poet, Andre Breton, has suggested that we should conceive of our waking lives as merely the punctuation points in the primary continuum—that of our dream lives, rather than the reverse, which is the way we ordinarily conceive of this relationship. Vijali has intuitively lived her life according to that reversal of priorities, always giving the prophetic sense of the dream priority over the solutions offered by ordinary reason and reality, always seeing the positive in place of the negative, always giving heed to the dream's guidance over society's worldly teachings.

She begins her book with the dream that changed her life and galvanized her artistic activity—the dream of a borderless world. In this dream, she saw herself in the future as a sculptor carving huge works out of boulders and creating new sacred sites in countries not yet revealed to her. This dream led to her creation of a performance art/life event of global proportions which she calls the World Wheel—and which continues to this day. The story of her selection of the initial twelve sites along the 34th north latitudinal parallel of the earth—

*The Other Self* (detail)

from the Santa Monica Mountains to the ancient Shinto Shrine of Tenkawa, Japan—is interspersed with vignettes from her personal life as a nun, as a wife in two different marriages, and as a renunciate at various critical moments in her transformational journey.

Throughout this immense spiritual pilgrimage/travelogue of changing cultures, languages, climates, foods, cosmologies, ritual practices, friendships, guides, healing ways, theatrical and artistic traditions, there is a constant *basso continuo* in the background, her dream of a borderless world. This guides her emergence from seclusion into the global network of interlaced communities that she connects as she lives out her dream. The monumental carvings that result include *Homage to Andean Woman, Kuan Yin of the People, Winged Woman, Rainbow Bodhisattva,* and *Trinity*, among others.

After reading this book, I wondered from where Vijali's direction and courage came to undertake this life journey. I am struck by the fact that someone who



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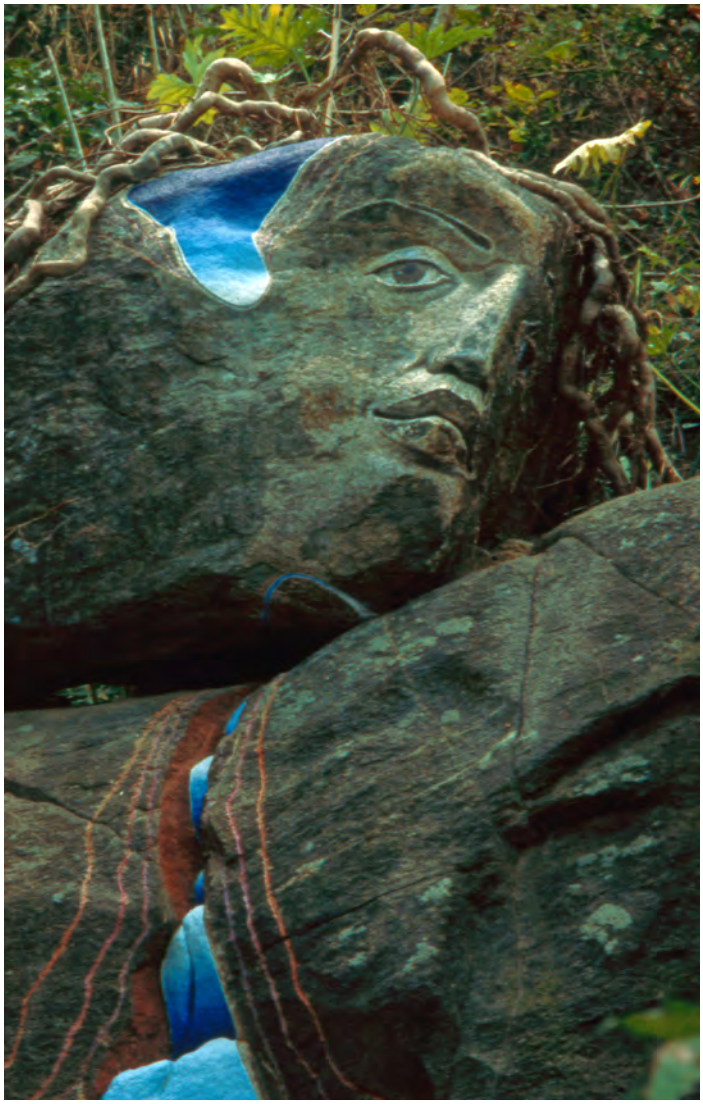

*She Who Opens the Doors of the Earth,* Yelapa, Mexico

has resided in caves, meditated in forests, and built altars of stone was born on May 1st -- May Day! -- that archetypical day in which many cultures celebrate springtime rebirth and the renewal of the earth. I feel that Vijali has equally gained strength from her spiritual practices of fifty years: living in many ashrams, as a wandering holy persona, a renunciate, and at one time chanting 700,000 repetitions of the mantra "Om Ah Hung" for the freedom and welfare of Tibet.

The seriousness and integrity of Vijali's vision of a borderless world is felt whenever she chooses not to remain with any particular person or system, husband or healer, but to follow her non-dualistic vision. She decides to leave the world of the amazing curandero Don Hildé in the Peruvian Amazon because he sees things in terms of opposites such as good and evil, while she seeks a place beyond polarities which would not exclude others by positing them as negative. Even though Don Hildé warns that she needs protection from Jesus, Ramakrishna, and other powers in the worlds that she enters so innocently, Vijali chooses to follow her own inner guidance. As she ventures off into forests, caves, mountains, and jungles alone, I can only admire the reality of the protection one earns from many years of chanting, meditation, and prayer. I have observed and marveled from a distance at how Vijali leaves on her World Wheel travels with very few possessions, accomplishes her dream, and always emerges completely unscathed.

Vijali intuitively models a new psychological paradigm, one articulated by writers like Catherine Keller, who maintains in *From a Broken Web*[1] that the true road to individuation is not through the construction of borders between the self and the other, but through expanding the self via the interconnections one makes with the other. Psychological self-realization then becomes an expression of a continual opening. Each life is rendered more complex, more compassionate, more humane through this extension of the boundaries of the self, to the point at which it is seamless with the entire universe.

The more Vijali works to release the face of the feminine hidden in each rock and boulder, the more she joins her voice to the voices of the feminine in oppressed cultures, the more her art becomes a living prayer. The prayer, carefully crafted to answer the question, "What can I do to help the suffering in the world?" is the expression of her life's purpose. Vijali envisioned her network of sculptures like acupuncture needles on the Earth, each one unblocking the energy at a certain point on the meridians of the body of the Great Mother. Through Vijali's work with communities from different cultures, she comes to understand that one person *can* make a difference, *can* make big changes. In order to do this, she realizes that she has made a shift of identity from the small self to the large Self, from the limited to the infinite and unbounded Self. She tells us that:

> *The world became my studio. I was a pilgrim who made offerings and gave voice and form to the spirit of the earth and the people I met along the way. I kept expanding the borders of what*



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*sculpture was, what art was, integrating it more and more into life itself—the people around me, their problems, their hopes, their dreams of the future. I saw that at the root of these problems is the misunderstanding of ourselves as separate, isolated beings needing to exploit the earth and each other for our personal gain. This dualistic way of thinking is the direct cause of our ecological and social problems, which are rapidly leading us toward global disaster.*

The role that Vijali plays for us in this artistic journey is one I would like to call the role of the Peregrine. Whereas a pilgrimage is a journey to a sacred site made by a person in search of a vision or a healing, a peregrinage is a journey to a sacred site made on behalf of the person in need of a healing, by a Peregrine, a person who stands in for those too delicate or too frail to risk the dangers of a long perilous journey. Thus, Vijali's art has become a peregrinage on behalf of all humankind to make offerings at ancient sacred sites, to create new sacred sites, to weave communities together—a rebalancing of the energies of the earth and of all the earth's peoples.

In the latter part of the twentieth century, several other women artists have felt the call to circle the globe several times and interact with women of indigenous communities in ways that remind me of Vijali's peregrinages. Both Betty LaDuke and Suzanne Benton have created paintings, masks, and sculptures with women in diverse cultures, and have been impelled to create their own artistic peregrinages as they, too, circled the globe creating art works and events with people in different cultures, sharing mythologies and sacred stories. Perhaps a new prototype or archetypal pattern is emerging through these journeys.

Within this movement among artists, however, Vijali's work is unique, for she is a spiritual practitioner and a visionary as well as an artist. Vijali's peregrinage has been guided by dreams, visions, and rituals, by her life as a Vedanta nun, by wisdom figures like Anandamayi Ma and Mother Theresa, by her friendship with Anaïs Nin, and by a number of spiritual leaders and shamans from the cultures she has visited. Hers were not visits about artistic interchange alone. They were about spiritual communion, healing, compassion, harmony, and an interconnected global family. Sharing with us the innermost dimensions of her experience during the final ritual in a Shinto temple in Japan, she writes:

*I lost my sense of individual identity and opened to universal energy. As the music pulled me to the south, the wail of earth's sadness and the sorrow of her children rose from my belly and poured through my lips. In the west, I felt the darkness of hibernation and dream, and our awakening visions on this earth. In the north, I sang an ancient Sanskrit hymn honoring the Divine Mother of the Universe. My movement stopped in the east, and as emptiness, I stood at the point of new beginnings, the rise of a new sun.*

When the ceremony was completed, the Shinto priest turned to her and said: "The Earth and Cosmos have heard your sincere prayer dance, and it will be answered."

Whenever Vijali arrived in a new country, she would ask the people she encountered three questions:

1. What is our essence?
2. What is our sickness, our imbalance—personally, communally, and globally?
3. What can heal this sickness, what can bring us into balance?

The answers she received formed the basis of the themes she worked into her earth sculptures and performance pieces, and always she left these art works as a gift to the communities with which she collaborated.

This book brings her three questions to us in the form of a living example, and it offers us one woman's response to the question she asked of herself, "What can I do to heal the imbalance in the world?" Knowing that a single person with a dream can indeed make a difference is a great source of inspiration and validation. We are encouraged to actualize our own dreams, and to dream her dream further. By following her lead, we may eventually understand that, as the Surrealists once taught us: "The imaginary is that which tends to become real."



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Ultimately, Vijali's life story enjoins us all to become peregrines, to make the sacred journeys on behalf of those in need of healing, to make the offerings that will bring about the visions and guidance necessary to lead us on the path to peace and unity. Vijali has re-ignited the cosmic web of the Great Mother. It is now with urgency that we must nurture our planet and keep the spirit of the Mother, our earth, alive.

—Gloria Feman Orenstein
March 2006

*Gloria Feman Orenstein is Professor of Comparative Literature and Gender Studies, University of Southern California in Los Angeles, and the author of* The Theatre of the Marvelous, The Reflowering of the Goddess, *and* Multicultural Celebrations: The Paintings of Betty LaDuke. *She is co-editor of* Reweaving the World: The Emergence of Ecofeminism.

*Dark Roots Luminous,* Canyonlands of Utah



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