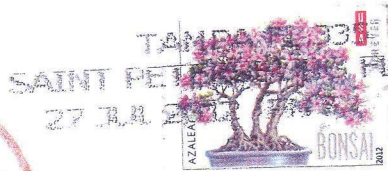


Obama



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Paradoxically, the ability to be alone is the condition  
for the ability to love.

-- Erich Fromm

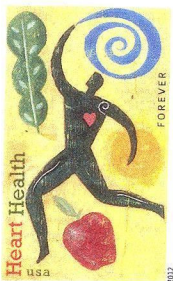
(in The Art of Love, p. 112)



the ground work doesn't show

till one day —

Corin



I was there! - BJ

## Corita Kent

### SURVIVING WITH STYLE

URBAN GUERRILLA WITH PAINT BRUSH

Article by Harvey Cox

**W**HEN Corita Kent died here in Boston last month, the first thing I thought of was a splendid evening we shared sometime around 1970 which we called "A Peace of Bread." The title, of course, was one of her puns. We invited lots of people — many hundreds came — to a gathering for song, poetry, art, and the sharing of bread, all as a celebration of life and a protest against the war in Vietnam.

It was a great evening. Micki Myers, Corita's talented young protégée, had done a lot of the preparation. The lighting was classical late-sixties. The mood was upbeat. People obviously wanted to say and do something positive and affirming, not just continue to say "no" to the war. It was also the time when the vague oriental wave had already crested and many young people were looking to Christianity again.

Dan Berrigan was there, reading his poetry, a garland of carnations and daisies around his neck. Judy Collins, Corita's friend, threw back her head and sang a couple of her best songs, including — as I recall — "Clouds." I was a sort of master of ceremonies. But the high point was Corita. High because it was so low profile, so unassuming, so matter-of-fact. She simply showed some slides and talked about a disturbed and painfully shy little girl she had helped to lead out of

her pain and withdrawal by teaching her how to draw a large sunflower. She ended by saying something which, when I write it down now, sounds hopelessly trite. But when she said it that night it was anything but ordinary. I forget the exact words, but it had to do with bringing out  $\frac{1}{2}$  into visibility and color and texture and light — the flower inside each of us.

Why is it that I forget almost everything about the rest of that evening, but I remember Corita — small, fragile, earnest, speaking almost shyly about something which, at least on the surface seemed to have little to do with the bombing of Hanoi?

I think it is because Corita had a complex kind of simplicity. She combined a childlike innocence with the kind of wisdom one finds more often among very old women. She mixed being serene with being high-strung. Above all, she had a certain indefatigable resiliency. She was a fighter who not only survived the scarring battles the Immaculate Heart Sisters lived through but did it with verve. Of all her slogan posters I think I like "Survival with Style" the best. That's who Corita was, a survivor with style.

Corita Kent also won my heart because she had an *urban* sensibility. She loved the city. She reveled in the junk and handouts and throwaways and labels and ads that most people experience merely as a suffocating wave of mind-deadening trivia. For her they provided the endlessly fascinating material for her lively and playful art. In this sense Corita was profoundly sacramental and very, very "Catholic." The world of signs and sales slogans and plastic containers was not, for her, an empty wasteland. It was the dough out of which she baked the bread of life. Like a priest, a shaman, a magician, she could pass her hands over the commonest of the everyday, the superficial, the oh-so-ordinary, and make it a vehicle of the luminous, the only, and the hope-filled.

Every time I drive to the Cape I go by the huge oil storage tank she splashed with her famous, colossal squiggly daubs. There they are, assertively antic, endlessly making gentle fun of the bizarrely inappropriate structure they are splashed over. When I see them I always smile. No matter how horrendous the traffic is on the Southeast Expressway, no matter how bad a day it has been, my spirits are always lifted. For Corita "art" did not belong under glass. Art meant transforming even the ugliest parts of the urban environment into testimonies of joy. She was an urban guerrilla with a paint brush.

I have not driven by that tank since Corita died. The next time I do I know I'll feel a stab of sadness. There are so many girders and stanchions and dreary warehouses and pipelines that still invite her magic touch. She's gone now. But I hope somewhere little girls and boys are letting the flowers within come out, and some adults are remembering that even something as banal as Wonderbread can taste great if you know how to serve it up.

Corita did not survive her last battle, but she lived — and died — with style. For that I'll always be thankful.

HARVEY COX

(Harvy Cox teaches at Harvard Divinity School. His most recent book is *Religion in the Secular City*, published by Simon & Schuster.)

Her colors and pictures and sounds surrounded us.

~rp

And I thought,  
Yes a  
Cinema

Circus! — Bill Joyner 2012