



**Responding to the Wisdom Sharing of
Alice Walker, Gloria Steinem, Dr. Chung Hyun Kyung and Melanie Harris
Tuesday, October 14, 2014 Ghost Ranch**

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At the end, someone stood and said, thank you for giving us permission. She was speaking to the four remarkable women onstage, author Alice Walker, activist Gloria Steinem, theologian Chung Hyun Kyung and educator Melanie Harris, who had moderated a remarkable discussion that got to the heart of feminism, womanism, spirituality, fear and purpose.

We clapped, every single one of us, women and a few men, standing, sitting in a wide, adobe-walled room at Ghost Ranch. I could feel the sound filling the space and going beyond through the open doors into the sunlit field, the yellow cottonwoods and the distant mesas topped by Pederal in purple shadow. Looking at the faces around me, animated by all we had heard that morning, I felt the resonance of the comment - "thank you for giving us permission" - not because we, as women, need permission but because we forget we don't. We forget we are enough. We forget we are more.

At the beginning, Melanie Harris introduced Alice Walker and sang a song. The melody lingered after she had stepped away from the microphone, and Alice Walker stepped up to it. Alice said she had waited to be here, to see what would come to her to talk about and what had arrived was fear. "I have been called fearless all my life. I'm not fearless. Nobody is fearless."

She spoke of being a young mother in an interracial marriage in Mississippi, waiting for the Klan, who had left a calling card in the mailbox, to show up. Waiting in a house with her husband and her child -- and a single rifle and a German shepherd, not knowing what would happen. How she had felt fear then. Or on a beach in Athens, on a flotilla to Gaza with other peace activists to protest the Israeli blockade. They couldn't get off the beach in Athens, she said, because the Israeli military kept sabotaging their departure, but finally, they decided to take off. And then they waited, knowing that Israeli military would attempt to board the boat, having heard stories of how they literally stepped on you. It was her job, she said, to sit with the other activists in a circle and greet the soldiers with meditation. And sitting there, not knowing what would happen, she felt fear.

So fear, she said, "it's normal. All creatures in the world feel it. The question is, what do you do with it? You feel the fear. You bear the fear. There are moments where you have to hold your ground; you hold your fear. But don't deny it."

We forget that there is fear in fearlessness. She said, "you know what people mean when they call you fearless? They mean, you do it. "

She shared her poem:

This Human Journey,
Don't waste one moment
Trying to be someone
different
or someplace other
than where
you are.

This human journey
is like
finding yourself
in Brussels
rather than
in Broccoli.

Find out what's good
about the place
-- in Brussels
as in Broccoli --
there must be something.

Later, just when it felt right, Melanie Harris suggested a break so we could absorb all we had heard in silence. We dispersed - apart but not separate - in the fields, edged by cottonwoods, in groups and alone, on a bench in a courtyard, a chair under a cottonwood, low adobe walls lining the path.

I wanted to write down all I had heard right away not because I had forgotten the words but because they had already gone to where they were needed, straight to the soft clay that I was that day. They went towards the loss and uncertainty I had felt since returning from Palestine a few months ago, seeing the injustice of occupation in the West Bank, the assault on Gaza, the young theater students I had worked with, fighting to speak their truth and the questions the experience had triggered: what was my response to injustice, how to be an activist in the same way I was a storyteller, that is, in my own particular way?

The words went to all these places and what I remember now is their aftermath, the feeling of fragments healing and giving me permission to process. In that moment, I didn't write anything down - I just felt the sun on my face, watched the women around me and was grateful.

When we came together after our silence, there was the richness of four women on stage: Gloria Steinem, Chung Hyun Kyung and Alice Walker in a discussion moderated by Melanie Harris.

Their ease with each other, made them feel familiar and familial - here were friends who had spoken and laughed long into the night and the day, about what mattered to each of them, and in speaking of their differences, found what they shared. "We bring each other into other worlds," Gloria Steinem said.

They spoke of how they came to know each other, Alice Walker and Gloria Steinem from the early days of Ms. magazine, Alice who hated editorial meetings and Gloria who loved them, how people would come up to Gloria and say, "You know Alice Walker?", Gloria going into bookstores and exclaiming, "You don't have *The Color Purple!*", Hyun Kyung coming to Gloria's house in NYC and teaching a group of hard-bitten New Yorkers. Gloria paused and Hyun Kyung added with a smile, *Asian Eco Feminist Tai Chi*. "Yes!" Gloria laughed, "and the amazing thing was that they all did it;" Alice and Hyun Kyung answering questions by Korean feminists in a book they co-authored, Melanie's gentle and provocative moderation of the discussion, and Alice saying about her, "I have adopted Melanie and her mother, who is here today, approves."

Everything they said felt revolutionary, deeply-felt. They had looked at the world, clear eyed, full hearted, and seen it for what it was and what it wasn't and described what they had seen in speech and prose, articles, books, poetry, stories. They had given voice to their voices, made themselves manifest in another form and that was inspiring.

They spoke of jealousy and its antidote, our uniqueness:

Chung Hyun Kyung: "You feel jealous to people who are similar to you, your peers...sometimes in my younger years, I was jealous of my friends, because they are smarter and more beautiful or 'she got the man I wanted;' but over the years, I discovered that, there are only *that thing* that Hyun Kyung can do in this world and so every day, every moment I focus on that one thing, one unique thing I came here with...your calling and I always try to focus on that and I feel okay because I have to do that and actually I celebrate my friend... because she is doing so well what she is meant to do in this world.

Gloria Steinem: "Once you get on to the fact that each of us is a unique combination of millennia upon millennia upon millennia of environment and heredity combined in a way that could never have happened before and could never happen again.... we're both unique and we're part of the human and natural communities, both ...not one or the other, then it's helpful because, for instance, when I am trying to decide what to do, I try to think to myself, 'well could someone else do this?' and if they could, then I shouldn't, because I'm not doing the right thing.... just to try our best to do what we can uniquely do."

"How have you become a good teacher?" Melanie asked Alice Walker.
"By surviving," she said. "You have a duty to be who you are."

It lit up my brain and my heart to hear them. I was telling my friend Sunny Dooley about it yesterday and it got her talking too, sharing her moment, her unique response. She is a storyteller in the Navajo Nation, which right now is the throes of a big controversy – one of the candidates for president is challenging the requirement that all candidates be fluent in Navajo. And that has stirred all kinds of responses, from the Navajo Supreme Court, the election board and everybody else, responses for and against, responses that go to heart of identity and culture.

“So I’m standing in line,” Sunny says, “waiting for the bank to open, and one of the other people in line is a woman who arrives angry and starts talking right away about how she’s going to go protest on behalf of the candidate who wants to do away with the language requirement,. She’s going on and on. And I think to myself, ok, Sunny, here you are, one of the first Miss Navajo Nations, a storyteller, a preserver of stories – what are you going to say to this woman, what is your response? And what came to me was – I looked at her and said, in Navajo, ‘I value my language and it is sacred to me.’ I said it three times and the woman kept talking, the bank opened, we went in and the sixth man who was in line behind us, right when he crossed the threshold, I heard him say, ‘Me too, I feel the same way.’”

“We are here facing our own pain,” said Alice Walker. She spoke of the aftermath of a love affair, how the pain went on and on. And how “you have to bear it for as long as it’s going on... In the bearing, something else is being fashioned. Afterwards, I had such lightness, such joy...so when I feel pain, I feel it to the full because something else is being fashioned...Know that you will belong to love again, in a different way.”

“How do you stay in joy?” Melanie asked her. “By not clinging to it,” she replied. “For 51 days,” she said, “of bombing people in Palestine, I was not in joy. I got an email from a poet friend there that said, Alice, I can’t breathe, our hearts have stopped. During that time, I understood what it means to wring your hands. I had heard it said that older people wring their hands - when you can't do anything but weep and wring your hands, I got it.”

She finds joy in simple things, she said, aspens and cottonwoods changing colors – things like that.

“And don’t be afraid to be tired,” she added. “For so long, I tried not to be tired. All these human things, if you accept them. You can do what you want to do, what you need to do then sit with your beloved, play with your dog, go for a walk.”

Since that day of wisdom sharing, I feel I have started again. I’m not sure what I’ve started or where I am going. But what matters is the ease I carry into the unknown, and that I am not alone, there are others who have walked before, and will walk after and are walking now. And there is a curiosity as to where I will arrive and what the journey will be like. And a determination to keep at it, to unearth what is ready for the light of day or the dark of night - it is the same, it is bringing forth, finding form, giving voice. And, most of all, there is hope, because as Alice Walker writes in her poem, “Hope is a woman who has lost her fear.”

Hope poem (<http://alicewalkersgarden.com/2013/10/hope-of-healing/>)

LINKS

Alice Walker <http://alicewalkersgarden.com>

Gloria Steinem <http://www.gloriasteinem.com>

Chung Hyun Kyung <http://www.utsnyc.edu/chunghyunkyung>

Melanie Harris http://www.rel.tcu.edu/faculty_harris.asp

Alice Walker's entry about working with Chung Hyun Kyung

<http://alicewalkersgarden.com/archive/books/articles/>

Alice on Gaza <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/jun/25/alice-walker-gaza-freedom-flotilla>

Sunny Dooley <http://sunnydooley.weebly.com>

Land Out Loud Palestine <http://www.landoutloud.com/palestine.html>