Prompt: "How has storytelling been transformative in your work, and how can it help us build more connected, resilient communities?"

Imma Be Me, So You Can Be You or "I Don't Want Crumbs"

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We live in a world where marginalized voices are relegated to secondary roles. I don't want crumbs—as my students say, "I am here to eat a full meal."

My method for storytellers: recognize that our most intimate experiences are intensely social. Take two events from your week, make a work from them to register your life, to account for your perspective. I am here! I was here! And you need to see, hear and most of all, feel me.

This poem refuses typical academic distance and instead offers exactly what I'm advocating for: intimate experience as intensely social storytelling. It captures storytelling as a connection across cultures through Japanese coming-of-age tradition. This is how we transform intimate experience into social connection and provide a fuller meal through narrative. It's called Seijin-no-hi, about the Japanese cultural event of turning 20.

Seijin-no-hi

Lakas turns 20
on Friday
9/12/25
Today, Wednesday, my husband I go
to the public health building.
There are two lines.
one for births
and one for deaths.

Signs name us from above:
birth nacimiento
death defuncion.

On one side
a dad and mom
wear all pink:
shirts, hats, bags.
On one side is us
wearing black and white
criss cross and pin stripe.

The birth line
keeps going, keeps flowing.
Then no more babies gurgling,

strollers enshrouded completely
gone. Suddenly just us in
the death line:
older somber steely adults
arguing complex probate
or solo with quietly whimpering eyes
or me choking buried face
in my husband's chest

waiting our turn
as the clerk calls out
"next for birth" or
"next for death"
then i'm filling out forms
listing dates
his birth 9/12/05
his death 12/25/13.
our relationship:
i am his mother
filing for a permit
to scatter his ashes
at sea from a boat he loved
from a harbor frequented
when a baby, toddler, adolescent

we are scattering
Lakas' ashes on
his 20th birthday
as coming of age
following japanese culture
inheritance of tradition.
20 is adulthood
like the american 21.
Usually a new robe.
a new hairstyle.
a parade.

Lakas loved water.
on the boat we will toast him
then bring down his ashes
within the first 15 minutes
with flowers flowers flowers
before we head back back back
looking to land

in water he becomes
everywhere
in the world

i remember his joy
big movie star smile

the athletic prowess
big hitter biggest hugs
all the reading all the drawing
all the writing and storytelling
performances every friday night
the chef and future pediatrician
the one to beat at zelda on the wii
the one who said "i am grateful to be alive"
on thanksgiving

i remember his birth his life
we love you forever Lakas
you make us strong like you
today we are doing
something for Lakas.

(Time-allowing, poem number 2 and conclusion)

Today, Lakas feels so alive

His family—me, my husband, Dan, his brother Bayan,
his godmother Sachi and a friend Yumi get on a boat.

As Bayan lays his brother to rest,
a black seagull simultaneously flies in
to sit near the biodegradable urn,
shaped like a flower to accompany Lakas
like a guard, a guardian, a guide.

Shaped like a massive flower,
the urn with wild flowers and his wooden coins
keep swimming back to the boat.
We watch as if ready to prevent a drowning,
like we are witnessing Lakas pass a swim test.

As soon as the captain toots the horn
to signal our departure, the urn gently glides
down into the ocean under the waves.
The black seagull disappears. Who prompted this?

We look to the land, eat the donuts Lakas ate on Fridays with his dad.
The captain blasts a song I sang every night as his mom.

Happy Birthday, our young man.
You are now everywhere
We stay alive in this world to be with you.

I chose to speak with you in poetry today for it distills the power of emotion as deployed in the most succinct language. Perhaps a better way of saying it is the event and the experience demanded poetry's almost sputtering expression. Full sentences do not appropriately capture

how a mother outlives her child and what happens as part of the facticity of his ashes: powder and bone. When my husband and I transferred from the first pouch to the biodegradable one, the substance came onto my fingers and palms. I ate him to return him to my body where he came from.

I chose to adorn my body as a form of speech today too: a black tafetta balloon dress and a hat shaped like a hershey kiss to walk into the room noticeably, undeniably to be seen, to be heard, to be felt so you cannot unsee, unhear and unfeel me. This is the definition of fabulosity. Imma be me so you can be you. I do so because I appear invited to speak within a moment where my identities have become prohibited. The response cannot be do not speak, do not be heard, do not be felt for, do not be defended, do not be protected: the narrative about someone like me: brown, woman, feminist, autonomous, free, independent as demonized today. This demonization is not a better narrative. It is not winning over seeking access, seeking equality, seeking rights.

What I am learning today is that every time we speak, we may not be heard. We may be harmed, injured and hurt instead. And this is part of living in a world of social inequality where hatred is empowered. Seeking recognition and legibility as human is rendered threatening rather than the securing of rights to one's expansive humanity.

"See me, hear me, feel me" is a wish not to succumb to silencing and disappearance. Yes, still that is the goal. I call up June Jordan, I call up Toni Morrison. I call up Jessica Hagedorn. I call up Chrystos. I call up Cherrie Moraga. All those who came before me who enabled my manifold speech. The championing of difference, in the literature of women of color, may be called wrongheaded as a simplification of the mere wish to be oneself. Imagine the violence of that deprivation.

Imma be me so you can be you means my story is necessary for your story and our collective story and its many facets. I want equal access to the power of story! This is why I take the risk of standing up, looking unforgettable, without guarantee of safety because I believe in the power of story to make people feel for other than who you are. And to learn, to grow, to become richer through the abundance of perspective and experience. And if the response is refusal to learn from me—then I must believe in the power of keeping on speaking, to enable the next after me.

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