



Epiphany in Waiting

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Abstract:

Rumi writes “Keep walking, though there’s no place to get to. Don’t try to see through the distances . . . move within” (Barks, 1997, p. 278). In this lyrical essay, I begin by enacting a walk I took with my mother along the ocean. I poetically dwell in a sensual phenomenological inquiry where I attune to the experience of this walk as it is unfolding: the images, the colours, the gestures, the scents, the sounds and the silences. Through the (re)telling of this pivotal event, I am then transported to the past, where I (re)enter a painful moment in a classroom. As in the line of the altering hues of the horizon that we walk alongside of, I relinquish to this line of inquiry. As I theorize this space in between the present and the past, I am brought to an epiphany and transcend both experiences into a renewed understanding of my pedagogical self. Here, I learn how the body holds the words; and in poetry as a physical, emotional and spiritual walking through, I then enter into a place of light. The keen lessons of an encountering give in healing and meaning, illuminating the future with promise and with purpose.

Keywords: poetic inquiry; embodiment; arts-based research; aesthetic phenomenology; spirituality

And even the small event unfolds like fate, and fate itself is like a wonderful, wide fabric in which every thread is guided by an infinitely tender hand and laid alongside another thread and is held and supported by a hundred others.

–Rilke, Letters to a Young Poet

Look at the sky, it's the colour of love.

–Sade, Kiss of Life

I have been a pilgrim of poetry, journeying through my life lyrically, on an intimate path of mystery and discovery, of lightness and darkness, and of music and echoing silences that play the inner strings of my soul. I have relinquished myself to this path of creativity in all its duality, in times of both elation and in sorrow, and I experience self-reconnecting—profoundly—with the soul's rhythmic vibrations. I am on a whirling musical journey, inspired by the unity and wholeness of poetry; it keeps me writing and moving, as it gives in light, love, purpose and wisdom. I am keenly a sovereign surveyor of my life (Kates, 2005); I am an intellectual and spiritual wanderer meandering purposefully, always attentive to the music of the nuance (Rajabali, 2017).

In this lyrical essay, I share my practice of aesthetic phenomenology, a first person investigation that is concerned with not only documenting the bare bones of a given experience, but the very flesh of it, capturing its sensory capacity. I highlight how the sensual body moves, feels and holds a meaningful and vivid encounter. With this text, I reflect on the significance of this process by sharing the experience of two interrelated poems. Hejinian (2000) writes that poetry does not stand at a distance; it is an intimate experience that is felt deeply and bodily. As a poet, researcher and teacher, I have come to know poetry as a life force coursing through my veins.

My writing takes shape on the page in form and rhythm, embodying the memory with colour, unfolding into some poignant poetic knowing. I emphasize the body as a vessel that processes the poetry, with a leaning in and leaning back, where language is first held and felt deeply in the bodily experience of words. As a poetic inquirer, my writing is a slow, purposeful and gradual path into newly found understanding: an epiphany, a sudden illumination, a point of light. What was not there, now is. I come into understanding through essence and embellishment. The essence is simply the heart of the experience, a coming into a keen knowing where poetry unfolds into some *thing* that is now learned. The embellishment is purposeful, a way of paying attention to the integrity of the poetic images in metaphors that are generative and that may have wings. I lace my words with beauty, furthering the aesthetic and artful nature of the form, exploiting its capacity for the feeling and meaning of both writer and reader.

Hejinian (2000) writes “the emphasis of poetry is on the moving rather than on the places—poetry follows pathways of thinking and it is that that creates patterns of coherence” (p. 3). In this aesthetic context, I am a body-based being, living through my (re)search into horizons of discovery and meaning making, which is a participative and intimate documenting of “the textures and aliveness of a fleshy world that is relevant to persons” (Todres, 2007, p. 2).

In the first poem, *Walking Alongside*, I reflect on a walk I took with my mother. As a representation of embodied inquiry, I held this poem in my body for a long while as I wrote the poem several months after the event. The walk was an encounter that would not leave me, as it deeply held and settled in my body. It somehow called me to write it—to (re)live it, to lean into the words. I had walked alongside this poem and it came slowly, here and there, over several months of ruminating and reflecting. It was not written in a flash of light, as are many of my poems, created in moments that are quick and calling. This poem followed me and became a shadow, eventually bringing me and my words to light—a unity now—as I was called to pen the words.

Walking Alongside

I am walking Ambleside
 alongside my mother
 on a slightly winding paved pathway
 hugging the rugged shoreline
 where remnants of a recent storm remain
 in ragged broken branches and weathered beaten logs
 severed by strength to be built back by this strength—

Here, the Capilano River meets Burrard Inlet
 eventually to flow into the far Pacific Ocean
 which is peacefully placid on this Spring day in May
 until a bevy of boisterous birds seem to welcome our presence
 entering from the distant sky
 splashed with yellow flints of light
 that shimmer on the Blue where the birds sit steadily,
 momentarily on the waters
 breathing—
 to then shape into a pattern which we follow into
 specks towards the sun
 and lifted eyes can see the stoic mountain ranges
 peaking on this familiar path of footsteps taken before
 again
 and again
 saying hello to the occasional passerby.
 “I feel alive here,” she says and so do I
 and some thing here is light and warm, some thing is also heavy
 hanging in the air like the slight chill of the whirling winds
 as we mould into the landscape with the history of our love
 between us.

Leaning towards the lookout

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we take a slight pause in the path
where I see far flung squinting into the distance
three large barges behind a tiny tugboat
seemingly still in feathery Renoiresque form of colour and line—
moving towards some destiny that she will guide them to
pulling heavy with conviction through the tumultuous seas
only to then strut away, lighter now,
and eventually fade little by little
disappearing into the hazy misty morning

And I am walking Ambleside
alongside my mother
the one who has three daughters
She tugged behind her with a fierce wild tenderness
through the rains and the waves into the Sun
“I used to be beautiful when I was young”
She remarks, often
and I see her clear in this good strong light
deepened lines on the soft flesh
imprinting traces of time and pain
but the eyes gentle, reflecting my own gaze
where I look momentarily past her to see a lone white bird
sitting stoically on the rock
resolute to looking out
I want to see her wide wings moving against
the wind striding higher and higher

And in the dirt a tulip is blooming
in blood orange and canary yellow
we stop to notice its pronounced petals
reaching up—
like my baby arms to her
in that new house in a foreign place
with the faded yellow curtains
where we shared that pain of newness
I somehow feel her soft breath
on my little face
tender butterfly kisses on my cheek—

A petal falls gracefully around the green
I imagine the rest will follow eventually

one by one
to wither back into the dirt from where it once rose
I hope it blooms again with perennial promise
but does it ever come back the same?

And I am walking a little behind my mother now
who tugs me gently to walk home with her
I fall back to see the familiar form
imprinted in my mind
slower but strong

And for a moment
the sun becomes so bright and golden
illuminating her body with light
I marvel at its beauty and wonder of the Source—
of a light that still flickers
of a light that still needs to guide me
Home.



Rajabali (2018). *Reaching Up*.

Photo of a blood orange and canary yellow tulip, described in Rajabali's poem, "Walking Alongside".

Ralph Waldo Emerson writes "all natural objects make a kindred impression when the mind is open to its influence" (2003, p. 37). In this keenness of seeing, understanding is nuanced and cannot be separated from an embodied aesthetic participation. It requires a heightened reflectiveness of a given encounter with a concern and attention for the metaphoric capacity of language. This is the

tension of an arts-based researcher: the question of how to create, retain and document the texture, richness, sheen and feel of an individual experience, so that it transcends outwards to others.

How can one be porous to the light of an experience? I believe the answer lies in being attentive to vertical ways of being, a looking up. As I followed a horizontal path with my mother, there was this verticality too, where we heeded to nature moving around us, the mountains, the birds and the sky; we had a kindred understanding that there was something more than just us. Our eyes looked up with head uplifted where we took in, breathed in, the vibrant landscape. As poet, I internalized a lifeworld pregnant with meaning; there was reciprocity, where the natural world gave back to us (Merleau-Ponty, 2007). Steinbock writes "if our society and ecosystems are in disarray and in turmoil, it is because of our relations to the vertical dimensions of experience are in disarray and in turmoil" (2007, p. 1). With vertical presence comes an expansive way of thinking, one that gives rise to philosophical, moral and ecological spheres of existence, and one that embraces spiritual sources of knowing. As I reflected on this experience of walking alongside my mother to write of it, I hovered above the encounter, looking at it with a bird's eye view, which then threaded together the images with a certain precision crystalizing the moments. To stand back gives the vision (Rajabali, 2014).

Poetry is (re)search that understands the primacy of the living/lived body and puts the body experience into language. It involves locating the self in a process of knowing, where bodily depth of feeling is more than one can express (Gendlin, 2004). To write poetry of an encounter is to enact one possibility of many. Something is carried forward in the unfolding of meanings of a given event, where "signs point to other signs endlessly" (Todres, 2007, p. 23). As my (re)search weaves my life experiences through space and time, I start to see what the poet Naomi Shihab Nye eloquently describes as "the size of the cloth" (1995, p. 42). She uses this phrase to metaphorically illuminate how she recognizes the full scope and breadth of a given moment. I imagine this cloth like an intricate quilt that opens, wide and colourful. I pictured it, on that day, somehow hovering over my mother and me, moving elegantly to the wind. It was through the (re)telling of the walk alongside my mother, that I whirled back in time to another point of light and life. I was taken back to a pivotal moment in a classroom where a teacher accused me of something I did not do. It occurred to me, in retrospect, that this moment was not about the hand of the teacher that rejected me, but about the hand that received the rejection. Central to this story is the poem, *Fear*, the few verses I penned as a child. The poem provided a powerful medium to express my own internal fears at that time and most profoundly, the journey and the fear of my parents, who as new immigrants, were trying to assimilate to a foreign place. There were many layers of discovery in what was said and unsaid, but still pronounced. It was a negotiation of identity, a discovery of my young raw vulnerable self, finding courage through the veritable process of writing. Through each word and poetic turn, there was a becoming into. The particular classroom experience that I recall in the poem, which I still remember so vividly, speaks to the notion that I was not seen for who I was or who I could become. This brings me to reflect on memory, and what and how it remembers. I see clearly the hand of the body that rejected my first poem and I see the hand of the body that received it.

Fear

You will write a poem
the teacher announced
I was an awkward nine
a shabby purple sweater
chubby fingers
with bangs my mother cut
uneven and short
to show the sole dark face
of uneasiness
in a classroom of white
a child pulled from the East
now in the West
unrest
in the heart strings of a young soul
needing to feel needed
now

You can write on anything
the teacher said
it is due tomorrow
I took the pencil
to the paper
and
I wrote:

Fear
What is it?
It is illusion, it is confusion

the words coming
that I did not know
but knew me
I was lifting
it was Light
rising in my young heart
who started knowing
lyrical lines luminously
descending
to the final last line lamenting:

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There is one thing that fear is not and that is courage

I was nine
What did I know?
What did I know?
I stood in line to show
the teacher
my poem
the girl before me
a bounty of blonde
hair
straightly cut bangs
perfectly sitting upon
sapphire eyes
shining
Did you copy this poem?

I was
dropping
 dropping
 dropping
Inside of me
meekly speaking

I didn't copy
This is mine

She gave me a checkmark
a mark—
a mark—
she left me with
a mark—

I ran home at lunch
carried by the heart in my belly
bursting through the front door
to find
my mother sitting on the edge
of her king-size bed
with the bold African print
colouring covered
with laundry as she softly sang to

Roberta Flack on the tiny rusty radio
 giving music to a loneliness
 a haziness of a sunlit memory now of
 a young mother in yearning:

Strumming my pain with his fingers
Singing my life with his words

And I offered my poem
 to the hands
 that once held me so close on the plane of exile
 the young mother with long ebony hair and eager hazel eyes
 carried with the promise of a life and of a love
 carried with *Fear*—
 the poem that I had written
 weeping she places it on the fridge
 And
 the pain mixed with beauty that
 we shared between us
 in the in-between of us
still remaining
still lingering
 in the gaps and spaces
 of a lone poem that speaks
 in the silences of
 a moment of *light*
 that I experienced
 in poetry
 when I was
 only nine.

I have come to find light in between the lines of poetry. I write into the light of knowing, a space where I fall into a silence that allows me to meet my higher self. As I leaned into the writing of *Fear*, I was surprised where each poetic turn led me and how it brought me home. In thinking thematically about these poems, I find myself reflecting on homecoming, a (re)turning to mother. She is more than a muse for these poems, but the source of my creative destiny; poetry is a bridge of understanding between us.

In my title, I used the phrase “epiphany in waiting,” to refer to the poetic process as a purposeful tuning into each poetic turn as a guide post and point of light. This epiphany—a sudden moment of illumination—is one that I conceptualize as also walking patiently alongside language as

it is coming together: formulating, crystallizing, eventually leading into a clearing and clarity. When I hit the wall of language, I somehow always find the window, feeling my way intuitively back into a vertical space, flying out towards the summit of inspiration. This keenness of seeing means being attentive to the world with its complexity, simplicity and intertwined relationships, which manifest in poetic form into a unity and wholeness. In a life that has been walking alongside words and seeking for these words to express the breath and breadth of my living as an artist, researcher and teacher, I reflect on this body that holds poetry, the poetic body that moves a little more softer now through her evolving worlds. I must remain open to these sacred signs, as I have felt the sheer beauty of the nuance. And in the end, I simply pray for this vision.

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