

The Power of Stories

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In 2012, a neo-Nazi came into the gurdwara I attend in Oak Creek Wisconsin. He had a gun. He shot 6 people. As he left, he was apprehended by Officer Brian Murphy in the parking lot. He fired 17 shots into the officer. He then turned his gun on himself.

In the days and weeks that followed, I found myself writing articles explaining “What is a Sikh?” because few in the local Sikh community can do so fluently in English. I’m not an especially observant Sikh woman, but this was what my community needed from me and every other bilingual Sikh man or woman who could express themselves in writing. We needed to be seen as individuals, not in the collective. The only way to see another person as an individual is to learn his or her story.

In your time here at Jesus & Mary College, you are studying English Literature. Your professors assign novels and short stories in English not just to have something for you to discuss in class, but to give you a sense of a very long cultural conversation in progress. Peoples formerly-colonized by the British -- Americans, Indians, Australians, Nigerians, Kenyans, and Canadians -- may have come late to this conversation but nevertheless, we’re very enthusiastic and determined to have our say.

Why? Because storytelling is subversive. Why subversive? Because we can only tell a story about *individuals*. Try writing a story with We or They as protagonist, and you will immediately learn it’s about the narrator. Stories are about people. And because we writers find ourselves unable to describe the amazing complexity of people, we say we write about characters.

Some of you may decide to join this great conversation in progress, some of you may already be participants. Some may sit on the sidelines as readers and cheer. Some of you may follow the example of your professors, participating for a while and then teaching the next generation of participants to enlarge the conversation. Maybe some of you will become critics whose role is to describe context for readers, people who help readers understand where a story fits into, contributes to or illuminates the larger conversation. But I hope I can persuade you that writing novels or stories is one of the most important creative acts in the world.

For me, writing stories enlarges my experience of the world.

Take the story of the shooting. You now know what happened in the shooting because I just told you. You know the answers to the journalistic questions: who did what, where, and when. You know he was a neo-Nazi so you have some idea of why. I told this story as non-fiction, in summary form. You can now send it to Trash in yesterday's newsfeed or to the dustbin if you read it in a newspaper.

Did you think it was true because you read it under the banner of a newspaper or because I said it was true? Was that all you needed to know? Was that all you *wanted* to know? Didn't the facts make you wonder – what on earth made that killer decide to pick up a gun and walk into a house of worship? Doesn't it make you angry that no one is interested enough to dig into the subject and tell you not only WHO dunnit, but WHY dunnit? And was this act a symptom of mental illness or is this a case of domestic terrorism? Don't you want to know why he only managed to kill 6 people in a crowded place you imagine when you think of a gurdwara? And don't you wonder: if this happened to you, how would you react?

What would you do if you were visiting Shauna and you were on your way to the Oak Creek gurdwara with her when this happened? What would you do if you were the wife of one of the singers killed that day? Could the Sikh family members' reactions in the days that followed guide you if you ever experienced such an event affecting one of your relatives? If you were a gurdwara committee member or the next Mayor of Oak Creek, what can you do to prevent such a thing from ever happening again?

When bare facts lead to questions, it's time to make the well-educated guesses we call fiction. Every writer's process is individual – which is what makes fiction interesting. Speaking for myself, I find inspiration for stories everywhere – images that keep recurring in my mind, photos, voices, snatches of songs. But inspiration is not enough. It takes research and imagination to understand characters whose world views may be utterly different from my own, and whose needs bring them into conflict with their times. I usually study for a book for two years, but studied for my last novel, *The Selector of Souls* for five of the seven years it took to write it.

Yes, writing is a commitment.

And writing is one of the most rewarding vocations -- I don't mean in dollars and cents, especially in the era of 99-cent downloads. The perpetrator of the shooting at Oak Creek showed us he had the power to destroy, and how very *easy* it is to destroy, so easy you can destroy yourself as well. But what that *also* means is that one person has the power to create, mend, and amend.

I believe that person is a storyteller: a writer of novels, short stories, scripts and plays. Once a writer channels the creative spirit to bring words from the unseen to the seen, the derivative arts can occur: agents can sell rights, books can be edited, publishers can publish, books can be sold and downloaded, films can be made and streamed, plays can be staged, actors and actresses can enter and exit stages and screens, teachers can discuss with students, critics can critique, academics can analyze, and readers can enjoy. But none of these arts can happen *unless someone writes a story.*

If I were writing the story of the Oak Creek shooting as fiction, I might tell it from the point of view of one of the fifteen Sikh women who stopped buttering hot rotis to crowd into a pantry the size of a cupboard when they heard the first shots. I could tell it from the point of view of the killer – that would be a very short story, since he dies. I might tell it from the point of view of Officer Murphy, or a journalist interviewing each member of the victims’ families. Every choice I make tells you something about my politics, my heritage, my interests. Perceptive readers know my choices may reveal my gender and what I think of other genders (note the plural); the times I live in; my ability and willingness to understand the beliefs, feelings, thoughts, prejudices, cares and limitations of someone else.

Each character I feature in my story will enlarge my experience of the world. When I write a story, I am no longer limited to being Shauna. I am no longer limited to this life, this time in history, my country of origin, my religion, my community. With research and imagination, I can roam the planet and beyond!

Whenever I am swept away with this kind of excitement, a funny little voice starts up in my head. It has a very Indian accent: *“Huh! No story is unique. We’re born, we live, we suffer a lot, then we die. Then it begins again. Why is this story you want to tell more important than all others?”*

The answer is usually: it isn’t. But it’s the story *I* need to explore. Maybe because I feel the world is too dominated by a narrative that contradicts my lived experience. Maybe I would feel better if I reframed and complicated that drumbeat. Maybe I could have fun poking a few pompous asses while I do it. And anyway, it is a story *ONLY* I can tell. And I will find the words to tell it in a fresh way, so it becomes like a delicious meal so beautifully presented you won’t realize it is also nutritious. Or a song so ethereal, you may not recognize it as an elegy.

Though there are a few scientific studies to the contrary, I still believe language shapes and changes our thinking. I still believe Freudian slips reveal our thoughts. Because I’m a woman, I don’t have the luxury of believing a cigar is “just a cigar” but not symbolic of the penis I am supposed to envy.

What if we enlarged the definition of the word “family” to include other members of the human and animal family in the term? What if we enlarged the definition of god so that everyone else’s religion is no longer superstition? What if we degendered a word like “doctor” so we don’t need to add “lady” before it?

In the US, we need to enlarge our definition of words like “minority” and “diversity” – which are too often used as code words for “Black” or African American. Today several minorities in India and the USA are many shades of pink, brown and black.

True or untrue, stories are terribly important in our lives. They guide us, they haunt us, they taunt us, they teach us -- but above all, they individualize.

A shift in point of view can offer an alternative to Hindutva ideas of exclusivity for Hindus or Neo-Nazi ideas of exclusivity for Euro-Americans. Any story that sends a stranger into a new town can help a reader understand another culture. A story about a journey can give someone bound to a wheelchair an out of body experience. A science fiction story set on another planet can warn us where a current trend might lead. A work of historical fiction may carry you back to another time and ask you to imagine how you might react in your grandmother’s era. In this way, fiction may be our only antidote to the war on compassion that rages all around us, a war fed by our accumulated fear of strangers.

Globalism has given us access to a banquet of information yet most of us are starving for context. The jobs you look forward to are already in jeopardy from a computer, but take it from me, an IT consultant who also writes novels -- writing a novel is the one task a computer cannot do. So, I urge you to try it.

I challenge you to share your stories, face to face, and in writing, and in politics. When you write your stories and share them, you refuse exclusion from that long cultural conversation in progress. You’ll also challenge borders of religion, class, caste and color.

After the shooting, many non-Sikh people in Oak Creek showed their solidarity with my community by wearing bracelets with the Sikh good luck greeting is *Chardi Kala!* -- which is usually translated as relentless optimism, but which literally means spiritual progress through the arts. I still wear mine every year on August 5th. That bracelet gives me relentless optimism that there can be progress through the arts, because fiction can inspire compassion for other humans and animals. I know that progress can only happen one reader at a time, one story at a time, so I wish you all Chardi Kala; many characters to show you their points of view; and happy reading and writing.

Thank you.