What time Is it on the Clock of the World

At almost 100 years old  
By Grace Lee Boggs

At almost 100 years old, I experience falls, new levels of pain, and difficulties moving. I also feel the need to reflect on that which has sustained me over these years. In particular I want to emphasize the importance of philosophy in my life. When I started college I had no idea what I was going to study.  Japan had just invaded Manchuria so I thought international relations and political science should be my field of study. But in the middle of my sophomore year, the great depression started and I dropped all of my classes and decided to take philosophy even though, at the time, I could not tell you what it meant to study philosophy. Somehow, in my late teens, I was beginning to ask what life was all about, and that has been the question that has shaped the more than 80 years that have transpired since then.  That’s where philosophy begins.

What is life about?  How do we know reality?

Philosophy begins with conversation.  We ask ourselves what it means to be human, how do we know reality.   What a wonderful gift to be able to talk with one another.

Conversation is a wonderful gift and not to be replaced with speakerphones or emails that are so unilateral and not mutual.

Socrates believed in dialogue and he was afraid that the new technology of writing would replace dialogue, where human beings actually interact with one another and through this they discover what they truly think.

This is what I got from the work of German philosopher Hegel. As I wrote in my autobiography *Living for Change*, “I sensed that understanding Hegel was the key to the rest of my life … Hegel helped me to see my own struggle for meaning as part of the continuing struggle of the individual to become a part of the universal struggle for Freedom. Empowered by these ideas, I began to view my unease and restlessness not as a weakness but as a strength, a sign that I was ready to move to a new and higher stage of being.”

My philosophic journey has taken me many places. For example, my reevaluation of Martin Luther King, Jr. and his call for the beloved community and a radical revolution of values helped us to conceive Detroit Summer and the work needed to rebuild our communities and our cities.

In my living room I have a hundred books that I have selected from the thousands of books in my library.  I am going to record why each of these books is important to me.  They are about education, they are about philosophy, they are about this city.

On the first shelf are the books of philosophy. There are books from Socrates, who created the topic of philosophy, all the way to Lenin and Mao and Hegel.  And then on the second shelf are books on the history of cities, including the history of Detroit.  These are the books that I share with the people who visit.

As I think about my nearly 100 years and these 100 hundred books, I want my life to challenge people to think philosophically. I want people to ask themselves and each other what time it is on the clock of the world.