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Narrative as Life

By

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How It Began

I began writing the collection *Swimming in Hong Kong* in 1997 after living in Seoul, Korea for a year. At that point, my publication record consisted of a poetry book, and some newspaper and magazine articles. Stephen and I were living in Venice, California, a few blocks from the beach. The kitchen was painted bright Sedona orange, and the bathroom a piercing turquoise. We lived downstairs from an opera singer who regularly practiced, and a few actors who regularly argued. I worked as a substitute teacher in the Los Angeles public school district. I had left the film business and was moving in another direction.

Korea had partially filled in the gaps and marginalization that many people of color feel in the United States; I had confronted an ancestral homeland which left me both delighted and exasperated; and like all travelers, I had stored up some interesting adventures, the highlight of which was my short stay in Hong Kong where I met Stephen in Lan Kwai Fong, a few nights before Handover. My visions of my future were this: I would spend a year or two writing my book of short stories, after which I would enjoy a life of great literary acclaim and not worry about such mundane matters as health insurance or car repairs.

This was not how the narrative unfolded. I am standing before you now with the book that took 20 years from its inception to its Hong Kong launch, a third of the time of which was spent writing, the other 2/3 of the time it spent in the filing cabinet after repeated attempts at publication. This book's stories have been edited throughout the years, but it remains very much the same book that I had finished writing long ago, one that holds the questions and thoughts of a much younger me.

Rejection and Publication

Most of the stories were rejected over 100 times, enough that I could rightfully be labeled a masochist, as there is no way that the number of times I was rejected and yet continued could be deemed sound. I received encouragement along the way, approval, grants or

scholarships, enough to keep going, but not enough to make a reasonable living. I could write an article on the history of literary rejection in the latter half of the 20th and early 21st century, and its evolution from short form letters on small squares of paper to the glories of the online credit card fee charging submission system.

I won various awards for the writing, and I am grateful for the recognition, and the sorely needed validation, but the prize money over the years in no way paid for the copying, postage, ink, or labor spent on the collection.

Stephen saved us from financial ruin.

The complicated aspect of writing is that it is intangible to people. When you tell people you are a gardener, they can look at a plant and say ‘nice job.’ When you tell people you’re a writer and you don’t have a book out, mostly they look at you like you’re faking it or a loser, that is, unless they themselves are writers or know a writer, and even then, they are probably muttering this behind your back. Writing is a lonely and unnatural act: alone in a room, or in a café with your screen, you attempt to translate what you feel and think and see and know, what you imagine, what you question about the world, into little shapes that stand for words and stories that live in your head. The entire enterprise can be viewed as pointless, impossible, and terribly strange, a type of self-inflicted hostility, but as any writer will tell you, there are times that you feel your body as a mere vessel for words that tumble forth, and you believe, if just for a moment, that this is what you were meant to do.

Being a Writer

But what I tell most people is that writing is not something you choose. It chooses you, and if it does, you cannot do anything else, and foolishly and ruthlessly put everything on the line for this tremendous, inexplicable and financially unjustifiable task. I came to writing because I was a socially awkward non-white child in an itinerant family who didn’t fit in with my classmates, and reading was a way to escape.

I came to writing because I had a 1970s Korean American bookworm mother and when she learned I had problems making friends, had no deep heart-to-heart with me about the matter, but instead suggested that I read because then I’d always have a friend in a book. In reading I found solace, acceptance and friendship. Reading was freedom. Reading was solitude and privacy. Writers are readers first, and it is reading that will make you a better writer. We readers and writers are asocial beasts, but we are important to society. We do a lot of thinking and feeling. And that matters.

The Art of Narrative

During the time when the manuscript was shelved or being rejected, I lived another thread of my storyline, the very plot of my life. The art of narrative evolves from the art of our existence. There was going to graduate school and amassing several degrees that have failed to guarantee me an income. There was the story of teaching, sickness and carpal tunnel, making friends and enemies, going broke, employment and unemployment, having a child, parents, relatives, marriage and traveling, and moving to HK and back, and HK and back. I am a writer and a teacher, a wife and a mother. My full story has been a braiding of these multiple threads, making sure that the strands of this existence, do not completely tangle or knot.

My own plot has been hard for me to figure out, and like many plots, is often convoluted, and subject to change. Should the narrative of who you are confuse you, it is because you have not figured out your plot. According to E. M. Forster story is this:

The King died and then the queen died.

Plot is this: *The King died and then the queen died because of grief.*

So I ask: What are your fears and desires and why? Why do you believe something to be true or false? How did you come to this conclusion? We all can rattle off events, but try to find the reasons and causes. Try to figure out the plot points.

What makes my life stand out? Absolutely nothing. But it is my story, and thus I will fight for it til the bitter end with utter ferocity, because this story is all that I have and all that I am.

Our lives are narratives—we are the art of narrative, and we must understand, guard, and cultivate our story, as if we do not, we are subject to the narratives that others impose upon us. Those are the narratives of people who are more powerful, who control us through government or money or paperwork or emotions, who want us to be something other than who we are. If we do not stand up for our own story, we become the story of others who do not know, in any intimate way, what it means to be us.

Ordinary people are extraordinary. Our humanity should never be crushed. We must honor the dignity of our stories, because that is what it means to live. Our narrative is our life, and one that we must live with brave hearts, with sharp minds and wit, and with all of the beauty and laughter that we can muster.

Reasons for Rejection

There were two very distinct reasons that my story collection remained unpublished. Firstly, the stories were not linked. Publishers prefer a collection of connected stories. If you don't want to wait a decade for publication, remember this fact! You can however, write and publish an amazing novel first, and then often they will release your short story collection as it builds upon the momentum achieved by your brilliant novel.

I had no brilliant novel, only two very bad ones.

The second reason is that in order to be published, one must write of a present that the majority understands, if only through Google. Global is now a key word. Over the last fifteen years, widespread accessibility of images of locales and people, interacting in unpredictable and unusual fashion and delivered through the screen via The Information Superhighway, or the Internet changed opinions. It became clear that in far-flung parts of the world people were falling in love, asking questions, and living in ways previously unimaginable.

People could understand that a Korean language teacher obliged to pay a matchmaker could very much fall in love with an American a decade younger than herself. Or that a professional African American woman in a Causeway Bay swimming pool could learn how to swim from an older working class Chinese man. In HK, a longtime center of trade and commerce, we navigate with the historical privilege and knowledge that people interact in unpredictable ways. The construction sites full of local Hong Kong men and maybe a woman, working alongside those from India or the Philippines. The Nepalese and Thai co-workers in a business owned by a French proprietor married to an Indonesian.

The truth is this: People encounter each other in ways that are small and frequently thought of as insignificant, meaningful only to those who live the experience. Global citizens, flexible citizenship, cosmopolitans, migrants, refugees, immigrants, emigrants, travelers, exiles, expatriates, and outliers—those who venture beyond their own group's reality or ideology out of curiosity or experimentation, or those who were thrust from home due to nothing of their own doing, are now visible, front and center.

People can only publish what they can imagine.

Polyculturalism

I want to leave you with a 21st century concept that I unknowingly explored in my book: *Polyculturalism*, as discussed by Vijay Prashad. This idea works with *multiculturalism*, a late 20th century word, but it is not the same. A multicultural society prioritizes origin, and is used as a concept to allocate funds, quotas, and policy

often within a government or institution within the boundaries of a nation. It is both a necessary and limiting word to explain our humanity. Polyculturalism acknowledges origin, but prioritizes exchange and sharing, and can operate outside nation. It considers groups of people from multiple perspectives. We are always more than the labels that others impose upon us. We always have more than one identity.

For example, many Hong Kong people, may or may not want to participate in a particular narrative of Mainland China. Some HKers like to be grouped and thought of as a distinct community based on their particular history, their cultural practices, or organize in a way that extends beyond nation. There are many ways people can categorize and think of themselves. Polyculturalism allows for flexibility. It obliges us to contemplate how groups contribute and share on a global scale. We can learn from each other if we respect the way we are unique.

The term *polycultural* is based on the musical idea of polyphony, think of *row, row, row your boat*, where all sing the melody.

If the world is a symphony, some sit in the first violin section, but the person playing the triangle, hitting just a few notes, is also necessary for the symphony to sound its best, for the music to resonate with meaning and beauty. There are things that we gain from the smaller, or seemingly minor players within the symphony that can add to the texture and depth of our experience. There is art in everyone's contribution. Remember too that sometimes we like to listen to a bass line for a few measures. Other times to the melody. We must listen and play together in this symphony called life.

So I ask all of you now to figure out the plots of your lives, and to literally or metaphorically, to write the questions and narratives of who you are and your purpose. Let us honor the beauty of our differences and the magnificent light of our humanity. If we do this, our hearts can travel and cross the borders and boundaries that divide us, and together we can write the story of what we dream and imagine all that the world can be.

THE END