

# WADE IN THE WATER

*The Wisdom of the Spirituals*

Revised Edition

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## Preface to the Revised Edition

I am grateful that this edition of *Wade in the Water* is being made available to a new generation of readers as well as to others who previously had access to the original edition. The process of working on the original edition was unlike anything I had experienced before. I felt that there was an unseen guiding presence assisting me at every turn. I was consumed completely by the project; the daily choices I made at each stage seemed to be coming *through* me rather than *from* me. This was especially true during times when I was frustrated about how to document a particular point or argument that needed to be made. As soon as I let go of the pressure, I found myself being led gently to a helpful, familiar reference that was readably available or being introduced online to a new, unfamiliar source, with the sudden urge to seek it out in the library and devour it completely over the course of the next day. At other times, a specific song would inhabit my whole body, along with a surprising amount of clarity about what needed to be said about the song, and precisely where this new narrative needed to appear in the book. Often I would wake up in the middle of the night, venture into my home office, and find myself typing whole paragraphs without stopping, not knowing where the words were coming from. And most astonishingly, a complete first draft of the book was finished within a roughly six-month period, which seems impossible to me even now given the complexity of issues I sought to share.

At the time, I did not have an adequate vocabulary to describe for myself or others what I was experiencing, but over the years I have become increasingly comfortable using the word “calling” as I talk about this passionate desire to immerse myself in the songs of the ancestors and the cultural, psychological, and spiritual teachings that are embedded in their melodies, rhythms, and lyrics. I have experienced a persistent push to do whatever I can to share what I have learned, through concerts, lectures, workshops, college classes, symposia, conferences, and other writing projects.

All this was catalyzed, at least in part, by a merging of my work in African American and multicultural psychology and a serendipitous reemergence,

in the late 1980s, of my childhood love of singing. This coming together of these previously separate parts of myself ended up sending my professional and personal life on an unexpected detour, from which I have not returned! Today, I still experience a certain amount of mystery surrounding the whole process. I have come to believe that the ancestors have been present consistently, providing welcome guidance and encouragement, especially when I am on the verge of losing my way.

My decision early on to respond affirmatively to this “calling” has led to deeply satisfying experiences as a teacher, singer, scholar, and community worker. And over time, “blessing” is a second word that has entered frequently into my conversations. I have been blessed by precious opportunities for collegial relationships and friendships with others from various vocations and academic disciplines who have shared my commitment to uncovering and teaching about the value of the ancestors’ songs, from widely diverse perspectives. I have had the privilege of founding a vibrant nonprofit organization dedicated to preserving and revitalizing the spirituals tradition, and the good fortune of helping to transform this organization into an official, community-centric university program. In the process, I have discovered a personal gift for seeing and experiencing strong connections between seemingly disparate strands of musical, psychological, and spiritual experience, with a great deal of debt to the ancestors who themselves were masters in this realm.

In the midst of these rich blessings, I have been pleased that the narrative structure of the original edition of *Wade in the Water* still feels useful today as a resource for understanding why the spirituals have so much to offer to all of us, not only about the lives of the enslaved Africans who created the spirituals, but also about what these songs teach us about discovering our shared humanity while we work simultaneously to dismantle oppressive systems of power, caste, and privilege. So I have left the original narrative intact.

In this new edition, I have added an “Epilogue” in which I share brief reflections on the evolution and continued importance of the spirituals tradition as we approach the end of the first quarter of the twenty-first century as well as some newly refined ideas about the spirituals and the unique dynamics of contemplative spirituality in African diaspora cultural spaces.

Importantly, I remain convinced that reading about spirituals is only one step toward gaining an adequate understanding and embodied experience of the depth and impact of the songs. It is only through hearing and—even better, *singing*—spirituals that we get to truly understand them and their

continued importance for us today. To aid readers in these efforts, I have also added to this edition an up-to-date, annotated resources list, which includes not only recommended print resources, but also a list of recommended documentary films, other multimedia resources, and sound recordings. My hope is that by sampling some of these resources, readers with a wide variety of previous exposure to the spirituals will gain an enhanced appreciation for what I have called, in the Epilogue, “the many varied dimensions of African American spirituals as art form, tradition, and tool.”

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## Preface

In some ways the birth of this book seemed serendipitous; it would have not been written except for a series of unexpected experiences. In the fall of 1990 I offered to do a lecture-recital program for the upcoming African American Awareness Month activities at the Denver Museum of Natural History. The title of the program I proposed was “Hidden Meanings in Spirituals,” a topic in which I had long been interested, but had not taken time to research. What I later recognized as very preliminary research was enough to prepare me to do a competent job in this first lecture-recital program, which was presented at the museum in February 1991.

While preparing for that first program on spirituals I found myself thoroughly immersed in the literature in the area. Originally, I had planned the program on spirituals as an interlude in a variety of wide-ranging music I wanted to work on and perform, all a part of the work I was doing as a singer after having decided to enter the music world in 1987 (following an extended period during which I had given up my childhood love of singing to focus on developing my career as a clinical psychologist). But in preparing for my program at the museum, I began to experience a shift in the direction of my intellectual and emotional energies. I began to focus almost exclusively on spirituals. I read about them, sang them, attended concerts and listened to recordings, dreamed about them, and absorbed them thoroughly into my consciousness. It was as if I was suddenly *at home*, having lost my way years before.

As I found myself almost single-mindedly focused on the spirituals, I began to make plans for more lecture-recital programs. Without fail, numerous people thanked me for the programs and especially for the valuable insights about the deeper meanings and functions of the spirituals. Enthusiasm came not only from African Americans, but also from people of varied ethnic and religious backgrounds, confirming my emerging conviction that the music early African Americans created is archetypally relevant to the *human* experience, extending far beyond the folk community of origin.

However, I also found, surprisingly, that a number of people, African Americans and non-African Americans alike, had very little knowledge of the spirituals. Not only did they know very little about the historical background of this body of music, but they were unfamiliar as well with songs I thought everybody knew, such as “Go Down, Moses,” or “Joshua Fit the Battle of Jericho.” This was especially true for people ages thirty-five and younger.

In my work as a practicing psychologist and teacher of undergraduate and graduate psychology courses I had specialized for years in the area of African American mental health, and had published several articles in the area. But my experience of researching and performing African American spirituals helped deepen my understanding of African American psychology in ways I could not have imagined. I began to understand much more fully that the spiritual songs that originated in slavery are important and accessible survivals of a culture that has within it elements of extraordinary healing power. I also began to understand that the spirituals reflect a central core of African American culture, upon whose foundations almost all other aspects of our psychological and social history have been built. Additionally, I began to appreciate the almost unlimited potential of the spirituals as sources of wisdom and guidance in addressing *current* societal and psychological issues.

Another important personal experience came in the summer of 1991, when I was invited to attend a weeklong meeting of African American spiritual and community leaders from around the country, organized by the scholar-activist Vincent Harding. The meeting was convened to continue a discussion that had begun a year earlier (I had not been present at the first meeting) concerning directions to pursue as a community that would advance progress toward social justice, for African Americans as well as other oppressed people. The spontaneous integration of song and celebration in our meetings seemed to me providential, fitting synchronistically with my rapidly deepening understanding of the role of music in the African American experience. I came away feeling not only refreshed but also warmly and permanently bonded to a community of colleagues and friends. It seemed to me significant that all of our meetings that week occurred in a circle, reminiscent of the African ring shout ceremonies in slavery that gave birth to the spirituals.

Through all of these experiences I began to feel my work as a singer very much connected to other parts of my life, including especially my work

as a psychologist and as a scholar and my expanding sense of commitment to new areas of community work. I also began to feel connected emotionally to others in the African American tradition, men and women like Roland Hayes, Paul Robeson, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Bernice Johnson Reagon, who have experienced the same link between singing and other facets of their lives. It was from this inner reference point that this book was born, along with an urgency to share my thoughts and insights with others. I wanted to communicate something of what I had learned about this tradition of songs, including how early African Americans used them to integrate awareness and action, but also including thoughts about how we might revive that kind of integration in confronting contemporary social and personal issues. I also wanted the book to be accessible to any interested reader, regardless of prior knowledge of the subject. I was especially mindful of the fact, which gained support from questionnaire data I collected during recital programs, that many people today have virtually no understanding of what the spirituals are and why they are important. And for those who are more knowledgeable, I wanted to offer some fresh perspectives on the spirituals, which might spur reflection and dialogue.

In important ways the book that has emerged from these varied experiences is my gift to the African American community and especially to our children. I have begun to share the concern of many in our community that knowledge of the rich tradition of the spirituals is in danger of being lost. My hope is that this book will contribute to our collective effort to keep this tradition alive. However, this book also addresses a larger audience, consisting of anyone open to what I have come to believe are the *universal* applications of the teachings of the spirituals to critical issues of human concern. From this vantage point, the spirituals are a gift to the world, sharing their powerful African American framework of spirituality, morality, and effective action with anyone who is willing to listen.

Because the spirituals are in many ways *social action* music, I believe it is a mistake to treat them as simply interesting pieces of history, avoiding the important question of what they have to teach us about the difficult social issues confronting us today. Accordingly, I have included in my discussion some of my own thoughts about the relevance of the spirituals to our late-twentieth-century and impending twenty-first-century concerns, both in the African American community and in American society at large. I am fully aware that in doing this I have taken the risk of alienating some

readers who, because they disagree with my extrapolations, will also avoid reading the larger portions of the book that concern themselves with an understanding of the cultural and historical context in which the spirituals developed. My sincere hope is that those who disagree with my applications to contemporary issues will not throw out the baby with the bathwater; that is, I hope they will focus on the historical and cultural discussion I have provided and take the time to formulate their own ideas about what implications the spirituals have for our lives today.

I have also tried to bring together (from widely disparate sources) pieces of information about the spirituals, which are part of our continuing oral history but about which many people have questions. For example, the idea of coded communication or “hidden meanings” in the spirituals is something many of us have heard about, but most of us have no idea where to go to learn more about it, or we have questions about the extent to which it is really true. In my research I have been frustrated at times about the prospects for integrating the widely varied pieces of such prevalent oral lore, and I have been very excited as it has come together in somewhat of a coherent whole. I am hoping that making this kind of information available under the cover of one book will be helpful to others who have experienced similar frustrations.

I am convinced that it is impossible to gain a full understanding of the spirituals from an examination of song lyrics alone, without hearing (and especially singing) the rhythms and melodies of the songs as well. Accordingly, I have attempted to infuse my discussion of various songs with references to recordings that some readers may want to consult as a supplement to their reading. Unfortunately, the recent technological “advances” in the recording industry have rendered a number of previously available recordings difficult to obtain. However, there also has been a recent increase in the number of recordings of spirituals reissued on compact disc, as well as in the number of new recordings appearing on disc for the first time. Accordingly, I have attempted to direct readers to some of these readily available recordings. I have also tried to utilize, as much as possible, song examples for which written music is readily available in a songbook found in many churches around the country, the *Songs of Zion* collection, published by Abingdon Press.

As mentioned at the outset, it has seemed in some ways that the series of events leading up to the writing of this book was entirely serendipitous.



However, deeper reflection leaves me certain that many of the events in my life, including the experiences that have prepared me to write this book, have been guided by a spiritual force much larger than the sum of personal experiences. Therefore, I join with a community of living and ancestral souls, African Americans as well as women and men from myriad cultural traditions, in giving thanks to that guiding spirit, thanks especially for the helpful insights we are able to offer one another, whether in writing, in conversation, or in song.

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