



OP-ED

Make peace with your #MeToo experience through poetry

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I will never forget October 2017. As a result of dozens of sickening sexual-assault allegations against Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein, a deluge of posts on Twitter and Facebook from angry and empowered women followed by the tag #MeToo.

The posts varied in their descriptiveness. Some women went into specifics, perhaps not naming names, but naming the relationship: professor, boss, boyfriend, followed by a specific verb (pick one): touched, groped, raped. Each detailed an unforgettable transgression and often a forced path into a new and lonely world.

One I will never forget listed at least a dozen varied assaults, ranging from stranger touches on the street to date rape, all experienced on the fraught journey from childhood to adulthood. There on my computer, scrolling through social media with a cup of coffee one morning, I very much related to that one, yet all I could manage on my public timeline was a #MeToo surrounded by white space.

As a poet and writer, I've written about many subjects, including the difficult: mental illness, war, exile, death. But as the #MeToo responses demonstrated, what one wants to say about traumatic experiences is often shaped, or muffled, by the severity of the experience, societal or family stigma, career-related repercussions and shame and victim-blaming turned

inward.

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Why tackle this — especially in poetry? Why not let sleeping dogs lie, as I’ve been taught to do in my own family? While I mostly believe that poetry and therapy occupy two separate domains, I have found in my writing practice that taking an experience or an emotional state that is difficult to write about and turning it into an object that can be molded and shaped — which is what all artists do with art — has already fulfilled one purpose: the almost alchemical transformation of one thing into another, or to borrow from the title of poet and activist Audre Lorde’s essay, what occurs is “the transformation of silence into language and action.”

Beyond the act of making poetry and taking back control of your narrative, voicing these experiences, even if only on the page, can do what those posts did last October. Speaking or writing about abuse, once one is ready to do so, can be cathartic, can remove stigma, not just for the writer, but for the reader, too. Linking two or more strangers or friends creates community. And communities are what are needed to effect changes small and large.

These days, I often think of one of the poems I first loved, Lorde’s “Coal.” The poem is about many things, primarily black identity, but a portion of it has always stuck with me because it reminds me of my work as a woman and as a poet and the often-difficult task of working with some words:

Some words live in my throat

Breeding like adders. Others know sun

Seeking like gypsies over my tongue

To explode through my lips

Like young sparrows bursting from shell.

Some words

Bedevil me.

During my “Silence Into Language” workshop, part of O, Miami month, I hope to validate and facilitate for what some might be a small shift, and for what others might be something like metamorphosis. There will be a variety of exercises and poetic techniques to meet individual participants at different stages of their healing process.

Some will be ready to speak plainly and directly. Others might need metaphors — maybe lots of metaphors, to enter through the poem's side door even, to be able to even approach the act of retelling their experiences. Some might write, but not wish to share. We'll meet each other where we are.

Me? I plan to do some of my own writing and sharing, in the hope that I, ,too can learn how to speak, communicate and commune in more articulate ways — and maybe even gain a new understanding of the things that have happened to me ,too.

YADDYRA PERALTA IS A POET WHO TEACHES WRITING AND LITERATURE AT MIAMI DADE COLLEGE. SHE IS A SUNROOM/O, MIAMI VISITING POET AT EMERSON ELEMENTARY IN WESTCHESTER, AND IS ALSO ASSISTANT DIRECTOR OF THE PALM BEACH POETRY FESTIVAL.

SILENCE INTO LANGUAGE WILL BE HELD FROM 10 A.M. TO 12 P.M. APRIL 29 AT THE CENTER FOR SOCIAL CHANGE, 2103 CORAL WAY, MIAMI. PARTICIPANTS WILL LEARN DIFFERENT TECHNIQUES FOR WRITING POETRY ABOUT SEXUAL TRAUMA IN A SMALL, INTIMATE AND SAFE SPACE. FOR MORE INFORMATION AND TO REGISTER, VISIT OMIAMI.ORG



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