

GRIEF AS PROTEST AND CREATIVE RENEWAL

By Susan Morales Guerra, *writer and facilitator, Norway and Texas*

I was dead, then alive.

Weeping, then laughing.

The power of love came into me,
and I became fierce like a lion,
then tender like the evening star,
only from the heart can you touch the sky,
your soul is like an eagle ready to soar

—Rumi

Sitting in San Antonio during the first weeks of the new presidency, I sense the knots and headaches, the anxiety and anger at the sweeping changes being made causing great destabilization. I am sad as many will suffer and sad at not knowing if I, as an individual, have any power to create alternatives that will allow justice for the many to win over the privilege of a few. The corporate global powers on this once so sweet Earth, take no heed when it comes to who must pay the price for their unbridled capitalistic and inhumane greed.

The genocide we have financed in Gaza and the steady domestic bureaucratic coup d'état, now carried out by the same billionaires and white-collar criminals has caused overwhelming grief. Where do we go with this? How can we act from an injured place?

This text is based upon my experience and my listening. In Oslo, Norway last August and September, I participated in workshops and 2 performances led by multidisciplinary Syrian artist, Farah Azrak. <https://masahat.no/speaker/farah-azrak/> Her program, a 6-week residency of workshops with 2 street performances was called “*Songs of Anemone*”, a somatic, cultural and political program focused on Palestine. Azrak sees grief-tending as a radical form for protest and a deep resource for vitality on an individual and collective level. She was in Oslo as part of the *Masahat Festival*. (bit.ly/Masahat-Festival-2024.) The many Arab artists involved in this 5-day festival exchanged their experiences and knowledge. I also attended the conversation, “*Artists and Liberation*”, between Farah Azrak and musician, poet, Hamed Sinno, (bit.ly/Hamed-Sinno) from which I also developed my thoughts for this text, thanks to their shared insights.

I understand the connections between Zionism and the oppressive measures against institutions, professionals and social justice groups in the USA now, are grounded in the same global ideological source for fascist strategies, white supremacy and viewing societal order (aka government) as solely an economic venture.

The talk was centered around the complex themes of the responsibility and necessity of art in a world evolving towards authoritarianism, the difficulties of meaning-making in times of genocide and the problematics of linking politics to art. It is impossible to move forward ignoring grief over the genocide of people and destruction and annihilation of places, geographical and cultural places/spaces called HOME.

Susan Guerra at the Masahat Festival.



Paper maché model of the rubble in Gaza.

Collectively, our question and conversations for now are how can we create something else, which is deeply democratic and of the people, without the access to the powerful billions which govern the globe? How did it become this way?

Naming Our Spaces

Our job is to name what we know. What we know sits in the body, often without language to support our expression of what we know and how we understand ourselves and each other. This is how I experienced Asrak's somatic grief-tending exercises, using breath, sound and voice to discover what I know, alone and as a group. Helping each other breathe, learning to "listen with my hands" was to discover layers of myself gaining imaginative expansion. To apply this to my creative production, imagination with an increased boldness, so to share this process with others. Is this something I can do?

*"Imagination is more important than knowledge".
"You cannot solve a problem with the same mind that created it". Albert Einstein.*

The act of "wording the world" (Paolo Freire (*bit.ly/Paulo-Freire*)) enables understanding our place in the world, our place on this earth and among the global family of other geographic places and other species and plant life. We are Nature together. Words are felt, words have limitations. Which is why the somatic approach to knowing is powerful.

What I learned from the *Songs of Anemone* workshops was the depth of what we know sits into the deep muscle tissues of our often-ignored bodies. Through the exercises of voice, sound, movement and breath, I, with the others, was able to clear out knots of thought, fear, sadness and confusion and open to breathe in the world as it is, not as what I longed for it to be.

With this cathartic experience, there was room for creativity and kindness, energy, but most powerful was the sense of connection. Connection to people, ancestors, places and nature's diversity.

During the workshops that I attended with 12 people (unknown to me), from Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Poland, Norway, Mexico, Kosovo, Texas, California; we entered a space facilitated by Azrak, where we shared in confidentiality. Without judgement we were able to practice naming our histories with language and movements, listening with the entire body, bringing artifacts or poems, images to an altar



Farrah Azrak, workshop leader. Credit: Jorunn Bakke Johannesen.

keeping us grounded.

Our education expanded as we remained with new questions and stories, discovered a global connection of our stories, created an awareness of social and political power structures, both as hindrances and resources. We were taught lessons of (self) care and (self) love through breathing and sound exercises, supporting each other to release the muscles holding on to collective and personal trauma—bringing forth strength and clarity of mind.

Our imagination is more powerful than knowledge, Einstein said, and it takes a clearing of the mind and body to act creatively, in a powerful way.

We learned to gather with each other's differences, we created spaces where conflict, annoyances co-existed side by side without resolve, all the while maintaining our care for each other.

Can this experience provide some of the contours for a new social order together based on humanitarian values of respect and compassion? I see a platform for new structures which we can intentionally practice within our families and organizations, based upon non-competitive common actions together for common goals, as each context deems necessary. This may provide the vitality from our diversity without anger and separateness.

Self-education, Complexity and Beautiful Knowledge

"....Quetzalcōātl, Aztec God revered for wisdom and life-sustaining principles, symbolized the divine blend of air, wind, creativity, learning, and knowledge in Aztec culture, embodying 'Precious and Beautiful Knowledge'."

"Precious knowledge" is a reference to Mayan concepts that say to "self-reflect (Tezcatlipoca), seek out precious and beautiful knowledge (Quetzalcōātl), begin to act (Huītzilōpōchtli) and ultimately transform (Xipe Totec)....." The academic journal, The Society for the Study of the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States (MELUS) [9]

As common beings of Nature, we have become mindful of the importance of taking care of this earth, no matter which spot we inhabit. We are co-inhabiting within systems where there is great harm done to the very qualities of air, water and soil which we need to nourish all creatures. Instead, we are being poisoned and paying a price for this. There is much anger and fear in the world, and mistrust. What do we do with what we see, feel, and know locally

and globally, personally and collectively? Where do we go with questions and suggestions for solutions where we can create connections through what we know? And through what we don't know?

Nourishing systems—thinking are needed for the transformation of the harmful systems—thinking which separates humans and other animal life from each other, which see nature and humans as separate, divides spirit from body, our physical world from the cosmos. As the Mayan concepts of “self-reflect (*Tezcatlipoca*), seek out precious and beautiful knowledge (*Quetzalcoatl*), begin to act (*Huitzilōpōchtli*) and ultimately transform (*Xipe Totec*).....» as a wake-up call, I see the workshop “*Songs of Anemone*”, takes this process at its roots. “Self-reflection” begins in the effort to know ourselves from within, somatically. What drives me? What returns my power? How do I release the haunting stories of oppression and suffering and struggle? “Seeking out beautiful knowledge” is something more than facts, subjectivity. Shared stories are the places for knowledge to emerge from. “Beginning to act and then transform” is the work of creatives and artists together with communities who care and who share a position of non-privilege in the social/economic systems which rule us today. The stories all over the globe tell us something about our own take-off point for transformation.

We mobilize for this by mobilizing our bodies, freeing them and releasing the individual grief which wants to resist changes to feel protected from even more harm. By knowing our own body pain, we bravely can begin to find the resources needed to create new systems based in our human creativity.

“According to Freud, an artist is someone who transforms neurosis into art...But rather, Gómez-Peña transforms outrage into art; tender, witty, outraged art.” —Shelly Errington

Performance artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña, has in 2021 created a media-based public exhibition which can be read about at the **Gómez-Peña's Casa Museo: A Living Museum and Archive at the Jane Addams Hull House Museum** (Chicago). “Through sound, image and performance, the keynote and exhibition offers ‘a borderless world where geographic, municipal, gender and other borders are dismantled to allow public institutions to reflect and serve all.’”

The ability of bold creativity to move and touch emotions are some of the most powerful motivators for actions. Is it then the role of artists to lead some of these actions? Or to intentionally paint, draw, sing, dance the vision of new systems, of beautiful knowledge? Slaves sang songs, the movements for civil rights were led by music and theatre, and religions and patriotism move people with anthems, poetry and art. Because emotion connects people, connects people with pathos and pathos sits deep in the body and stays there till it is either

expanded, deepened or transformed to meet the needs to live our lives. Pathos craves release. Politicians know about the power of emotions as we are manipulated incessantly. Artists can help us explore more the potential power of emotions through art to create ruptures in the patterns of unregulated capitalism, so something else will happen.

And through the awakening of our emotional layers, we can explore who are the perpetrators/predators, who are the victims/targets and who are the witnesses/bystanders? Where do we find ourselves currently?

Moving Forward and a Pedagogy of Questioning

Community-centered artists pay attention to the scents, colors, behaviors, sounds of people around them. This has birthed new styles and broken patterns for expression in music and art, architecture and dance. Writers have included image and context of what was considered inferior, ugly, and dismal realities, the loss of life and love due to harsh lives for those who live a life of the unprivileged. This has expanded readership and audiences. Also, what is considered beauty.

In doing so, artists have lifted our awareness to the surface for those who are interested and disinterested. It is why the disciplines of minority studies and theories are being slashed away from curriculums by the present government. A thinking and creative citizenship is difficult to contain.

An Egyptian journalist, Lina Attalah, (bit.ly/lina-attalah) based in Cairo; who was part of the *Masahat Festival* was asked what she read in order to be informed. She answered with the titles of books, but the answer which stayed with me was that she said the best way to learn was to have conversations with others who also seek to find new ways to practice democracy. And I find that my own experience of having conversations and dialogues with others, especially those who think differently than me, give me insight into the complexity of what we are doing here together.

For me the issue is to provide safe, healthy places for people, without fear of violence around the corner. It is the highest wish of Palestinians in Gaza and among the unprivileged in the USA today.

My biggest challenge is to gather with others to discover, what are the questions we have not asked? What questions are missing from the local and global narrative? Through the acts of leading somatic grief-tending or making artwork (collectively designed, co-created) and leading dialogues where conversations slow down, bring different-thinking people together to hear each other's life grievances and passions, may be a way to boldly and tenderly bring alive the beast of the empowered self.

BIO: Susan Morales Guerra, writer/facilitator, is from San Antonio, Texas; resides in Norway. She is a mother, grandmother, activist, community facilitator, spiritual humanist. Her work for social justice integrates participatory methods with arts and culture.