

Transcript of KPFA Benefit Event with Alice Walker, hosted by Nina Serrano

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Kathryn Horsly: Nina Serrano is a poet, writer, translator, filmmaker, and independent media producer. She is a veteran KPFA Program host/producer focusing on literature, Latinx, and world affairs programs all the way back to 1961. As a prize-winning poet, she has published three books of poetry, *Heart Songs*, *Heart's Journey*, *Heart Strong*, and a novel, *Nicaragua Way*. Nina currently produces *Literary Dialogs with Nina Serrano* on NinaSerrano.com and YouTube channel, as well as her regular KPFA programs, *La Raza Chronicles*, *Cover to Cover*, and *OPEN BOOK*. Nina was a cofounder of the Mission Cultural Center for Latina Arts, served as an Alameda County arts commissioner, and is a former director of San Francisco's Poetry in the Schools program, and the Stagebridge Storytelling in the Schools program. So with that, please give Nina Serrano a warm welcome.

Nina Serrano: Thank you, Kathryn Horsey, for those kind words of introduction. I also want to thank Bob Baldock and the committee for producing countless live KPFA fundraising events, for inviting Alice Walker to share her new book, *Taking the Arrow out of the Heart*, and for inviting me to host tonight, and to bring us all together to help move our beloved community radio station forward. I'm so glad that at age 84 ... That at age 84, so many of my life projects are coming together including these 55 years of combining literature and radio. I first became aware and excited about Alice Walker when she won the National Poetry Award in 1974. Just as our San Francisco Third World Women's Collective was publishing our *Third World Women's Book of Art and Literature*, which also included our very own radio producer and poet, Avotcja. Yes. Then again, in 1982 when Alice Walker's prize-winning novel, *The Color Purple*, evoked a loud, dismissive response from the local male literati lights, I recognized their patriarchal voices at once. The familiar, quiet, woman. Stay in your place. Don't be divisive with that women's lib talk. It's for wealthy white women. I thought of my friend and neighbor, Judy Knoop, a single mother of three, leading a welfare rights protest at San Francisco City Hall. I heard women's voices from Asia, Africa, Latin America, and across the world demanding equal rights for women and finally scoring a major UN victory declaring 1975 the Year of the Woman and 1975 to '85, the Decade of the Woman.

Back in 1983, Elaine Elinson and I, thrilled by Alice Walker winning the Pulitzer prize, invited her to be a headliner at our *Breaking the Blockade of Ideas* fundraiser for Friends of Nicaraguan Culture at the Palace of Fine Arts. She was our chosen literary queen who expressed solidarity with the oppressed of the world. No borders or caste systems for her. Once Alice was in the limelight, she brought the ancestors out of the shadows, spotlighting the neglected writings of Zora Neale Hurston, a black writer, activist, and anthropologist from the Harlem Renaissance era. Alice broadened the conversation about American literature, African American literature, and women's literature. She didn't stop there. She found love in her *Mother's Garden* and deepened her spirituality until her poems, talks, and blog posts are now a source of sustenance for many globally. We are so grateful for Alice Walker's work, particularly after this anguished week of Kavanaugh hearings and the public denial of women's voices. Tonight, we will eagerly hear her read her own newly published poems that inspired the Cuban translator in Havana, Manuel García Verdecia, to render them into Spanish to create this beautiful, bilingual book, *Taking the Arrow out of the Heart*. Please join me to bring on our very own literary shero, Alice Walker.

Alice Walker: I'm very happy to see you, too. And thank you so much, Nina. That was beautiful, what I could hear of it. They need better sound back there. Talk to someone. Wow, I'm really happy to be here. I'm happy to see you. This is what makes it all worthwhile. When we're feeling really terrible, like oh god, what more can we bear? And then we find ourselves in a place like this. And Nina and I were talking backstage about how amazing it is that somehow poets have managed to inherit the churches. And really it is, I think it's a wonderful thing that all these spaces that we managed to inherit were not really meant for us. They were actually meant to suppress us. They didn't want us to be poeting out there. They really wanted us to be listening to something that would dampen our spirits and make us really sad, basically, and as if we didn't have our own connection to the universe, which we do. So over the centuries, it's just such a joy to know that we can inhabit all these spaces and bring the life to them that they deserve. Can you imagine how many places of worship are just dying to be liberated? They wanna have dances. They definitely do. They wanna have music that's really just ... Anyway. We're thankful that we have this and we're very thankful that you're here. It matters a lot that we come out for each other. And I hope you can hear me back in the back. Yes, good.

I'm gonna read this first paragraph because I sometimes just speak it but I think it's nice to hear it. It's about why this book is called Taking the Arrow out of the Heart. And it goes like this:

"No one escapes a time in life when the arrow
"of sorrow, of anger, of despair pierces the heart.
"For many of us, there's the inevitable need
"to circle the wound.
"Some of us spend decades screaming at the archer,
"or at least for far longer periods than are good for us.
"We always assume that an arrow that's so painful
"that we are feeling has to have been meant
"for somebody else."

Don't you feel that way at times? Like this hurts so much, it couldn't be meant for me. I've done everything right. Anyway,

"Some of us spend decades screaming at the archer,
"or at least for longer periods than are good for us.
"How to take the arrow out of the heart?
"How to take the arrow out of the heart?
"How to learn to relieve our own pain?
"That is the question.
"Like many such questions, it is delved into by Buddhism,
"but also by anyone who has lived long enough to see
"by trial and error, for the most part,
"that the futility we begin to feel
"as we attempt to bring down the archer
"leaves our wounded heart untended, and the medicine of life
"that abounds wherever we are ...
"The medicine of life that abounds wherever we are,
"is left unapplied."

Now I first was introduced to this idea by Pema Chödrön, and I'm sure many of you have studied with Pema, either in person, or on her tapes because she's a wonderful teacher of liberation. And I was basically suffering myself a great deal at the time that I discovered Pema, and feeling that I could not

shift this feeling myself. And it was she who mentioned to me that there are practices that our ancestors, in this case, Tibetan ancestors, had put into play many, many centuries ago to help us deal with this suffering that we feel that we can never handle by ourselves. And so many of you may be aware of a practice called Tonglen, which is the foundation of helping you to deal with this suffering. And very quickly, it is, hopefully you would have a meditation practice, and in this meditation practice you would assume that you're in a room that's full of very dark, heavy smoke. And this would represent the pain that you're actually feeling. And instead of trying to avoid it, sorry, I've been on the road a lot and I've gotten a little froggy. But instead of trying to avoid it, this hot, heavy, sad, suffering feeling, which I think most of us have had, you draw it in. So you can visualize it as this room absolutely full of this heavy, acrid, terrible smoke, and you start to breathe it into yourself, because this is something that is oppressing you. And then after you have cleared the room of the smoke, which is now inside you, the instruction is to think about what you would rather have. And for many people, just a clear blue sky when you wake up in the morning, the birds singing, your children happily off to school, whatever it is that makes you really happy, that's what you imagine breathing out. And the catch to this, and what makes it a true spiritual practice, is that you don't breathe it out for yourself alone. You always breathe it out for everyone. So you assume that what it is that you want in the world is something that is good for other people and you want them to have it.

So I love this practice because it means helping us rid ourselves of a certain kind of greediness that has led us to where we are now, which is a place where we have ignored other people, other beings on the planet to such an extent that it's almost as if we're all going down, partly because we could not take the time to realize that all the beings that we have mistreated really basically wanted to live just as we do. Thank you. But Taking the Arrow Out of the Heart was not the original title of this book. The original title was The Long Road Home, and there's something of a connection to taking the arrow out. But I was thinking in the country. I was spending a lot of time meditating and the feeling our ancestors, the ones who, they're all colors, these ancestors, and I often think of them as people who basically would have died laughing because they had that sense of joy, except that it had been crushed out of them, the red, the white, the black, the yellow, the brown, there's that thing that we have in common, I think, which is just that mirth that rises in the spirit that so many of our ancestors had.

So one of these ancestors that I was thinking about a lot was Muhammad Ali, and many of us think of him, we immediately think of him as the boxer and the prizefighter, and of course he was that, because if you think about it, if you are a black man in Louisville, Kentucky, you have had no education, basically, and very little money, you have to think about ways to get out of there. And so he became of boxer. However, when it was time for him to be called to the army in order to fight the Vietnamese, he refused. So this is part of what I was thinking about with the first title, which is The Long Road Home. And what is the long road home? The long road home is the road to your truest self. That's the longest road. And it is a treacherous one. It is incredibly challenging.

And part of the reason I wanted to look at this and then talk about the long road home and to write poetry out of that feeling, is because of, for instance, things like the opioid crisis. The opioid crisis and drugs in general alert us to the fact that people are being hit in the heart all the time by the arrow, the drug industry, and the image there is just almost a physical one of taking something. But the grief that occasions this piercing is overwhelming, and I think of our young people in so much pain and trying to dull the pain and not knowing that they should be, they must be on the path home. There is somewhere they're supposed to be going. It's not into drugs. It is to the truest self. And if you don't ever get to the truest self, you don't get home. So we look at our society and we see a society that is not getting home. People are not getting home. They're in television, they're in movies, they're in opioids, they're in whatever else. All these are distractions, but they're really also arrows, arrows in the heart to prevent you from getting to where you need to be in order to fully live this life.

So Muhammad Ali just stood up and said, I'm not gonna go over there are harm these people. They never did a thing to me. And I'm sure he probably, until they made it a big deal, knew where Vietnam was, because most of our children at the time didn't know. Most people today, when they are sent off to wars, they hardly know where they're going. So he was finding this self. He was finding this, who was he? This is who he was. So I wanted to honor that. And actually I'll read you the poem that grew out of my thinking about him, because whenever we have elders and whenever we have companions on the way who stand up, they're actually like a signpost for us. They're actually saying to us, don't go that way. Go this way. And sometimes you look at them and you think, well, yeah, well you went that way and look what they did to you, and you fell over the edge, and so forth. He at the end of his life had something, a disease that for all we know was given to him. You never know about the evil that is possible in this culture. But however that might have been, here is someone who remained. He remained on his path to his true self.

So the suffering of course in this is not small. And that's what you learn as you go, that it takes a toll and you have to be willing to take the chance that you might not make it, either because you decide you don't wanna make it or because society has decided that, no, you won't make it.

"The Long Road Home for Muhammad Ali.

"I am beginning to comprehend the mystery of the gift,

"the gift of suffering.

"It is true as some have said

"that it is a crucible.

" it is a crucible.

"in which the gold of one's spirit

"is rendered "and shines.

"Ali,

"you represent all of us

"who stand the test of suffering

"most often alone

"because who can understand

"who or what

"has brought us to our feet?

"Their knees worn out

"ancestors stood us up

"from the awkward position

"they had to honor

"on the floor beneath

"the floor." The floor beneath the floor.

"I have been weeping

"all day

"Thinking of this.

"The cloud of witness

"the endless teaching

"the long road home."

Thank you, go ahead.

Breathing in, I thank Thich Nhat Hahn, breathing out, I thank him more. There is a connection between Muhammad Ali and Thich Nhat Hahn. Thich Nhat Hahn was there on the ground in Vietnam. His world was destroyed. Muhammad Ali chose not to be a part of the destruction. Thich Nhat Hahn comes to this country to help us. Imagine. Imagine, here he comes, with all of his knowledge, his wisdom, his

beauty, breathing in, I thank Thich Nhat Hahn. I was so happy that Martin Luther King Jr. suggested him for a Nobel Prize. Now he doesn't need a Nobel Prize. Nobody does, but it was a wonderful gesture. One warrior priest, monk, holy person, true human being seeing another and welcoming that person in the best way that he could think of. I love it. What beautiful people. Breathing out, I thank him more.

This is called The New Dark Ages because we are in the new Dark Ages. Do you feel it? And I dedicate this to Martin because some of you never saw him, probably never think much about him. But for us, people of color, he remains this brother who loved us. I've been taking this book and reading it. That's why I'm so dirty, and talking to younger people who seem not to know how loved they've been, and I feel it as such a tragedy. How can you not know, and yet I know how they don't know, that you've been so loved that you're loved by people who, they didn't have hardly anything, but they knew they wanted you to have a future. So beautiful. So anyway,

"As we slip into the new Dark Ages
"you become more dear to me.
"Your face, your smile
"that carefully trimmed
"never to turn gray hair.
"We may not emerge from this darkness
"in my lifetime.
"And yet, I think of you
"so often smiling,
"or laughing outright;
"your sturdy frame gallant
"and ready for the fight.
"Though it is true
"you left home
"like the Buddha
"to find a way for all of us
"leaving your wife and children
"to suffer a most peculiar loneliness
"and yes, the children, some of them
"would be lost.
"Still, we miss you. Dreadfully.
"As we miss so many others
"who left us with this one desire:
"This one desire.
"that no matter how steep the fall
"into obscurity and obscenity
"obscurity and obscenity,
"this new age portends
"Life might permit us,
"life might permit us
"to remain standing, remain standing
"if only on the inside;
"smiling and laughing with you
"among the solemn army
"who went out into the darkness
"all those years ago,

"always singing, always singing
"to examine the path
"and be the light."

Now this is a poem in a way for Jamal Khashoggi. Hold on a second. (Drinking from her metal cup). I think it's the other side. These things are so tricky. Now many people are not, Saudi Arabia is not even on their radar at all, really, and yet it is such a terrible, bloody, repressive place. And it didn't just start being that way. So when I was reading about Jamal Khashoggi, Khashoggi, I always see that word not applied to him but to his family and the sheikhs who have all that money. I didn't know they pronounced it "Khashoggi" so I always pronounced it as "Cash Hog." Anyway, and I think that really fits a lot of them, basically, because the egregious seems incredible. But also the cruelty. The stoning of women, immuring them behind walls, and the new guy who was touted as being so progressive that he let women drive and then he locked up the women who organized the driving.

So anyway, so this is a poem that comes from a couple of years ago, and I was gonna look up what happened to this man that I'm gonna read to you about, but I just couldn't bear it. So his name is Raif Badawi, Raif Badawi. And it's called Light a Candle.

"Darkness is gaining
"winter in Gaza,
"babies freeze to death
"soldiers shoot children
"aiming for their eyes.
"Light a candle for us all,
"light a candle for the children
"light a candle for blind justice
"light a candle for the death of hope
"in Saudi Arabia.
"And though it is hard to look

But I didn't tell you what the problem was I'm writing this poem about. The Saudi Arabian government ordered 1,000 lashings and 10 years in prison to Raif Badawi for insulting Islam.

"Darkness is gaining,
"winter in Gaza,
"babies freeze to death,
"soldiers shoot children
"aiming for their eyes.
"Light a candle for us all,
"light a candle for the children,
"light a candle for blind justice,
"light a candle for the death of hope
"in Saudi Arabia.
"And though it is hard to look
"and harder to let ourselves feel,
"thinking, what can I do?
"What can I do?
"Light a candle and say a prayer
"for this man."

Can we even imagine a thousand lashings? And 10 years in prison? For something as vague as insulting Islam? But our government doesn't seem to mind.

This is a poem about beginning to feel at home in Mexico. I've been going there now for a few decades and I was so happy to finally start to feel although my Spanish is still terrible, but I'm beginning to feel that I am home, and there are certain ways that we can feel that, no matter what is happening or how little we know certain things. A lot of it has to do with just our friendships with people who love us and that we love. And this is about 12-12-12. The celebration of the Virgen de Guadalupe is always on the 12th day of December, which is the 12th month, the 12th day, and this actually was written in 2012, so it's My 12-12-12 in Zapata, Mexico.

"They told us we must be ready before dawn,
"and just at dawn Manuel came for us.
"We rode in silence as the day was breaking
"to join a slowly building crowd of people
"on the outskirts of Zapata.
"There are so many Zapatas in Mexico
"And many Villas
"it must be said.
"But there we were, a small contingent waiting for Her.
"A nun showed up first, of course,
"I liked her though; she led us in song.
"And soon, sure enough, She appeared.
"She appeared.
"Brown, slender,
"somber and very young,
"maybe still languid
"from interrupted sleep,
"this year's incarnation
"of La Virgen de Guadalupe
"Shivering a bit in the morning chill
"she wrapped her green mantle
"that tended to slip
"more securely over her loving head.
"With the help of many hands,
"her neighbors and friends,
"she climbed into the back
"of the waiting pick-up truck.
"I could have started weeping right there.
"But no, I held on.
"Though happiness and love welled up
"behind my eyelids.
"They have survived, I thought.
"As the marchers, and we,
"my companion and me,
"fell in behind the truck.
"Our nun singing and chanting
"and the two of us "humming the parts of litany "
"we did not understand.
"Hail Mary, Full of Grace
"Hail Mary, Full of Grace.
"Pray for us now and in the hour of our death.

"The only thing we thoroughly understood
"chanted and hoped would also, at death,
"apply to us!
"We began to walk.
"It was only three or four miles.
"We crossed a river.
"We saw early morning dairymen
"in the bush milking cows.
"We saw fields and hills
"of this most beautiful part
"of beautiful Mexico.
"The Virgin led us faithfully.
"So young, so brown, so long of dark hair.
"Her face only twice breaking into a smile
"that showered us, walking behind Her,
"with Her radiance.
"The sun appeared only briefly,
"the day was still, overcast and calm.
"Yes, we ended up,
"the truck and all of us, outside a convent
"where the nun and the priest were waiting.
"But the ceremony linking the Virgens
"Mary and La Señora de Guadalupe
"occurred in Nature outside
"beneath sheltering trees.
"And this also moved my heart.
"For I am more at home with the other Her,
"the one who creates
"the out of doors so casually.
"We sang, and hummed, stood and sat
"(chairs materializing behind us "out of thin air)
"until the last song, then turned
"to retrace our steps.
"Sore in thigh and foot but fulfilled.
"Halfway back we re-crossed the river
"which unusual for this time of year
"was full of water.
"I sat, fanning myself, on the railing of the bridge.
"I am inside the picture now,
"I said to my companion who feared I might fall.
"I did not care, really, but assured him
"I am more careful of my life
"than it might appear.
"I recognize the gift it is to me;
"out of gratitude I protect it.
"Yes, I am inside the picture now,
"not just looking at the painting.
"And I thought of this
"while trudging down a once unknown road

"in the heart of Mexico
"that I now know very well;
"feeling joy and relief to see another Virgen
"my Mexican sister Yolanda
"speeding toward us in her new Pathfinder
"coming with cool water and delicious fresh papaya
"to rescue all of us and, smiling, deliver me."

At the front of this book there's a saying that I really believe, which is that, if we want a better world, we have to make it ourselves. It won't be made otherwise. Really, and why would it?

Will you let me know if I'm running over? Am I running over time?

- [Audience Members In Unison] No. No.

Okay. Yeah, you know how it is but you just gotta, anyway. Anyway, so yeah, we have to make it ourselves and we can, and that is why people like us in here I think have more of a handle on that than many people in the rest of the society. And many of us have been actively at it for so long because we could not be fooled into thinking that we're different just because we speak a different language. It's so silly. You may have different cultures and you like clabbered milk and I like yogurt. But basically, clabbered milk and yogurt are the same. And we just have to continue to believe that it is possible to make the world we want and even if we don't get there because of various kinds of intervention it's a worthwhile goal and a joyous one. That's been my experience.

I grew up in the country, actually. I was gonna say a small town, but there was no town, really, where we lived. The closest town was the cemetery. And they were mostly relatives. But I grew up feeling that if I ever got big enough to get out of there, I was gonna see what else was happening. And when I was 18 years old and had gotten out of there the first place I went to was the Soviet Union because at that time, just like now, they were trying to figure out a way to bomb Russia, which, you know you have to really watch because it's done so cleverly. Have you noticed how they will demonize a leader and then most of the people in your country will just think nothing of bombing all the people just because ... It's really, it's a madness.

So anyway, my job then as an 18-year-old was to go over there and see, why would you wanna bomb these Russian people? And I liked them, and I still do. And as far as I'm concerned I will speak for them and say to whoever that, no, I don't want you to bomb Iranians. I don't want you to bomb Russians. I didn't want you to bomb all the people you've recently bombed in the last seven or eight years, which is just why our hearts are so heavy.

Anyway, this is called Fullness of Heart and this is an encampment in Palestine, because actually now we deal with the reality all the time of this heaviness. We know almost too much. Sometimes I think we long for the time when we didn't know as much because we feel it and it hurts.

Fullness of Heart

"We will never regret
"we will never regret
"having been born in this
"cruel time for we recognize it
"for what it is: the time of fullness of heart.
"When the heart, on a daily basis,
"fills to capacity and overflows
"with love of the people:
"of the people's children,

"throwing stones against tanks,
"of the people's women
"combating erasure;
"of the people's men
"risking all for dignity and peace.
"Fullness of heart.
"What is fullness of heart
"but a heart filled
"a throat filled
"eyes filled
"with tears?
"Tears we do not regret
"because we the people
"of the world are standing fast
"together at last
"together at last
"on Palestine.
"Who knows what will happen next?
"Craziness has a long shelf life.
"All we do know is now is the time
"to live life to the full
"live life to the full and without regret.
"I speak for myself
"and I believe also for you.
"Standing fast
"together at last.
"For Palestine.
"Our tears no less than our blood, our glue."

I was visiting Rwanda many years ago because actually I was trying to figure out how I could adopt an African child. I never quite figured that out. And I'd also had a lot of complaints from my own child. But anyway, I've met some I know, yeah. But anyway, so I met this wonderful person, Aloisea Inyumba, who you'll see in the poem. She died, actually. She was my age or younger, and she was just this most incredible person who had an understanding about what her country should be about, especially after the genocide. She was very much into finding houses and taking care of who was left.

"Aloisea, My Younger Sister,
"it was love at first sight.
"For there you stood
"in the garden of the presidential compound
"along with its sister occupant
"and you were both giggling
"like Spelman girls
"at a Morehouse tea.
"I saw in you my roommate
"from Uganda with her proud and honest gaze;
"her stoic lack of pretension:
"I saw my other classmates
"from Kenya, Tanganyika,
"Sierra Leone and also

"the always challenged Liberia.
"Dorcas, Constance, Mary, Caroline.
"Not their real names
"at all; though I would not
"understand this until much later.
"Aloisea Inyumba,
"you were able to keep,
"to live under, to offer
"with your wise and fearless eyes
"who you really were.
"For this, we black Americans
"might have envied you.
"But love of your free look
"would demolish that.
"And you were so clear!
"As we poked into orphanages
"and dim and dusty huts
"filled with the malnourished
"whom you vowed to feed and properly shelter:
"This misery is not part of Rwanda's dream, you said.
"We will change it!
"You showed me places and shared experiences
"I could not believe
"could actually exist.
"A woman's answer to the question
"of homeless people
"especially homeless children
"is to take them into one's home.
"Children were not meant
"to live in orphanages.
"There seemed no doubt in your mind about this.
"Aloisea Inyumba.
"You were the most beautiful
"of all the beauties I witnessed
"in your beautiful country.
"Zainab, our friend,
"also a stellar warrior
"for the good of women and children
"and by their inclusion
"in the health of the world,
"also a warrior for the good of men,
"told me of your death.
"All I could think of at that moment
"was: This too?
"How can we bear it?
"I was so undone to hear this news
"I could not weep until now.
"For I remembered not only your tireless work
"for your people and your loyalty to your

"friends who worked beside you,
"whether in high places or in low,
"I recalled your generosity.
"Alice, you said,
"when I said to you: I love Rwanda!
"Come back here and live here.
"I laughed.
"No, you said, in all seriousness: Come back.
"You are home here.
"And I tell you what: When you come back
"I will see to it that you are given a plot of land
"to grow your garden on
"and, you said smiling impishly,
"best of all, we will give you cows!
"Cows!
"Another love of my life, as, apparently,
"they are the love of the lives
"of many Rwandans.
"What is the dream, Aloisea?
"What is the dream?
"Let us make it clear again,
"as the world reawakens
"to possibilities
"until now barely thought:
"Is it the peaceful nation
"in which every child is wanted and adored;
"where every woman has a voice?
"Where every man's dignity is rooted
"where every man's dignity is rooted
"in nonviolence?
"Oh, my beloved sister,
"to walk with you in a garden
"of collards and tomatoes,
"to rest on a hillside in Rwanda
"flanked by our cows.... Bliss.
"Bliss.
"Other women of Africa
"will live this dream after us.
"But it is you who
"in your brief years
"saved it shining for us all.
"Rest in Well Done.
"Beloved sister of our clan.
"Aloisea Inyumba
"Minister of Gender and Family "Kigali, Rwanda"