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Why I'm a Transformative Language Artist

by Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg

Growing up in the 1960s, I played the board game, “What Will I Be?”, which gave me and other girls of my generation six career choices: nurse, model, secretary, stewardess, actress, or ballerina. Leary of bedpans, I was too clumsy to serve people in the friendly airs or plié on the unfriendly stage, too short and stubby to model, too easily-distracted to take dictation, and too much of a ham to be a good actress. What brought me alive was making things: painting, playing the piano, and especially writing poems and stories. I couldn't have imagined at the time that writing in my journal was a career track, but it turns out that it was once I became a transformative language artist.

Transformative language arts is an emerging academic field, profession, and for many of us, a calling that draws on the ancient impulse to make sense of our lives through the power of stories and the metaphorical magic of language. TLA implores us to read, write, listen, speak, sing, and create as a means of both looking within ourselves and at what's happening in the world to hone our vision, hear our voices, and learn more about who we are with all our troubles and struggles, promise and strength.

When people ask me what I do as a transformative language artist, I reply, “Got a minute?” because there's no one-word or even one-paragraph answer. I cobble together a livelihood from teaching at Goddard College in Vermont, and then back in Kansas, leading writing workshops, giving talks and readings, and collaborating with others on arts-based community projects. The low-residency Goddard Graduate Institute houses a master's program in TLA, which I founded in 2000 after realizing how many people found clarity, healing, and resilience through making things out of words: stories, songs, poems, collaborative performances. Low-residency means students and faculty gather for a week to map individualized curriculums from lifelong passions, hang out in the cafeteria discussing the connections between botany, sustainability studies, and local economics, and even put on a cabaret. Then everyone goes home, whether home is Akron, Ohio, or Nagoya, Japan, where we immerse

ourselves in a four-month semester of students sending packets of their work to faculty mentors every three weeks, and faculty like me, sitting around in our pajamas, writing long letters in response. The institute houses programs in individualized studies, social innovation and sustainability, and health arts so the learning is lively with spectacular cross-pollination between people studying everything from burlesque as a form of TLA to the conjunction of Medieval sainthood and contemporary ballet.

A typical week finds me sitting up in bed with my coffee each morning, answering emails, before writing a long letter to a student who's planning health and writing workshops for African-American women in Harlem, meeting friends to plan an interfaith writing workshop, or catching some Mexican food with a rhythm and blues singer, Kelley Hunt, to plot out our singing and writing retreat. Once a month, I trek to Kansas City's Turning Point: The Center for Hope and Healing to lead a long afternoon writing retreat for people living with cancer, M.S., Parkinson's, diabetes and other serious illnesses, where, no matter what the writing prompt, we end up laughing so hard we cry. I also aim my car west frequently, traveling to small Kansas towns to lead book discussions for our state humanities council, or give a reading after driving hundreds of miles down roads I'm well-acquainted with after years of driving carloads of poets around during my tenure as state poet laureate.

In between, I write: poetry, non-fiction, memoir, and fiction; an occasional blog post; a whole lot of letters to students and proposals to organizations. I write song lyrics on the plane home from Vermont; poetry on my front porch while the cicadas roar in waves around me and the dog snores on the floor. I revise essays about being Jewish in a downtown Christian bookstore. I proofread my manuscript for my next novel or plan a book tour for a new collection of poetry, focused on wild weather, that I wrote in collaboration with weather chaser/photographer Stephen Locke. Words wake me up and infiltrate my dreams, and what's behind the words fills my life with vitality.

I'm a transformative language artist because, like so many others I know, reading and writing have saved my life. I've seen what difference it makes for a 50ish Vermont woman to write her story of having a happy life after childhood sexual abuse. I've witnessed how a lonely man in west Texas, who

could hardly ever stop talking enough to let people in, found his people by leading storytelling workshops in his community's nursing home, where he was lucky to get a word in edgewise. I've helped a Houston mother of grown boys start leading writing and art workshops for lost teenage girls to name what's beautiful for themselves.

I've seen the damage done when people don't have good witnesses for their dreams and experiences, witnesses who help them feel the weight of their own words, and the strength of their own syllables. I've seen how coming together to tell our stories makes its own synergy and community, even among unlikely bedfellows, like the workshop I facilitated in a small Kansas town for “at-risk” and “troubled teens” coupled up with elderly women at a well-heeled retirement center. By the third week of writing together, the girls -- mostly abandoned by their mothers who favored drugs or abusive boyfriends instead of their daughters -- were sitting in the laps of the older women, reading their new poems aloud. I've watched public housing women, all in recovery from abuse, addiction, mental and physical illness and poverty, show up week after week, open the journals we gave them, and despite the boyfriend who just got arrested, the kid who has to repeat second grade, or the shaky feeling from being on new meds, summoned up the courage to begin again.

I'm a transformative language artist because writing just for the art of it isn't enough, and neither is writing in one genre, working with just one group of people or for one narrow cause, or occupying one traditional profession. What brings me alive also turns out to be what brings so many others alive: making something that speaks of and for us at the same time we make community, we make change, and we make meaning out of the broken and beautiful world.

More on Transformative Language Arts can be found at <http://goddard.edu/ma-individualized-studies/transformative-language-arts-concentration> and <http://TLANetwork.org>. The international Power of Words conference on TLA is Sept. 19-21 in Kansas City (<http://TLANetwork.org/conference>).