

Violence and Its Unmaking

Several years ago I went back to school to become a healer; I wanted to heal myself. My mother, perhaps a little alarmed, was quick to point out that only Jesus can do these things. These are drastic times, I reminded her, for which drastic measures are needed! I'd been in and out of talk therapy for years, starting when I was fourteen and still living in Jamaica. And though I knew my issues up and down, I still could not shake them. It was still hard to love in a healthy way. It was still hard to trust. Relationships were a paradox. At thirty, I decided to try another paradigm. It was clear to me that the trauma was in my cells, in my bones, it was in places that words, language could not access. I needed to find someone who would go to the deepest, most intricate parts of me, someone who would change the brain circuitry, who'd reconfigure the DNA strands – I was asking for a lot I know. For a year I worked with a Jin Shin Jytsui practitioner, and after I saw the enormous shifts, I decided to enroll in a four year training program, curious to find out what exactly was this energy healing and could I do it myself. And of course, there was also the hope that this new exploration would become fodder for a new manuscript.

Even though I don't go back to Jamaica very often, maybe a total of only eight times since I left 28 years ago, it's as if a part of me still resides there. I think about Jamaica constantly. I think of her lush green mountains and valleys, that beautiful sea. I think of people's laughter, their stunning faces, their gorgeous, gorgeous teeth, their sublime gestures as their bodies move into prayer, into song. I think too of the land ravaged by so many years of bloodshed and violence, starting first with the decimation of the Indians, and then the brutality of slavery that lasted all those years, then indentureship. I think about the land locked now in poverty and hard life, the land still carrying all that grief, all that anguish, the dead still in shock, the dead grieving still. I think about our lives inextricably bound up with that land and I often find myself wondering – if the land is still in pain, wouldn't we too be in pain, since we live on that land, we eat off the land, the land is in us. I wanted to help the land. I thought that if I could learn to heal myself, what would stop me from also healing the land.

I remember reading an interview with the Japanese novelist, Kenzaburo Oe who said that it was the birth of his first son with brain damage that has been the central theme of his work throughout his career. I was 27 years old when my son was born, he said, and when I was 28, I became a writer. He said that after his son was born he went to Hiroshima, the place where the atomic bomb had been dropped and he went to the

hospitals where the survivors were staying and he began talking to them. And this is what changed his life, he said, it was something about the interplay between his personal pain and its connection to the suffering of others. “There is pathos in this dual concern for self and for others,” he said, “in the very act of expressing oneself, there is a healing power, a power to mend the heart. And not only is the artist’s work enriched, but its benefits are shared by others”.

After I read that interview, I began thinking about my writing differently. I began thinking about audience and about my intention as a writer. I began asking different questions about my work. With every print run of a book I have access to at least 6,000 readers, what will I say to my readers that is worthy, useful? Can my stories actually change lives; can they save lives? Can my stories raise large social and political questions and provoke thought, challenge beliefs, help people deal with the complexities of their lives, help people through devastation, helping people heal?

Writing has always been for me a way of explaining the world to myself, of making sense of the inexplicable, especially when the world sometimes feels like a very harsh and confusing place. Writing has been a way to investigate, to learn, to discover things I didn’t even know I knew, to embody an experience, to close my eyes and walk slowly and quietly through that experience, dwelling on it so it can be seen for what it is: a thing of beauty, something inexplicable, something significant. *A Small Gathering of Bones* for example was an attempt to try and understand a mother who could not love her gay son that was sick with AIDS and dying. *The Pagoda* was an exploration of what it means to belong, what it means to be at home in the world and in the body, what it means to be present with the self no matter what else is happening, what it means to be at home in the body when sexual violations make the body an uninhabitable place.

But as I think more critically and consciously about my work, I no longer want to simply make sense of the inexplicable, which sometimes seems to me like a naïve attempt to control what feels so impossibly unmanageable. I want the journey I undergo through writing to bring back a potent wisdom that is transformative.

When I started to write *The Fullness of Everything*, I wanted it to be a novel about violence and a novel too about how to heal violence. I wanted to write about characters in pain and I also wanted to write about a possible antidote to that pain. I wanted to know what that need was inside the characters that the violence was filling, and I wanted to see if the need could be filled up in ways that were not violent. What was it they needed that they could not ask for? What was the cause of their unfulfillment, their frustrations? What were they truly seeking that was

constantly eluding them? And once they could identify these desires, could they fill them themselves? Was the violence a way of saying, help me, help me, I am in pain and I cannot find the serum to soothe myself, I cannot even find the words to express what is ailing me, all I know is that whatever ails me is beyond terrible, it is so unbearable that I must strike out, I must thrust this pain away from me? I wanted to see what it might look like when one person in a family that has been plagued by violence decides to stop that violence not only in the family, but also in himself.

The novel took nearly a decade to write. This element of not knowing, of going blindly along, of waiting for the work to unfold is not unusual in writing, with this book however, that search, that uncertainty, that constant wonder, what is happening, was all there was for years and years. This was incredibly frustrating. But there were elements of the book I could not write until I had experienced them myself. There was an emotional truth I was seeking, and I could not write it until I was willing to know it for myself.

I think often of Nadine Gordimer who said, we don't choose a theme or a situation or a story, the theme chooses us and our goal as a writer is to prepare ourselves so that the theme unfolds through us.

I don't often read stories of men dealing with domestic violence in a meaningful way; but in this novel, I wanted to begin that exploration, for they too are affected, they too are deeply wounded. When the novel opens, Winston who lives in North America and who has not been in contact with his family in twenty-five years decides to return home after he receives a telegram that his father is dying. This father is the man Winston has been running from all his life. He is a man who loves life, who loves women, who loves the sense of power that his virility brings; a man who has strong notions of what masculinity should look like; a man who made himself from nothing, from scraps; a man strong and upright and valued in his community; a man who is not comfortable with what he perceives as weakness in other men; a man generous to his neighbors, an important man in his community; a man quick to anger; a man quick to lashing out. Confronting their father, this great chaplain of violence is no easy thing for Winston nor for Septimus his brother who lives in Jamaica still, and at first these men begin in the typical ways that many people, men and women alike, deal with fear: they look away, they think that if they don't look then it will go away, but to keep up this masquerade they have to close down their hearts, they have to harden themselves on the inside, eventually they lose touch with themselves and with their loved ones, they act out in inappropriate ways, they act out sexually, they misuse substances, they get sick, they function well in their careers, but at home they are lousy husbands and fathers and lovers. They are unaware of the help available to them, or they outright refuse it. In this novel however, I

wanted these brothers to make a different choice. I wanted them to face the difficulties at home and in themselves and to express their feelings; I wanted them to find ways to stop the atrocities and to begin to free themselves.

This return, this journey home, is a transformational moment for Winston, it offers him a chance to re-member, and for a man who has spent nearly quarter century of his life trying to forget, this is dangerous and frightening terrain. He doesn't know what awaits him and he naively thinks he will just go home and bury his father and return to the U.S. unscathed. But the minute he arrives on the island and sets foot in the house he grew up in as a boy, everything comes rushing back: all the secrets, all the lies, all the shame, all the dysfunctional patterns he'd tried so hard to escape, all the violence. But this time he is older and stronger, not necessarily wiser, but certainly braver. This time what he sees played out around him is no longer acceptable. And his determination to create change brings about the most vehement crisis in the family as frozen habits break loose and things fall apart, lives are uprooted and displaced, a death occurs, feelings of anger and betrayal run rampant, and there is heart break, heart break everywhere as upheaval and insecurity and disillusion reign.

Still, confronting the violence in his family is only part of the solution, because if the source is not found then the violence will only flourish again. What did the father long for all his life and did not get, could not find? Was he trying to find a way to grieve his dead child, or was it the brother that left for Panama when he was a boy? Was there a great loss in his life that he couldn't quite quell and did this dis-ease make him unkind to the very people who loved him the most? Did loving them mean that he'd have to open his heart, which probably also meant that he'd have to feel the unbearable grief of losing his child when he was the kind of man who did not want to go anywhere near bad feelings, for they were just way too intolerable for him to handle?

What did the mother want? Why was she willing to stay with that man who disrespected her again and again, why would she turn a blind eye to how he was treating her children? Why was she holding on to him? Was it the promise of love? Was it the strength in him she admired so much, his so-called power? Did she admire him because she did not have these qualities in her own self, and therefore wanted them, this feeling of internal strength, internal power? By wanting so desperately this promise of love, it seems she was willing to take anything, anything he handed out, even abuse, and she would forsake her children too, just for this promise of love.

And Winston who ran away for years and years, was he looking to find courage, to find strength? Was that the desire hounding him? And Septimus, who gave and gave, just so these women would love him, who did

somersaults, who betrayed himself again and again so they would stay with him, and still they left, still they sought out other men, what did he need so he wouldn't keep lashing out at them, pushing them away?

Sometimes I think if there were enough resources, if the economy were only stronger, and everyone had a job, everyone had something to do that fulfilled them, then there would be less violence, the murder rate would not be as high, everyone would be happier. But I also live in one of the richest countries in the world and money still doesn't seem to be able to stop greed, it doesn't stop white-collar crime, it doesn't stop domestic violence. What is it inside us that we need to quell in order to stop once and for all our violent acting out? What is it that will bring us peace, bring us a sense of well-being?

I don't know if the novel adequately answers these questions, but these were the themes I wanted to explore while writing. How can we self-soothe instead of lashing out? How can we self-soothe instead of shutting down? How can we find ease?