MY MULTIPLE PATHWAYS TO RIGHT LIVELIHOOD

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I am a writer and a psychotherapist. Psychotherapy is my livelihood, how I put bread to the table; writing is my breath. The two are intimately connected. In fact, they are two sides of the same coin. I consider my practice to be a means for crafting my soul while helping others craft theirs. I love what I do. In this essay I'll gather the stray memories from my formative years and herd them into what I hope is a coherent account of how I came to love my work, which has been shaped in large part by the stories I heard as a child and the Buddhist teaching I absorbed in my adult life.

I learned the importance of storying our lives from my grandfather, who wove life's events in a way that made them memorable. These stories gave us an understanding of how to live our lives. Papa Fano, as we called him, was a fine storyteller, one of the first ones to tell me stories about our mythic ancestor La Ciguapa, a woman with feet pointing backwards and long hair covering her naked body. This wild woman of the Dominican imaginary represents the need for protecting the sacred in the solitary self. Understanding this has served me well, both as a writer and a psychotherapist. The stories about La Ciguapa paved the way toward my spiritual consciousness, which has filtered into both my writing and my therapeutic practice.

In my writing workshops I use this archetype to illustrate a feminine symbol of political and spiritual consciousness; the archetype, more often than not, resonates powerfully with the participants, regardless of their cultural backgrounds.

For over 20 years now in my professional life, I have found ways to align the mind and the heart, reason and emotion. My close attention to Buddhism, with its precepts for a mindful, ethical life, has informed the decisions I have made in finding work that is both meaningful and supportive of my spiritual beliefs. While I am not an ordained Buddhist, a lot of my professional and personal leanings are guided by its philosophy. In plain language, my approach aims at causing no harm to others or myself. My life and work are bound together.

While my professional practice involves much verbal interaction and interventions, interestingly, my writing life has taught me the value of silence, of paying attention to my inner and outer experiences, and distilling them into verbal artifacts that are not only accessible to others but also help them find their own voices. What helps me as a writer often spills over into my practice as a psychotherapist. The need to reconcile the dichotomy of my internal and external worlds compels me to expand my vision in order to encompass as much as possible. Better yet, writing poetry or prose pushes me to inhabit my surroundings more fully, to feel a part of something greater than myself. This is no different from how I feel when others allow me to enter their world of pain and sorrows, their fears and afflictions. I feel called to practice focused awareness in which my whole being has to be engaged. The intention is to help, as we do in poetry, individuals take something they already know about themselves and work with it until they feel it at a deeper level, so much so that it creates a new meaning, a new way of understanding. In this sense, when I approach people's narratives, I pay attention to the part of the narrative that can bring forth a sense of who they are and, draw out the complexities of their stories with a new language, a vibrant and assured voice that is bigger than the stories themselves.

The Buddhist Eightfold Path extends an invitation to us to cultivate a life of presence and attentiveness in the pursuit of enlightenment. The first path invites us to cultivate right thought or right thinking; it means that we define our goals with a pure mind and heart. Right mindfulness implies carefully choosing the path of our work. Right Understanding is the act of bringing our work in line with our personal values. Right Speech involves the use of language infused with compassion toward others. Right Concentration or attention leads us to do our work with profound awareness and love. Right Action implies doing work but not attaching ourselves to its outcomes. Imagine what a fundamental change would take place in the world if everyone were to practice the Eightfold Path, an antidote to the greed and egocentrism that plague us.

Right Effort involves choosing work that we can do for our entire lives, keeping ourselves in a state of constant learning, and preserving a beginner's mind. When work embodies love and committed action, then we are in a constant process of growth. I am convinced that my success as a person depends on my willingness to nurture my beginner's mind, my willingness to learn and be changed by the learning. The result, no doubt, is "vocational wholeness," which involves doing work that calls for the union of our professional and personal lives. When making a living is connected to reaching our authentic self, we open ourselves to the possibility of spiritual growth.

In hindsight, though, the strongest influence for keeping Right Livelihood as a main focus in my life came to me way before I learned about Buddhism. It came from my childhood experience in the Cibao region of the Dominican Republic, where I was born and raised. My strong resonance with Buddhism happened because of the strong resemblance I saw between it and my ancestral beliefs.

Up until I was 10 I lived in Copey, a small rural village where I experienced the virtues of interdependence, way before my brain could even grapple with the concept, but I guess this kind of knowing filters into our cells and expands within us as we grow. The farmers in Copey, my parents included, practiced a form of reciprocity

that was the basis of the juntas or convites, in which groups of men and women would gather to cultivate or harvest each other's parcela, until everyone's land was tended. I witnessed them coming together in an effort to ensure that no one was left behind.

These communal gatherings practiced by my people in Copey showed me the way interdependence could support and shape the self. The concept of doing no harm and rejecting greed was made clear by the principles of the juntas or convites. This agrarian mentality in the countryside was assaulted by the era of industrialization that began in the 1800s and accelerated in the following century. In our country, capitalism reached its peak in the span of 30 years of the Trujillo dictatorship (1930–1961).

The convites or juntas began to be seen as useless folkloric expressions. At the heart of the convites was the intention of doing work without the mediation of a salary or payment. As with many other things, this way of being of the campesinos, the cooperative spirit and the solidarity, were slowly changed by the concept of private property. In the Dominican Republic, the emergence of the sugar industry gradually did away with these agrarian cooperatives. The industrialization of the Dominican Republic took place with the incorporation of capital investments in sugar production, although the practice of compartir remained alive among the campesinos. After all, people in Copey were still gathering in juntas in the '60s, when I was a child.

I know by now that memory, like any other archive, is always there, but it only serves a purpose when it's activated. So I am activating these memories now to find my footing and speak from the perspective of someone who knows that lived experiences are always reshaping the new. The convites are no longer a formal practice in the agrarian life in the Dominican campos, but I feel that the spirit of reciprocity still animates the way most Dominicans with a farming background interact wherever they are. I don't want in any way to romanticize the Dominican. I have had far too many experiences where Dominican greed hits me right in the face. We have a tradition

of corrupt politics and caudillismo, where individuality taints collective practices. Further, I am living in this chosen exile because I got tired of the greed, egocentrism, and male chauvinism so commonly practiced on the island.

Writing has helped me, and continues to help me, make peace with the past; it also allows me to reconfigure aspects of my life in which I feel conflict. I use poetry to get closer to my emotions and prose to explore and expound on them. I extrapolate from life and expand the horizon of my thinking through writing. My emergence as a writer has had a lot to do with my birthplace, the tiny valley which, although it limited me at times, became an inviting model for how to live my life in communion with others. At the same time, it is perhaps in the craft of poetry and writing that I learned to be a listener; an indispensable tool for a psychotherapist. I let the story from the person enter me, I hear the nuances; pain reaches deep into me, before I take a step back so I can appreciate what I am receiving; I resonate with her; I might put her story into my own words but in sympathy with hers, so that the pain that has obstructed her can become more graspable.

The work of the therapist is to hold things up with enough distance that the person can, by herself, apply all the resources she can muster and take the experience, in all its rawness, and transform it. In my view, therapy, like poetry, is about taking the problems of the world and transforming them into something manageable and possibly even beautiful in their darkness. Things may be falling apart, but the person feels there is something she can do as she falls; one gains a measure of control in the act of shaping and adopting a new perspective. Both therapy and writing are ways to make vessels in which to contain what feels uncontainable. We capture difficult experiences in poems in order to free them; we let them go as we offer the poems to the world. In the same way, the person captures a story and drops it into the receptacle of therapy; there is a letting go and, consequently, a freeing in that action.

As I said before, my exile is a chosen one, but exile nonetheless,

with all its complexity. Exile, no doubt, fueled my creative potential, especially through writing, and has shown me an effective vehicle to help myself and others find a way out of emotional troubles and into a more wholesome life.

Writing is more than a mere fanciful exercise. It is, in fact, for me, the real coming home, an answer to my sense of exile, both geographically and spiritually. Writing transforms loneliness into the solitude in which we find our sense of wholeness. It is in that sense of wholeness that the root connections between us and others grow deeper. There is a sense of connection with the world, a great sense of hope when a bad experience is shared by two; there is a sense of relief from the weight when the strength of one meets the strength of the other. That is what I think happens in both writing and in therapy. They are both ways to recognize our own experience in the other. So many times a person will say something in a session in a way that I never imagined, and I get the same sense of reassurance I feel when I read someone's poem, or when someone at a public reading tells me how much my poem spoke to her.

The well-known Joycean strategies of survival in exile—silence and cunning—are very relevant in my journey. Unlike Joyce, however, my silence is not haunted by disconnection. Rather, it is an element of depth that nurtures me, one in which I find my center. And as for cunning, well, that's what the Ciguapa symbolizes. She can be a telling metaphor for the way we create a pathway into our own story. Silence, (el silencio), exile, the cunning, the protection of our solitude, and the release of our creative potential, especially through writing, form the scaffolding, learned from my background and experience, which I use in my practice.

The recovery of the whole self is a sacred task that also involves a challenging journey. All too often, we give in to the temptation to surrender ourselves to the way things are—the mass culture, the familiar norms and conventions, the peer group, the established way of being. It is vital to distinguish between a collective in which the individual gets erased and a genuine community in which he or she

flowers. My long-standing connection to Buddhism, and my experiences with the juntas and the communal support they provided for everyone, have no doubt shaped this undivided Self that dwells contentedly between my writing and psychotherapy, between my life and my work.