

A voice in the wilderness

Street Roots' sister paper Spare Change News spends an evening with Cornel West

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STREET NEWS SERVICE

“I come to you tonight with a heavy heart,” Cornel West began. “I just buried my grandmother,” he continued at the crowd gathered at West Park Presbyterian Church, which caused a collective “ahhh.” Dr. West canceled a number of speaking engagements in early March, pausing his whirlwind schedule to deliver the eulogy for Rosie Bais. She was not his biological grandmother but the only grandmother he had known.

“It was the hardest thing I have ever had to do, second only to burying my father,” West reflected with a tear in his eye. Earlier in the green room of upper-west side activist church, West shared with the Bob Brasher, pastor of West Park and few others that his biological maternal grandmother died on the steps of a Texas hospital in the Jim Crow South. Staring into the distance, “The racist doctors refused to see her and she died from what began as a toothache.”

Rocking back forth on his heels, his hands in the vest pockets of his classic three-piece suit, he shook and hung his head. It seems that the specter of racism has followed West most of his life in very direct ways. West’s great uncle was lynched in Texas and wrapped in the American flag. This murderous act fortified the young Cornel West. Haunted by the image of his forebear as “Strange Fruit,” West refused to salute the American flag in the third grade. This childhood act of defiance warranted a slap from his teacher, to which West responded with a “Joe Frazier counterpunch.” His brother, Cliff, joined the melee. West was subsequently expelled. Sensing that her son was not a delinquent but rather an unchallenged intellect, his mother, Irene, a veteran teacher, requested an IQ test. Her strong willed son scored 160 points on the IQ test and landed in a gifted program in the “vanilla side of town.”

West would go on to excel as a track star, and also held first chair in violin at John F. Kennedy High School in Sacramento, Calif. He arrived at Harvard University at the age of 16, and soon found himself confronting race. After a white female student was sexually assaulted on campus, West and a few of his classmates were hauled in by the Cambridge Police as suspects. Although the police officer urged her to name West and the others as her attackers, she told the truth and West was released. “The white sister saved our lives,” West recalled.

Hanging on every word, the crowd listened, intently. Drawing closer to the microphone West whispered, “If you love poor people, you cannot be indifferent to their suffering.” Then he thundered, “Justice is what love looks like in public!” and the crowd exploded in applause.

Between parties, protest and thwarted imprisonment, West managed to graduate

from Harvard in three years with a degree in Near Eastern Studies. Though he was the first African American to graduate with a PhD in Philosophy from Princeton University, West maintained a deep connection to “those on the ground,” arguably because he has experienced the treatment of those without privilege. Driving to Williams College to teach philosophy, he was pulled over and taken into the police station on suspicion of being a drug dealer. When he told the arresting officer that he was a professor of philosophy, the officer responded, “Yeah, nigger, I am a flying nun.”

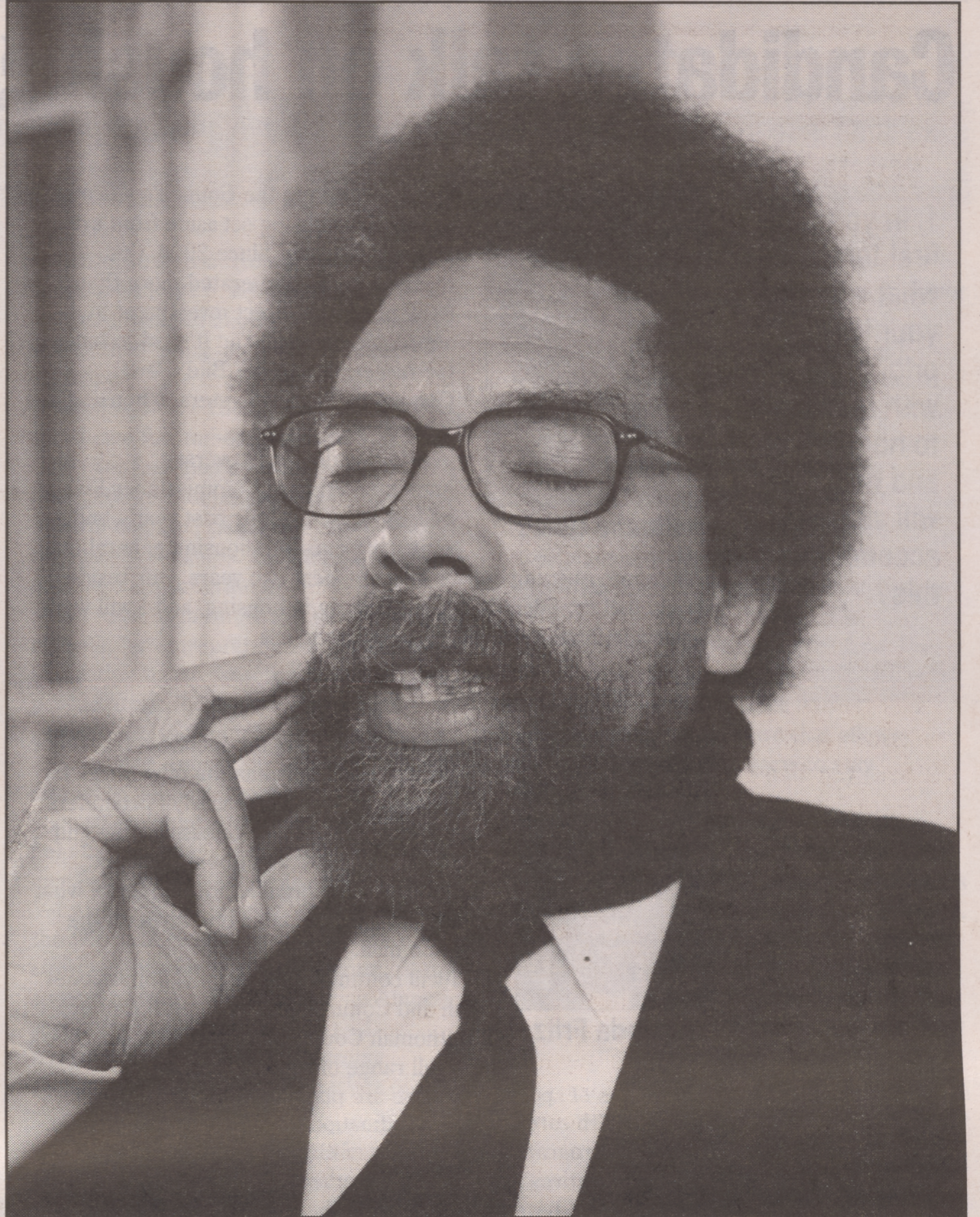
After the West Park talk, West walked down the street to dinner and was approached by a shabby dressed man, stumbling a bit with slurred speech. “Dr. West”, he calls out of his stupor. “My brother,” West says with a big smile. Flinging his arms wide open and gave the apparently homeless man a big bear hug. Without a missing a beat, West asked the brother his name and promptly asked, “What do you need?”

“Gary” began to explain his situation. Before he could finish his supplication, West reached into his pocket never losing eye contact and gave Gary a crisp 100-dollar bill. Samuel Weems, longtime vendor and board member of the Homeless Empowerment Project (the publisher of Spare Change News) pointed out West’s interaction with “Gary” was typical. During his time as a professor at Harvard, West was known to purchase Spare Change News and offer help to our vendors. “He always purchased the paper and developed relationships with the vendors,” Weems fondly remembered.

At dinner, a nervous graduate student approached West to ask his advice on a music research project and a Middle Eastern waiter thanked him for speaking out in support of the Arab spring. In both instances, West extended his gratitude to them first, then dispensed whatever knowledge that would aid them in their individual endeavors.

Over a filet mignon, French fries, and a side of sauteed spinach, West launched into a critique of the Obama administration: “The brother (President Obama) has been such a disappointment.” West has raised Obama supporter’s ire with his characterizations of the president as “black mascot of Wall Street.” Continuing his stinging summation, “Obama has not said a mumbling word about poverty.” West has been unrelenting in his displeasure with president’s economic advisers, particularly his old Harvard nemesis, Larry Summers.

West’s departure for Harvard was highly publicized. The spat between Summers and West concerning West is nonacademic work, two spoken word CDs and his campaign stops for Rev. Al Sharpton. Ironically, West has had another public fallout with Al Sharpton. For West, it is a matter of principle in each of these tense



engagements. West pointed out, “I have known Sharpton for 30 years. He is a long distance runner in the freedom struggle. I am just concerned that he is too close to the administration to bring a critique of the president’s silence on poverty.” And Summer, the former Harvard president, according to West does not have a history of working on the behalf of poor people.

West and longtime collaborator, Tavis Smiley embarked on a poverty tour last year. Their book, “The Rich and The Rest of Us” is a reflection on their tour from a Native American reservation to economically depressed Detroit. Originally, West and Smiley were approached by a major publishing house that would chronological their Tocquevillian expedition. The publisher had one caveat, no passion.

“They wanted us to just present the facts but no critique,” West recounted after taking a bite of his medium rare steak. Rather than compromising their passion for the subject at hand, they published an impassioned book through Smiley Books and will be embarking on a Poverty Tour 2.0. Focusing their second tour on key swing states, West and Smiley hope to force Governor Romney and President Obama to talk about their plans to end poverty in the world’s richest nation.

During the hour or so late night dinner, West seamlessly moved from the philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre, liberation theology, the crisis in American left, and personal

commitments to the struggle for justice. Before arriving at West Park, West spent most of the afternoon in federal court with Pulitzer Prize winning journalist Chris Hedges. West, Hedges, noted critic of U.S. foreign policy Noam Chomsky, feminist activist Naomi Wolf, and Daniel Ellsberg, former military analyst who the Pentagon Papers, are plaintiffs in the case against the Obama administration’s passage of the National Defense Authorization Act.

The controversial law allows the U.S. government to detain U.S. citizens indefinitely if they are believed to be supports of terrorist organizations. West and Hedges argue that the term “terrorist” is too ambiguous and could be used against activist citizens who support groups branded as threats to the state because of their activism.

Thinking retroactively, West told the West Park crowd that he could have been locked up indefinitely because he supported Nelson Mandela and his organization, the ANC. Both Mandela and the ANC were labeled “terrorist” by the United States government during the anti-apartheid struggle.

When asked how is has stayed true to his sense of calling in the midst of intense criticism and at times demonization, West, took a deep breath a let out a laugh, “Brother, I am just a voice in the wilderness.”

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