

ON PILGRIMAGE

SPIRIT IN ACTION SUMMARY REPORT

*What's Been Accomplished*  
*2000-2003*

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The Boulder Institute for Nature and the Human Spirit

## Letter from the Directors

We have prepared this special report of the Boulder Institute's **Spirit in Action** program to give an overview of what's been accomplished in the past four years.

During this time we have been on a global pilgrimage of service and teaching. Our travels have focused primarily on Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and Europe. In each region we partner with local organizations and people to initiate projects, convene events, and build long-term relationships across cultures and faiths. Much of our work is involved with spiritual teachers and religious leaders to bring an interfaith spiritual perspective to issues of peace and social change.

This summary report is designed to highlight the scope and continuity of this work. Our journey is made possible by the generosity of many people and could not happen without them.

In gratitude,



Elizabeth Rabia Roberts      Elias Amidon



**Elias Amidon** and **Elizabeth Roberts** have been social activists for over 30 years. They direct the *Spirit in Action* program and conduct peacemaker trainings for spiritually-engaged activists and community organizers in the U.S., Europe, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia. Founders of the Boulder Institute for Nature and the Human Spirit, they lead interfaith wilderness quests and spiritual retreats. They are authors of *The Soul of the Oasis*, a book on ecological design of desert cities (an NEA award), and the best-selling books *Earth Prayers*, *Life Prayers*, and *Prayers for a Thousand Years*.



## THE BOULDER INSTITUTE FOR NATURE AND THE HUMAN SPIRIT

*The programs of the Boulder Institute promote just and sacred relationships among people and between people and the land. To this end, the Institute sponsors a variety of educational events, leadership and professional trainings, pilgrimages, spiritual retreats, and wilderness journeys. It seeks to create modes of activism in which a spiritual, moral witness can be brought to bear upon the political, social and environmental problems of our time. The Boulder Institute is a not-for-profit corporation (501(c)(3)). Our programs are open to individuals of any ethnicity, gender, or heritage.*

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## *What's Been Accomplished 2000-2003*

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### **WORK WITH INDIGENOUS PEOPLES**

#### *Interfaith Solidarity Walks*

It has been seven years since we led our first Solidarity Walk in support of indigenous peoples of Northern Thailand. They are now established as an independent and ongoing project conducted in partnership with the Thai “*Spirit in Education Movement*” and Karen tribal elders.



#### *Festival of Forest Communities*

This festival was held in the winter of 2000 and was the result of six months of planning. The theme was “Can people and the forest live together?” Urban Thai activists, Karen villagers, and government officials worked together for the first time, and commitments to safeguard the watershed of the region were acknowledged.



#### *Declaration of the Rights and Responsibilities of Forest Communities*

To help forge a unifying ecological and political platform for forest communities we worked with Karen and NGO leaders to initiate a process by which indigenous people across Northern Thailand collaborated to articulate their land ethic, entitled “A Declaration of the Rights and Responsibilities of Forest Communities.”

#### *Bioregional Mapping in Thailand*

Maps are a powerful form of communication. For several years now we have been training village leaders to map their community forests and regions. This year, 21 Karen villages in Northern Thailand will be involved in this self-empowering process under the leadership of one of our Masters students from Naropa.



#### *University of the Poor*

For two years Rabia served as advisor to the curriculum committee for a new Peoples University developing in S.E. Asia.

### **TRAINING SPIRITUAL TEACHERS, RELIGIOUS LEADERS AND COMMUNITIES**

#### *Buddhist Monks*

Over these years we have conducted six residential trainings in deep ecology and social justice with over 200 Buddhist monks from Burma, Cambodia, Thailand, and Laos. These courses are now part of a three-month “grassroots leadership training program” sponsored each year in Bangkok.



#### *Catholic and Buddhist Nuns*

In 2000 and 2001, Rabia began working more deliberately with the many nuns and laywomen responsible for most of the social work in Southeast Asia. Thirty women leaders attended her first Women and Spirituality retreat in northern Thailand in 2002. In 2004 she will convene a gathering on the Sacred Feminine for both women and men.



#### *Kachin Women Ministers and Lay Workers*

Rabia held a similar retreat was held a month later in northern Burma with 25 women leaders of the Baptist church.



### ***Baptist Ministers***

The Kachin people of northern Burma are one of the largest ethnic groups in Burma. They are mostly Christian Baptist. Since their ceasefire, negotiated six years ago, they have been allowed by the Burmese authorities to provide “development-related” educational programs. As part of this agreement, we gave two workshops on Christianity and Ecology in Mytchyna in northern Burma in 2001 and 2002, as well as three training seminars to 20 Kachin Baptist leaders to initiate a larger-scale environmental mapping project across Kachin State.



### ***Christian-Buddhist Dialogues***

We facilitated a meeting with Buddhist monks and Christian ministers in Rangoon, Burma, to discuss their commonalities and differences on the theme of human-nature relations. This sort of interfaith dialogue in Burma is extremely rare.



### ***Contemplative Education in Thailand***

We met with the Thai minister of Education and 200 university presidents and department chairs to advise on their process to bring about substantive change in the curriculum of the country's 41 teacher colleges. Their interest is in raising awareness about the need for a more engaged Buddhist perspective at their schools.



### ***Sufi Teachers and Community***

In 2002 and 2003 we conducted five residential senior teacher seminars for European and American leaders of the Sufi Way. These will continue in 2004. This is part of a long-term intention to seed an engaged, universal Sufism to take its place alongside Muslim Sufi orders in the West.



### ***Gathering of Pilgrims***

In 2003 we held our first six-day gathering in Boulder, Colorado, of people interested in learning and applying the lessons emerging from our pilgrimage.

## **PEACE-BUILDING INITIATIVES**

### ***Interfaith Pilgrimages of Peace to Syria***

In 2001, Elias traveled throughout Syria meeting Sufis and other remarkable men and women. In 2002, this seed blossomed into an Interfaith Pilgrimage of Peace which brought 22 Westerners from eight countries to meet with and listen to Christian and Muslim leaders and students. In 2003 Elias made another trip to Syria and scheduled pilgrimages and retreats for Nov. 2003 and 2004. We are in discussion with several interfaith organizations to formalize these into an active interfaith peace presence in Syria over the coming years.



### ***Iraq Peace Team***

The war in Iraq and our work for the Nonviolent Peaceforce prompted us to join the Iraq Peace Team in Baghdad, November and December, 2002, and February, 2003. During this time we participated in humanitarian work, developed non-violent actions, did citizen monitoring and reporting and communicated our experiences to a wide audience. We continue to be invited by church and community groups to speak about the importance of these kinds of citizen peacemaking initiatives.

### ***Nonviolence Training and Strategies for Palestine***

Over the past two years we have helped support an initiative to convene a series of trainings for Palestinians in nonviolence. The trainings are now underway in six Palestinian cities in the West Bank, facilitated by the Holy Land Trust, in association with the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC.) Through our Spirit in Action Flow Fund program, we are helping to fund these trainings.



### ***Middle East Nonviolence Network***

As part of our volunteer time with the global Nonviolent Peaceforce we are working to establish a Middle East network of Arab peace activists. Over the past two years we have developed contacts with the office of Prince Hassan bin Talal of Jordan, representatives of the American Friends Service Committee in Amman, Search for Common Ground in Jerusalem and a number of regional activists. We have occasioned several meetings and continue to visit Jordan, Syria, and soon Lebanon to help identify members for a Middle East Nonviolence network, and over the long-term, to help foster a regional “culture of nonviolence.”



### ***Spirit of Bandung Movement***

In 2001 we met for four days with then President of Indonesia, Abdurrahman Wahid. This meeting with him and his ministers led to our involvement in planning for a series of regional meetings in honor of the 50th anniversary of the first global conference of Non-Aligned Nations held in the city of Bandung, Java, in 1955. The focus is on how countries in Southeast Asia can be “good neighbors” when there is terrorism, violence and injustice in the region.



### ***Conference on Peace and Insecurity in Southeast Asia***

As part of the Spirit of Bandung process, we coordinated and facilitated this gathering of Southeast Asian peaceworkers and NGO leaders held in Bangkok in 2002. This effort has spawned follow up activities and an ongoing committee working to convene a second Bandung conference in 2005.



## **NONVIOLENT PEACEFORCE**

### ***Facilitation***

In 2002 we helped facilitate a five-day meeting of the 12 person Interim Steering Committee in Ottawa, Canada, and the 150 person Convening Event in Delhi, India, of the global Nonviolent Peaceforce. This work led to our deepening involvement with the Nonviolent Peaceforce as it works to establish itself with 75 member organizations and regional offices throughout the world.



### ***International Governing Council of the Nonviolent Peaceforce***

The Nonviolent Peaceforce is an ambitious global effort on the part of citizen groups to establish an alternative to violent conflict. As a member of the International Governing Council (representing North America), Rabia is involved with several critical committees including the executive council, the strategic planning committee, and the Palestine working group.





### ***Palestine Working Group***

We are both active members of this special working group developing a proposal for the Nonviolent Peaceforce to extend its work into this area of conflict. Along with several member organizations we meet on-line daily to respond to the shifting conditions in the region. A working paper is in process.

### **THE SUFI CONNECTION**

#### ***Qadiri Sufis in Morocco***

During this time we have visited Morocco twice, meeting and studying with leaders of the Qadiri Sufi Order in Fez, and making contacts with them for colleagues such as Sulak Sivaraksa of Thailand, who has visited Fez twice as an honored guest of the Fez Sacred Music Festival.



#### ***Muslims and Sufis in Syria and Morocco***

We have nurtured good contacts with the Grand Mufti of Syria, Sheikh Ahmad Kuftaro and his son, Salah Kuftaro, and Sheikh Naazim Qubrusi of the Nakshibandi Sufi Order, and have connected the participants in the Interfaith Pilgrimages with them. Through our introductions, Salah Kuftaro's Abu Nour Islamic Foundation in Damascus, as well as Fes Sais in Fez, Morocco, have agreed to become member organizations of the Nonviolent Peaceforce.



#### ***Inayati Sufis in Europe and United States***

We continue to cultivate connections among Western (non-Islamic) Sufis of the tradition of Inayat Khan, both in Europe and the U.S., attending conferences, making personal visits, and inviting leaders of these groups to participate in our interfaith activities. Members of all four tariqas (lineages) will participate in the Nov. 2003 pilgrimage to Syria.



### **FLOW FUND GRANT PROGRAMS**

#### ***The Flow Fund Circle***

Between 1999 and 2002 we gave away \$60,000 through 38 micro-grant awards to community organizers, religious leaders, activists and students working for environmental, peace, and social justice issues, primarily in Southeast Asia, Europe and the Middle East. The money for this unique project comes from Marion Rockefeller Weber's Flow Fund Circle. (None of it can be used by us, our organization, or our pilgrimage.)



#### ***The Flow Fund Bridging Circle***

Because of the diversity and integrity through which we seeded previous funds, Marion Weber has recently given us \$100,000 each year for three years to give away internationally. Once again none of this money can be used by us for any of our own work. This time we have identified a small number of international recipients whom we will oversee as they make their own micro-grants over the next three years.

### ***The Spirit in Action Flow Fund***

We raised independent funds and established our own microgrant program, The Spirit in Action Flow Fund, in the fall of 2002. To date we have raised \$6,502 through contributions, speeches at churches and community organizations, and donations given at meditation evenings we hold. Of this amount we have awarded \$3,500, primarily to a number of projects benefiting or run by women in Southeast Asia and the Middle East.



## **COMMUNICATIONS**

### ***Annual Reports***

Every year since 1995 we have reported on our international work through our annual Spirit in Action report. These reports are distributed through our network of supporters and foundations. We trust that these reports serve to keep our network of funders and colleagues aware of international conditions and trends.

### ***Letters from the Road***

These email letters are sent periodically to a mail list of 800 people and are forwarded to an audience of between 5000 and 10,000 people. They recount our feelings and our activities while on the road and have inspired a number of people to seek ways of creating their own "pilgrimages of service and teaching".



### ***Letters from Iraq***

These letters (part of our on-going "Letters from the Road") described our experiences and response to the war in Iraq. Distributed and forwarded through email and hard copy they have reached tens of thousands of people world wide and been extensively reprinted. They created a context in which we have been asked to give many sermons, presentations, slide shows and media interviews to diverse audiences. This has given us the best opportunity to spread word of our pilgrimage.



### ***Presentations***

We have given more talks and sermons and participated in more formal and informal gatherings than we can list here. They include participation in the United Nations Gathering of Religious and Spiritual Leaders, a United Nations NGO meeting on Israel/Palestine, many presentations in churches in the U.S. and abroad, university meetings, citizen rallies, political and social justice forums, etc.

### ***Personal retreats***

To foster our commitment to a sacred journey we continue to take time for personal retreats within different faith traditions. These retreats have taken place in Fez, Morocco, the Monastery of St. Moses in Syria, Wongsanit Ashram in Bangkok, Four Winds Centre in Surrey, England, and the Upaya Zen Center in Sante Fe, New Mexico.



