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FOSTERING PEACE THROUGH LITERATURE & ART
SPRING/SUMMER 2019



"MY SECRET GARDEN" BY SHAZLY KHAN

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FOSTERING PEACE THROUGH LITERATURE & ART

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"Thank you for this journal which combines spiritual issues, imaginative issues, esthetic issues. All of those, I think, need to be in the mix for the richly lived life, the richly observed life."

- MOLLY PEACOCK, *former President of the Poetry Society of America*

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The Spiritual Aspect of Writing Memoir:

How We Find Stories in Our Quest to Find Meaning

Camilla Sanderson

Vivian Gornick writes in her 2001 book, *The Situation and the Story: The Art of Personal Narrative*:

“Thirty years ago people who thought they had a story to tell sat down to write a novel. Today they sit down to write a memoir. . . . For many, the development is puzzling. Everywhere—among those who read and those who write—people are asking, Why memoir? And why now?” (Kindle loc. 896)

This question of “Why memoir? And why now?” intrigues me. Perhaps this question is even more pertinent today than it was fifteen years ago when Gornick’s book was first published, as demonstrated by the number of memoirs that have hit the *New York Times* bestseller list in recent years. In my own journey of writing memoir, I experienced an intersection of two situations which gave rise to an idea of one possible explanation. By delving into this possible explanation, I will explore how, when a writer embraces and cultivates the spiritual aspect of memoir, the resulting psychic space that is created, often facilitates effective writing of memoir.

One of the situations that gave rise to a possible explanation of “Why memoir? And why now?” involved a two-year journey of studying world religions which I embarked upon after my husband recovered from cancer, and we left our twenty-year careers and lives in New York City to move to a log cabin in the woods of Temple, New Hampshire. My upbringing involved no religious conditioning, yet I did experience several years of a Waldorf education of body, mind, and spirit. My parents were interested in spirituality, but not in the dogma and baggage that so often comes with religion.

When doctors diagnosed my husband with cancer, we both faced his possible death. Truly considering an early end of Jamie’s life changed us both—in ways both internal and external. We changed where we live, how we nourish our souls, how we spend our time, what we eat (we’re now more simpatico with food—he’s more interested in organic vegetables and healthy foods.) Perhaps the fact that

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we also both approached mid-life added to my deep dive into questioning the meaning of our lives.

Historically when human beings have looked to find meaning, we often look to religions and spirituality for answers. But not having grown up in any particular religious tradition, I was drawn to this interfaith seminary program as it involved the study of spiritual truths found in all faiths. From Hinduism, the world's oldest religion—and third largest; Christianity being the largest and Islam second—to Shamanism, the world's oldest indigenous spiritual practice (although recent discoveries show evidence that the Australian Aboriginal Dreamtime may have existed even before Shamanism), to Judaism, Buddhism, Taoism, Sikhism, and more, we delved into their spiritual truths, rituals, beliefs, practices, sacred texts, prayers, chants and sacred sound currents.

As part of this two-year spiritual journey, for nine months we studied the ancient Hindu sacred text, *The Bhagavad Gita*. Our spiritual teacher, interfaith minister Reverend Stephanie Rutt, discussed the many ideas and spiritual concepts raised in *The Gita* and one conversation, in particular, stayed with me. Imagine a spiritual mentor standing in front of you, holding her left arm bent at the elbow about eighty degrees, her left hand in front of her chest with her palm facing upwards, horizontal to the ground, she waves it slightly back and forth on that horizontal plane, and she tells you, “this represents your *humanity*.” Then imagine her holding up her right hand above and perpendicular to her left hand, with her right palm almost gazing down on her left palm, and she moves her right hand back and forth and tells you, “this represents your *divinity*.” And it is from your *divinity* that you can observe your *humanity*—no judgment, simply observing. The physicality of this description of how we can observe our *humanity* from our *divinity*, struck a chord with me.

In Buddhism, there is a similar concept called *witness consciousness*—defined in more depth in the book *Brilliant Sanity: Buddhist Approaches to Psychotherapy* by Kaklauskas, et al. Many Eastern religions have a variety of terms for this concept, but the underlying essence is the same: the idea of this act of observing or witnessing without judgment our *humanity*: the story of our very human lives, from our *divinity*: a kind of benevolent, compassionate, and empathetic observing awareness within each one of us.

Part of this interfaith program also involved creating an individualized daily spiritual practice in consultation with Rev. Stephanie. When it was my turn to meet with her one-on-one, she told me that she had chosen three or four different chants or mantras she believed would serve my spiritual growth. She said that I could

choose one from the few she would sing to me. She began to chant and sing. I hadn't ever heard any chants or mantras like these and I enjoyed listening to them. They were in a different language so I couldn't understand the words, but that didn't seem to matter.

After two different chants, she sang one called *Gobinday Mukanday*, and it felt like she poured a bright, warm light into me. Tears came to my eyes. Even though I had no idea what the words meant, my whole being resonated with this sound current—as though my soul was being tuned like a musical instrument.

On an energetic level I felt nourished. The sounds connected with me beyond my mind, like it communicated directly with my heart and soul. As though my heart could communicate in this language she sang even though my ears and mind had never heard these sounds before. As though I was in a dream where we didn't speak with words but we communicated with feelings. Certain sounds invoked certain feelings. And the roots of those feelings reached deep into my subconscious. It was as though she tuned into the part of her Self that knew what I needed to heal within myself, and she sang directly to that wounded part of me. That wounded part of me that didn't yet have the courage to allow me to claim my spirituality in the world and give it voice.

I can't remember another time I felt so moved by sound.

Several years later, Rev. Stephanie finished her Doctor of Ministry where she proposed a new paradigm called *The Sonic Trilogy of Love*, detailing how sacred sound unites all in mystical unity across faith traditions. Her doctoral project was, *The Call of the Mourning Dove: How Sacred Sound Engenders Mystical Unity*.

"I guess I know which one I'll be practicing," I told her when she finished singing.

Rev. Stephanie smiled and told me that *Gobinday* is a courage mantra, also noted for the capacity to break through deep-seated blocks. I learned later that the Sikh guru Yogi Bhanjan says about this mantra, "Besides helping cleanse the subconscious mind, it balances the hemispheres of the brain, bringing compassion and patience to the one who meditates on it."

I learned it was a Sikh chant to help cultivate courage. After chanting it as part of a daily practice for about nine months, it must have worked on some level, as I finally had the courage to recognize my need to write and to share my writing in the world—after I'd worked in the publishing industry for twenty years (mostly in subsidiary rights.)

So I took a class at the Grub Street writing center in Boston called *Memoir Essentials: Finding Your Story*, led by a gifted writing teacher and Harvard law school

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graduate, Alexandria Marzano-Lesnevich. Alexandria discussed Gornick's *The Situation and the Story*. This was the second situation that contributed to gaining insight into the question, "Why memoir? And why now?"

Alexandria discussed the way Gornick describes how, in order to write a memoir, first the author must find the *story* in their *situation*. In order to do this, the author (who is also the narrator, in addition to a character in their own book) has to climb out of the box of their own *situation* and look back in to see the character of themselves participating in the *story* of their life. Conjure in your imagination, the physicality of hand over hand, climbing up to the edge of a box, to turn around and peer back in, to observe yourself as a character on a journey and see what's at stake.

As Alexandria physically mimed the act of climbing out of a box to show how we can look back in on our life *to find the story in our situation*, the physicality of what she demonstrated, made me think of when Rev. Stephanie demonstrated with her hands to show how *we observe our humanity from our divinity*. In that moment, I saw the connection between observing my humanity from my divinity, and finding the story in my situation.

In other words, I recognized it is the same spiritual act that is involved in both practicing *witness consciousness*, or *observing my humanity from my divinity*, that is also involved in the act of *finding the story in my situation*—which is what one needs to do to write memoir.

Both require me to get out of my own way.

Both require me to release attachments to what I may think of as "my story" as defining who I am. I am not my stories. To access the reflective narrator perspective, as a memoirist, I need to be objective about the stories I excavate from my situation.

Both require me to practice this kind of witness consciousness, where I am able to *observe* the stories in my situation without attachment to those stories. For a memoirist to objectively write about one's own stories, one needs to detach from the stories and see them objectively. My stories do not define me.

In writing about the stories from my situations, in essence, I cultivate the capacity to observe my humanity from my divinity.

This kind of witness consciousness helps me develop a nonjudgmental and forgiving attitude towards myself as well as others, which allows me to write my stories objectively. For example, it creates space so that I can see myself as the younger character on the page, as different to who the narrator is today.

This inner divinity or witness consciousness may be developed with meditation, mindfulness, mantras, chanting, centering prayer and other forms of

spiritual practices, and, in essence is also developed by the memoirist reflecting back on their life, and finding the story in their situation.

As a writer witnesses and then writes about their humanity from their divinity, the reader may also experience the author's divinity—their benevolent, compassionate and empathetic observations about their lives and the characters in their stories, and on some level the reader may identify with the universal elements in their very human stories.

In addition to a writer observing their humanity from their divinity, a memoir also most often includes the author reflecting and finding meaning from their experience. Questions around how and why events unfolded as they did are examined in depth. What the writer may have learned from their part in the situation, is also explored. This very act of finding meaning may provide both the writer and the reader with spiritual insights as well. As Viktor Frankl, the Holocaust survivor, Austrian neurologist, psychiatrist, and author of *Man's Search for Meaning* wrote:

“We have absolutely no control over what happens to us in life but what we have paramount control over is how we respond to those events.”

As mentioned above, historically humans have looked to religions to find meaning in our lives. But perhaps we are at a point in history where many people are no longer finding what they need in religions. Perhaps the dogma and baggage in organized religions are an obstacle for the growing Spiritual-But-Not-Religious crowd who still seek the true essence of spirituality. Perhaps the crumbling patriarchal hierarchies in established religions are a symptom of changes to come. Perhaps both writers and readers are discovering through memoir, certain aspects of spirituality: how to observe one's humanity from one's divinity and how to make meaning from one's very human life.

Perhaps the memoir journey provides an opportunity for *writers* to learn how to observe their humanity from their divinity, to spend time in reflection and contemplation, and to find meaning in the stories they excavate from their situations. And perhaps *readers* are turning to memoir to see how others are finding meaning in the stories of their lives.

Who knows? But the fact remains that the number of memoirs being published continues to grow.

DOROTHY RICE

Dorothy Rice is the author of *The Reluctant Artist*, an art book/memoir published by Shanti Arts in 2015. *Gray Is the New Black*, a memoir of ageism, sexism and self-acceptance, is forthcoming from Otis Books in Spring 2019. After raising five children and retiring from a career in environmental protection, Rice earned an MFA in Creative Writing from UC Riverside, Palm Desert, at 60. Find more of her fiction and essays at dorothyriceauthor.com and follow her on twitter @dorothyrowena.

JUDE RITTENHOUSE

Award-winning poet and short-story writer, Jude Rittenhouse, is also a teacher, speaker, and holistic practitioner (M.A. Counseling, NKH). For 25 years, she has helped people use their creativity to achieve positive change and growth. All of her work emerges from a commitment to deeper connection and greater wholeness.

DENISE RUE

Denise Rue's poems have been published in *Poet Lore*, *Inkwell*, *The Stillwater Review* and *Miller's Pond*, among other literary journals. She received her MFA in Poetry from Sarah Lawrence College and has taught poetry in schools, nursing homes and a women's prison. She lives in New Jersey and works as a psychiatric social worker.

BASMAH SAKRANI

Basmah Sakrani is a Pakistani-Canadian writer, currently living in Memphis, TN with her husband and 2 dogs. She is a storyteller by nature and works in advertising by day, on fiction at night. Her interest in conflict and identities is inspiring a collection of trans-cultural short stories for her MFA in Writing program at Vermont College of Fine Arts.

CAMILLA SANDERSON

Camilla Sanderson, author of *The Mini Book of Mindfulness* (Running Press, 2016), was ordained an interfaith minister in 2014, and earned her MFA from Vermont College of Fine Arts in 2017. She is a Guide for the Interfaith Seminary program offered online through the Tree of Life Interfaith Temple: <https://www.tolinterfaithtemple.org/overview.html>. This program involves a two-year commitment to a daily spiritual practice, an overview study of world religions, and an in-depth study of the ancient Hindu sacred text, The Bhagavad Gita.



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