

Making Positive Change

Keynote Address, 2016 Chandigarh Literature Society Festival, India.

Thank you to the organizers of this delightful two-day festival by the shores of Lake Sukhna. It's an honor to be invited here to exchange ideas and discuss reading and writing.

Do you have a difficult relationship with baggage? I do. On the one hand I want to travel light, and on the other, I want to plan for every possible contingency. As a writer, I find it impossible to travel without my writer's notebook, an ereader and several books. And my Indian heritage makes it doubly impossible to travel without gifts, though everyone tells me, *Ab toh sub kuch milta hai*. (Everything is available now).

I get separation anxiety when a flight attendant decrees she will take away my carryon and promises the airline will return it at my destination. Pretty soon my books are strewn all around so I can decide which ones to carry on board. By the time I am called to board the plane, book bags are hanging from both my shoulders; I look like a veritable pack mule about to take a footpath up the hills from Chandigarh to Shimla.

Which five things would you take with you if you had only fifteen minutes to decide? Ask a refugee, ask a Partition survivor. When I was writing *What the Body Remembers*, I was surprised to learn how many named a poem or story that had been necessary to their survival. As refugees know, a poem or story cannot be taken from you, once you've read it and hold it in your heart.

We are all millions of stories in progress. Which is to say: we are all changing. Change is the engine that drives our stories, in real life and in fiction. And we are all reading each other's body language each minute, listening, sharing ideas, reading stories, then carrying forward the stories we are told, helpfully retelling them to others.

My Hindu friends say there's a god of Change, Shiv, who dances forward, one foot holding down Apsamara, the demon of ignorance. If you're a Sikh, you are always a work in progress, learning constantly from life, changing yourself for the better. If you are Muslim, you know the first invention of Allah was not man, but the pen, and it records how your life changes. If you're a Christian, you are called to transform the world for the better. If you're Jewish, you are called upon to repair it. Buddhists are on an 8-fold path – and all paths involve movement toward some destination. Even if you're an atheist, you work to battle atrophy with compassion for the expected deterioration of the body, mind and physical around us.

Change is a fact of life, the one Constant. We can shape it, but we can't will it away. Octavia Butler begins her futurist novel *The Parable of the Sower* with this lovely poem:

*“All that you touch,
You change.
All that you Change
Changes you.
The only lasting truth is
Change
God
is Change.”*

Each of us is creating a life, finding its themes, finding meaning. Many of us read and write or create art to chronicle our journey and understand our lives. The books we read impose order on the chaos of life. They advise us how others might deal with change.

The Sufis tell us we progress to the divine through the arts. They say music, dance, and poetry help us to stay in touch with the creative spirit in ourselves and in others. When we Sikhs say *Chardi Kala* we're wishing each other progress through the arts. And as artists male or female know, when we create and nurture a work into being, we honor and rely on the feminine within ourselves.

A bibliography of my reading would reveal how I've changed over the years. I can tell you exactly where I was while reading Nancy Drew and Enid Blyton books as a child, and the historical novels of Georgette Heyer in school. My curiosity about the French Revolution rose from reading Baroness Orczy's *Scarlet Pimpernel*. My curiosity about Irish History from reading Leon Uris's *Trinity*, my curiosity about anthropology and the impact of technology from reading *The Dispossessed* and many other novels by Ursula le Guin. Later, my husband David and I would read to one another, and the underlining in books by Will Durant, Mortimer Adler and Antonio D'Amasio is my record of our shared journey, a record of ideas that were new to us back then. One book leads to another in the life of us bibliophiles.

The voices of human ancestors speak from books in every language -- all we have to do to meet our ancestors is read. We readers and writers are engaged in a huge ongoing conversation about events that happened, *and* those that didn't but could have or may happen if current trends continue. Every text, it seems to me, is written in response to and in counter-argument with a previous text. Each text is a small rebellion that says the author's experience, research and imagination tell a different story.

We appreciate the departure and daring of the new Testament of the *Bible* far more once we read the Old Testament. We appreciate the departure and daring of the *Guru Granth Sahib* far more once we read the Vedas and the Qur'an. Dickens wrote *Oliver Twist* about the Victorian workhouse in reaction to the text of laws that held the poor responsible for their poverty. One

of my novels, *The Tiger Claw*, was written to counter Orientalist depictions of the life of a woman of Indian origin, Noor Inayat Khan. You too can join the conversation – pick a moment in history, or follow along as writers imagine the future.

Every time a story I only saw and felt in my mind arrives in little squiggles on a page, it's a miracle. And it's a greater miracle if you read it in search of deep engagement with a subject. It's an even greater miracle if my story expands your heart to greater understanding of other human beings. So each novel or story collection showcased at this festival represents a potential moment of growth in empathy.

Fiction writers believe our role is to interrogate the past and help people remember – but why?

Each of us creates a life solely from our responses to change. It is now an axiom that we can't change others, only ourselves and our responses. That statement assumes our ability to imagine creative responses to situations. Fiction helps us model the consequences of alternate behaviors.

And so, many fiction writers use the past to comment on the present. And I also believe our collective project is to reveal how humanity has changed over time. Through writing novels and stories we explore moments of change, stringing together scenes like beads for a necklace, one leading to another. Moments of change that will, if we plot and plan them right, add up to a story.

Mahatma Gandhi said, "Be the change you want to see in the world." He assumed when saying so, that all of us want positive change for all human beings. The problem today is that the changes some of us want are retrogressive, taking us back to the age of Neanderthals. Maybe Gandhi couldn't imagine people who can want negative change.

As Vietnamese-American writer Viet Nguyen said recently, "The struggle over the direction of any country is also a contest over whose words will win and whose images will ignite the collective imagination."

When we attempt to change direction in any country, we begin with words of persuasion. However, as soon as we use our powers of language to stigmatize or demonize other people, or to assault the character of all people in a group, we're working for negative change. Words used to threaten to deport, report, or register someone because of their race, culture, national origin, religion, sexuality, gender, ideology, class, disability, or being -- are words in service of negative change. Nanak called such words Ninda, and warned against them.

In depressing encounters with the poorly-informed worldwide, we are being urged to look backwards on some glorious golden age.

Those were the days in India, my friends, when mothers had the same status as cows just because they lactate, when vendors cried “Hindu Chai, Muslim Chai!” when disgust was a status weapon, when to be called arrogant was a compliment. Those were the days before the British, before the Mughals, when the sword was far mightier than the pen, and the goddess Bharat Mata had not been invented. It was a time when women knew their place as receptacles of family honor. In this so-called golden era, women were taught that survival, upward mobility and a cushy life required them to enforce the norms of male entitlement in the lives of their daughters and daughters-in-law.

Similarly, the yearned-for days of American greatness in the 1950s were days when Native American children were required to be raised in residential schools to ensure their culture was not passed down. Those were the days of segregation between whites and anyone with a one sixteenth black blood, of almost-certain lynching for any black man who dared to love across the color bar. These yearned-for days of American greatness were days of exclusion of the Asian and the Brown man from property ownership and public office. Those were the days when contraception and abortion were banned in the USA even as they were promoted for women in the developing world. Those were the days when women rarely controlled their own finances, were excluded from all-male clubs, and were unlikely to progress past secretarial jobs.

In Canada, Conservative leadership candidate Kellie Leitch wants to take us back to the 1930s by dismantling the cultural uniter of Canada, the CBC. The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation is an institution that has done more to unite Canadians than any other.

All the progress we have made for human rights, social justice and democracy will be for naught if we let these so-called “good old days” recur on this planet.

Those of us who don’t want to see those days again can’t take the easy path of agreement. And equally, we can’t go inward, disengage from society and sit meditating and hoping for change. Hope and prayer are passive stances that will only take us so far. We can’t opt out and be pessimists. We can’t say, “I’m for me and mine and the rest can take the crumbs that fall from my table.”

What we *can* do is use our words to embrace, honor and encourage positive change with all our might, every time and wherever it surfaces. We can begin from listening for positive change, reading for positive change, and then writing and working for positive change.

What is positive change?

I believe positive change rises from curiosity about our fellow human beings. When we wonder what it's like to walk in someone else's shoes for a while.

For instance, I know a couple who enrolled in a total immersion course in German so they can read the novels of Stephan Zweig in his language. This would be remarkable even if they were not in their eighties.

Positive change enlarges the self. It enables us to appreciate complexity. Appreciating complexity helps us see beauty in all of creation. I know an attorney who decided to read all he could to understand music theory. I know a voice actor who decided to read all she could on neuroscience.

Positive change works to improve the participation of others in society: I have a landlord friend who wants to rent to a woman business owner. I know a woman who has developed a gymnastics program for children with autism.

Positive change crosses boundaries: I know an Indian couple who married across caste, yet didn't have to emigrate to make it work because their families created a safe and nurturing space to accommodate differences.

Positive change demands that we seek new language, language that avoids clichés to create new neural pathways. Unlike advertising, the language of positive change will engage many adjectives: the superlatives, the perjoratives and the adjectives in the middle. People who speak gendered languages like Punjabi and Hindi will demand the use of gender-neutral words. The language of positive change will refuse to diminish girls as they grow to women, or enlarge boys as they grow to men.

Positive change gives permission and encouragement to the next generation: As my grandmother once said, "Why should your life be like mine? You will live your own life, you will decide how to use it."

Though we are solitary when reading or writing, not one of us is alone as we change. We have words to bring us together. Language makes us human; it allows us to share with others. It enables us to talk to ourselves, to the dead and to those in generations to come.

Suppose you wrote a letter from your 80-year old self to your present self. What if you told your present self what you are proud to have accomplished? Tell your present self what you really regret. After this wonderful exercise go find the books you need to help you accomplish what will make you proud, and those that will save you all those regrets.

If you're a writer at this festival, I say to you: do your job. Read. Respect the feminine principle in you that creates. Travel, taking your baggage, bearing many gifts. Set your personal baggage down and share it with others from time to time. Read some more. Listen, witness and write. Describe the obstacles we face and tell us how we can improve ourselves to overcome them.

If you're a reader at this festival, read, absorb and discuss. And don't think that by reading about a problem you've done your social work. With each book you read, pledge to expand your empathy, resolve to improve your understanding, choose to create from your awareness of the feminine, and reach out to others working to repair our broken world.

Thank you.

Shauna Singh Baldwin
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