

On Womaning

by Meta Commerse

The phrase “writing out of pain” conjures something very basic for me. What I mean is the tradition of African Americans who knew that their pain was generative and transformative IF THEY used it as such. For example, jazz, the black man’s American experience set to music, his emotional genius set free to fly like a beautiful bird for the world to enjoy. Negro spirituals, began as moans and groans in the brutal work fields. African music providing human comfort. Comfort **from deep within, giving rise to gospel music and the blues**. And finally, our poetry. That this tradition lives in me is one of the learnings of my writing and blessings of my life.

A child of the black power or Black Arts Movement where my mother played a key role, growing up listening to black poets reading their work in Gwendolyn Brooks’ living room. I didn’t see then that I lived in the lap of history and that I, too, was a poet. Even as a teen with no voice, I wrote feeling the urge to express, seeking an outlet for my pain, yet keeping my poems to myself. I navigated my continued struggle for voice mostly through writing.

But, from early on, my voice was internal, an inner resonance that taught me a few things about myself. That my quest not just for knowledge, but for **understanding** was clear and relentless. That **growth** was my personal mandate. Without question, anything or anyone that stood in the way of **my growth** had to go! And then, I held a kind of **hope** not based on evidence. An undying, inexplicable hope for change and a better life that Bryan Stevenson calls “our superpower.” I also knew that my indigeneity lived in me from the time of my earliest memories. I can call it that now, but as a child, I had no such language. I only had knowings, urgings, “waking dreams,” or body memories, ancestral memories alive in me. I **loved** the natural world, wandering in the woods, climbing trees, collecting rocks, eating flowers, finding peace away from the house and among living creatures. As a third grader, I taught my brother how to read, and kept the teaching a secret with the urgency that enslaved persons might have had. This experience of indigeneity was not something I fully recognized for what it was until after the writing.

“**Womaning**” is the book I could not write until I had lived enough life and found enough authority. First, I had to become an elder, to acquire wisdom enough to interpret and apply what had I learned as a girl, then as a mother, in my quest to understand the problems of abuse, systemic silence and secrecy living in my family of origin and infusing the atmosphere in which I grew up. But make no mistake, as I learned through my private wellness practice, our family story was not all that unique. Through this writing, I learned the deep spiritual connection of story across generations.

Here, in the spirit of Mama Toni Morrison who said how important it was for us to tell *our* stories, to write the books *we* need to read, to write from the inside out, to describe our experiences intimately, let me mention something else. I wrote *Womaning* in my full black voice exploring my black, embodied, lived experience in a way that my readers would appreciate. And I wrote nothing in deference to the white gaze.

My memoir is at once an intersectional telling of oppression showing up as the violent patriarchy, body shame, sadness connected to deep self-denial, and father loss running through my maternal lineage. To hear all of these things speaking at once and through the day-to-day while trying to describe it with any intention is to enter a noisy, multi-layered undoing and rebuilding. For this and other reasons, after I started it, this book took two decades off and on to write. I also learned to catch glimpses of my body awareness and sexuality in this slow writing.

Barbara Kingsolver said that “most writers keep writing the same book over and over again.” She’s absolutely right in my case! **All** of my books (non-fiction, poetry, fiction) are my attempts -- more successful as time progressed -- to describe the ways in which I learned and struggled to live with my loved ones.

So, I wrote this book for the mother living in me. She who had voice only as it related to raising her children and making a home for them. She who was powerful only in that role and in everything supporting that role. She whose reason for living started and stopped with and in That Role. It was an important, creative and life-giving role, but as her children grew in strength and independence, she felt diminished and without self, which is identity, gift and direction. I wrote “Womaning” especially for her.

And it was a question my eldest son asked me one day in 2002 with a smile that started me writing these stories. *“Mom, why is it that there are so many pictures of my sister, and so many pictures of my brother, and so few pictures of me? Is it because I’m the “middle child” or something?”* His question stopped me cold. He wasn’t joking, and I didn’t expect such a question. He sounded as if something unfair had happened to him as a child, and I had worked myself silly to assure that that would not happen, especially not at home. So, to give him something suitable, I wrote the whole story of his birth to show him that whatever caused the difference in the number of pictures I took of him had nothing at all to do with him, or what he meant in the family, or my love for him. And when I read that story aloud to him at our next family gathering, there was not a dry eye in the room.

The stories assembled in this memoir were the ones that stood out the most as I wrote from a torrent of memories. They’d been with me all the while, and I wrote them, down to minute details in many instances, as if I only had to turn on my brain tap, and out they poured. The life-shaping moments, people and places that overtook me when I was back there. It was like striking gold. Emotional gold and I wrote from there, knowing it was transformative and healing IF I used it as such. Not writing from bitterness nor revenge, but finally, in retrospect, writing the truth of my soul as I knew it...to heal my life. I learned the value of my story in this writing.

Ultimately, I learned that my story was like a nested doll, only to be found at the center of the other dolls, the stories of my elders and ancestors. All of us as women had struggled with our bodies, living inside their confines -- not the skin so much as the rules -- constrained by the layers of girded clothing we were made to wear. Striving for a certain kind of beauty, an acceptable, unnatural beauty that would provide for us a ticket to happiness and love and all of the things we wanted. And with each generation, the pallet of our desires grew in width and

height, as we acquired more. More beauty and beautiful things as the boundary lines for our black lives kept changing, giving us more and more space to occupy, and this seemed perfect.

Until we realized we had been swallowed up by these trappings and symbols, by this so-called integration. And once you realize that, you must act to save your life and figure out what really matters to you, who you really are, beneath the rubble.

And in my second divorce, with a broken heart, resolute mind, and a tired body, I set out to extricate myself and then to find the answer to that question, the one that mattered most. And I got the answer through my education, through writing and research and travel and solitude and learning to live on my own and with myself for the first time in my life.

But the book does not follow that part of the story. It stops at the end of the second marriage. ☺

Please remember that this is not entertainment. It's *truly vulnerable space*, and, if you are afraid of vulnerability, or are uncomfortable with your body, or with frank, body-centered material/discussion, then this is probably going to offend you. With my hard-won elder voice, I have nothing about my life needing proving or defending. I share my story in my community as medicine, as an example of what is possible once we come to the *awareness of the healing power* that lives and breathes in the heart of our stories, IF we use it as such.

If you are interested in learning about Womaning, a memoir, or purchasing a copy, please visit our website, Storymedicineworldwide.com/publications/womaning, highlighting the link, right clicking, and choosing Go to...

Thank you.

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