

# “SisterMentors” by Shireen Lewis

Seekers Church Talk

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## SisterMentors

Thank you Peter for that wonderful introduction. I am honored to be here on this Earth Day weekend.

I want to start with that part of the bible you are reading today: Acts 4:32-35.

*“Now the company of those who believed were of one heart and one soul, and no one said that any of the things that he possessed was his own, but they had everything in common. And with great power, the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many that were possessors of land or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles’ feet, and distribution was made as any had need.”*

My mother and I read these verses together and we see them as quite radical because fundamentally they speak to redistribution of wealth and speak of a world where everyone holds everything “in common” -that is where there is no hierarchy of rich and poor, of the haves and the have-nots.

This is quite Marxist in philosophy because it is indeed advocating a classless society. This great society of equals comes at the time of “the resurrection of the Lord Jesus” – of Easter, of a new beginning, of new possibilities. How wonderful to envision such a just society!

So when Peter Bankson told me that he wanted me to speak to you today about the work I do and he then told me that one of the parts of the bible that you were reading was Acts 4: 32-35, I thought: how appropriate! Moreover, I knew for sure that I must start my talk with the story of how the name of the nonprofit organization that I direct, [EduSeed](#), came into being. It is in fact a story about survival, about creating community and about the search for something bigger than ourselves. The story starts with the author, the late Octavia Butler, who is one of the greatest writers of our time. Butler died earlier this year in February. She used to describe herself as “a pessimist, a feminist always, a Black, a quiet egoist, a former Baptist and an oil and water combination of ambition, laziness, insecurity, certainty and drive.” She was one of the few African American science fiction writers and the only science fiction writer to win a MacArthur genius award. In fact, Butler won several prestigious awards for her work. Butler died suddenly at the age of 58 but if you are a science fiction buff you know that death, in the world of science fiction, does not necessarily mean “The End” – there are always “Resurrections” and other things that keep characters alive – and kicking.

To continue my story, Butler wrote a novel – two novels in fact – which inspired EduSeed’s chair, Montina Cole to create the name EduSeed. In 1994, Butler published the novel called, *Parable of the Sower*, followed by the sequel, *Parable of the Talents*, published in 2000. Science fiction, they were called. Well in fact, Butler herself explained that these two novels grew out of her obsession with the daily news -she described

herself as a “news junkie.” The story is about a young black woman called Olamina, living in the future, in the year 2032. 2032 is a time of war, of global warming (water is scarce, the weather is erratic -winter is hot and summer is cold), destruction is everywhere and the United States is ruled by a far-right religious crusader in the presidential office – who, by the way, was from Texas. Butler was either clairvoyant or listening to news to which we were not privy. Butler said that her rule for writing *Parable of the Sower* was that she could not write about anything that could not actually happen. In response to what is happening around her, Olamina creates a new belief system, a new religion and begins to teach this new religion to others. She finally creates a community of followers called “Earthseed” and it is from this name that Montina Cole coined the name for the new nonprofit “EduSeed” – which means planting the seeds of education.

EduSeed’s mission is to promote education among traditionally disadvantaged and underserved communities such as women and people of color. Soon after its creation in 2000, EduSeed adopted [SisterMentors](#), a program I had founded in September 1997. SisterMentors helps women of color to complete their dissertations for their doctorate. The women in turn, while they are in our program, give back to community by mentoring girls of color in middle and high schools encouraging the girls to go to college. The women and girls are African American, Latina and Asian American. Some of the women and girls in SisterMentors are immigrants or children of immigrants including from Peru, El Salvador, Tibet, South Africa, Ethiopia, Eritrea and The Republic of Congo. Most of the women are the first generation in their families to go to college (and first in their families to get an advanced degree), and most of our girls are from families with low incomes and they will be first generation to go to college.

SisterMentors has helped 25 women of color to get Ph.D.s since its inception in 1997 and has mentored over 55 girls of color in the Washington, DC area. The program will send its first group of girls off to college next year, in 2007.

## **Why SisterMentors, and what is this really all about?**

Well, its essentially about (re)creating community – about being in the company of those of “one heart and one soul,” its about sharing, it’s about not having “one needy person” among us – as we just saw possible in Acts 4. The need for SisterMentors lies in the statistics. Let us first look at the case for the women we help: Studies show that 50 percent of all doctoral students (white, black, male, female) drop out of their program. The numbers are higher for people of color. In 2003, the percentage of women receiving doctorates was 50.6 percent, yet only 10.6 percent was women of color (African American, Latina, Asian American and Native American combined). Some of the primary reasons given for high dropout rates among doctoral students are lack of funding – students do not have the institutional funding they need to complete their dissertations – and the second reason is lack of mentoring from faculty at their university. With a success rate of 25 women of color Ph.D.s in a little over 8 years, SisterMentors is proving that mentoring alone, even without institutional funding, can be enough to help some doctoral students complete their dissertation and earn their doctorate. The majority of doctoral students in SisterMentors does not have institutional funding and work full time to support themselves and their families while working on their dissertations.

So how do we help these women? By what we just saw in those

verses in Acts 4: that we are at our most powerful when we are in community. SisterMentors uses several levels of mentoring: the women come together and peer mentor one another, including holding each other accountable for short and long-term goals that they set for themselves, and reading each other's work and giving constructive feedback. Then the other level of mentoring is the one-on-one coaching and mentoring I do with the women. The community support fostered around the dissertation is one of the most valuable benefits for women in SisterMentors. Each woman's accomplishment, however small, is recognized and when a woman gets her doctorate, she is joyously celebrated with gifts, lots of good food, and plenty of dancing.

Now, let us look at the need for SisterMentors for the young girls of color in our program for whom the women are role models who mentor and encourage them to go to college. A report released a few weeks ago, by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, shows a very high dropout rate among Blacks and Latinos. In addition, the Washington Area Women's Foundation conducted a study in 2003 that revealed that Black and Latina girls in the Washington, DC area are most at-risk for not getting a high school diploma.

SisterMentors message to girls is stay in school, do well and go on to college.

The model for girls is group mentoring, which they attend once a month. A group of women mentors a group of girls. This exposure to a group of successful women empowers girls and reinforces SisterMentors message that they too can go to college and do well academically despite the obstacles they may face. One of the most powerful aspects of mentoring is when girls hear stories from the women about the challenges

they have encountered and the strategies they have used to overcome those challenges. Girls mouths drop open and their eyes open wide when they hear that these women have been in school for about twenty years – from kindergarten to doctoral studies – (a middle school girl once asked the women with great consternation: “don’t you guys ever get tired of homework?”). Therefore, the girls get the message that, like these women who look like them, they too can fulfill their dreams of obtaining an education.

In addition to mentoring, girls also visit a college each year during their spring break – where they attend classes, dialogue with women of color undergraduates and learn what they should be doing now to prepare for college admission. Last week, for the first time, girls went to visit a women’s college -my Alma Mata, Douglass College at Rutgers University. Douglass College is the only public women’s college in the United States. The girls spent three exciting days on campus and learned for the first time about the fight for women’s equality. They had not heard of this issue before and so this visit was really quite a learning experience for them.

## **Our Core Belief: Education to Serve**

At SisterMentors, we talk about “Education to Serve.” We use this phrase quite often. This is one of the fundamental tenets of what we do. For us, it is ultimately about using education to serve others. We are inspiring and motivating doctoral students of color and Ph.D.s to become more socially aware and more socially responsible. We believe doctoral students of color and Ph.D.s are an untapped source of inspiration, knowledge and motivation for girls of color from disadvantaged backgrounds. Moreover, we believe that all the training that

doctoral students have received, from kindergarten to doctoral studies, should be tapped into to help deal with social problems and for helping to bring about meaningful change in the world.

In addition to becoming tenure track professors at universities after we help them get the doctorate, our graduates have also gone on to create nonprofit organizations. A good example is Paula Quick Hall who did both. After obtaining her doctorate in 1998 with the help of SisterMentors, Paula became a university professor and chair of the political science department at Bennett College, one of two historically black women colleges in the United States. Paula then founded a nonprofit organization, the African American Education and Research Organization, which gives scholarships to African American students, recognizes outstanding elementary school teachers, and documents the lives of African American elders through oral history. Our graduates are also having an international impact. Losang Rabgey, is an example of one of our graduates who is using her doctorate to help change the world. Born in a refugee camp in India to parents forced to flee their homes in Tibet after the Chinese invasion, Losang is one of the first Tibetan woman in the West to get a doctorate. With the help of SisterMentors, Losang obtained her doctorate last month, on March 1. Losang co-founded a nonprofit organization called Machik, which serves over 5,000 Tibetans in Tibet, with an emphasis on women's and girls' empowerment. She helped create the first school in a rural village in Tibet where more than 50 percent of the students are girls. The school serves more than 250 children who reside at the school during the school year.

## **Karen Armstrong**

As I close, let me center my remarks on a quote from the

celebrated religious writer and former Catholic nun, Karen Armstrong. This is what she wrote in her autobiography, *The Spiral Staircase*:

*“The reality that we call God is transcendent-that is, it goes beyond any human orthodoxy-and yet God is also the ground of all being and can be experienced almost as a presence in the depths of the psyche. All traditions went out of their way to emphasize that any idea we had of God bore no absolute relationship to the reality itself, which went beyond it. Our notion of a personal God is a symbolic way of speaking of the divine, but it cannot contain the much more elusive reality. You must live in a certain way, and then you would encounter **within** a sacred presence that monotheists call God, but which others have called the Tao, Brahman, or Nirvana...The one and only test of a valid religious idea, doctrinal statement, spiritual experience, or devotional practice was that it must lead directly to practical compassion. If your understanding of the divine made you kinder, more empathetic and impelled you to express this sympathy in concrete acts of loving-kindness, this was a good theology.”*

For me, this is where the action is – this is where it is happening. I believe that this is the core of our existence here on earth. Our challenge is to move beyond some of the “natural” inclinations of the human condition and conduct ourselves as the divine people that we truly are. This is indeed my challenge, and it is one I am working through in my work with SisterMentors.

I have come to recognize that I have been designated the vehicle through which the work of SisterMentors must be done. I have no property rights here. I was not the one who really created SisterMentors and I do not own it. All this goes back



to my childhood. The passion for the work I do with SisterMentors stems from having attended the first school in my village in Trinidad and Tobago. Before that school was built, we had to take the bus to a school that was many miles away. Very often, the bus broke down and we would have to walk the rest of the way to school. Of course, after all that, when we got to school we would not be in a mood to learn anything.

This first school in my village was a lifesaver – it was here that I, did not simply take flight, I soared – I got wings and they were magnificent. With the help of a young woman teacher, my self-confidence quadrupled and I excelled in school and in sports. My oh my, I said to myself, I can be anything I want to be – and I was merely 8 years old. These magnificent wings which were given to me, stayed with me for life so when I came to the United States I went to Douglass College and again with the help of women mentors I did extremely well. Then I went off to law school at the University of Virginia and then to practice law at a New York City law firm. Those wings carried me even further. I then went back to school -this time to Duke University-to finish a Ph.D. I had started while at Douglass. Then it suddenly dawned on me that God, the Goddess, the Mother, the Father, the Universe, the Divine, had been preparing me for this all along – to be used as a vehicle for change in my life and in the lives of others.

So I have been designated the vehicle. This message is conveyed to me at those moments when I have doubts about the work I do. At those moments, I would unexpectedly receive a donation in the mail from someone who found SisterMentors while cruising the internet and decided that they want to support our work or – as happened recently – a current donor would call me up and tell me that he wants to help us fundraise by soliciting donations from family and friends.

We end where we started – at the beginning: “There was not a

needy person among them, for as many that were possessors of land or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles' feet, and distribution was made as any had need." These verses give me lots of hope for now and the future. At SisterMentors, we say, educate women and girls of color and this will help change the world. Therefore, I see a very bright future – one that is filled with new hope, new beginnings and new possibilities. This is indeed the promise of the Resurrection of the Lord Jesus – it is the promise of Easter.

Thank you all so much for inviting me to worship with you today.