



WRITING AS ACTIVISM

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“When we speak, we are afraid our words will not be heard or welcomed. But when we are silent, we are still afraid. So it is better to speak.”

- Audre Lorde

I volunteered in New Orleans, one year after Hurricane Katrina, in the summer of 2006. At sixteen, the experience was the most powerful of my time in high school, as we witnessed the destruction and carelessness of government employees, elected officials, and businesses. This shook me violently awake to the world, while the struggle, compassion, and integrity of everyday people opened my eyes to the necessity of action.

I came back to my high school after that summer with a fire and a confusion burning, as if the world cracked open inside of me. Wide-eyed and fiercely focused, I ran around like a chicken with its head cut off trying to do *something*, joining every group I could, trying to understand how to “fix” the world. My time became eaten up with hope, guilt, shame, and determination as my heart became raw. Basic social interactions became difficult with people that I had known for years, and sometimes things would collapse in.

I would cry in class—heavy, hot tears rolling down my face as I stared disillusioned at my classmates. I had no foundation, no analytical understanding of systems or historical processes of power. I didn’t even understand the word “capitalism” as anything other than reality. All I knew was that I wanted everyone to wake up and get *angry*.

Everything became debatable, and I was relentless in the classroom. I can’t tell you how many times teachers told me to “calm down” so that the class could “move on.”

Feeling as if I were speaking through glass, I came to understand that getting angry wasn’t changing my conversations with people. In fact, it was isolating me more and more. I realized that I would have to stop wasting energy and just wait until I could leave the suburbia of Houston. Feeling as if there wasn’t anyone I could talk to, I turned to books.

The relationship started innocently enough after a lifetime of going to the library with my mom, a librarian. We kept our television covered with a cloth and potted plant, and refusing to buy me new clothes at the mall, my mom would happily drop \$50-80 a month on books from our local bookstore.

I read ferociously. I would read books in class, in the car on the way to school, put them in textbooks when the teacher wasn't looking, and read until I fell asleep on the couch as the clock hours passed into the morning. There, in those sacred moments, I conversed with Jennifer Baumgardner about feminism, sexuality, and grassroots activism; Thoreau and Annie Dillard about relentless environmentalism; Mary Oliver about faith; Charles Fraizer about the myth of the new frontier; Barbara Kingsolver about food politics; youth poets about racism; political prisoners about unjust governments and a larger system at play; and I began to truly see my city through reading *Houston Press*, the alternative newspaper.

In these moments, as my eyes rested on their words, I could feel the cells in my body rearranging. And the most beautiful thing began to happen... I began to shift. Away from anger. Away from confusion. It was and is in those moments that the sharp power of clarity settles into my bones. I don't just feel different. I *know* I am different because of what I just read. Their words sink into my bloodstream, and I get high. I get high off the conviction of purpose and the security of knowing that *something* is true. That tingling sensation of soul recognition, the kind that makes our experience feel more valued and legitimate because of the risk this other person, whom we may never speak with, took by believing in themselves enough to share with the world their deepest convictions. In a sense, it is them offering their soul up to the world, for us to hold in our hands until we are ready to carve our own.

Understanding and truth aren't just logic... they are experience. The most powerful writings are those from experience, and when I heard their voices, I began to find a refuge, an escape, and a dialogue that I could be a part of anywhere. It didn't matter that I was seventeen. It didn't matter that I lived in the cheapest apartments with my mom in one of the wealthiest school districts. It didn't matter that I was struggling with being the weird, "hyper-hippie chick" who "knew everyone." None of the labels put on me, or that I put on myself, mattered. All that mattered was that I was partaking in the lives and processes of a few, who were a part of millions. Through them, I could be a part of something so much larger than my own binding fear.

The beauty is that their writing gave me more than information—their writing gave me a voice I could connect to. These weren't laws, or "neutral" newspaper articles... these were raw and impassioned opinions, lived realities, and collective theories and dreams. I would never have met these people if it wasn't for them taking the risk of writing those words, shaping those realities onto paper. I would never have realized how big the world was, or that there were other people who thought like me, challenging me in ways that stretched my understanding of justice. I would never have known that there were alternatives. That the history I was taught was wrong. That something else was possible. That I could be a part of a community as my whole self. So when I am afraid to write, which is a lot of the time when it comes to activist work, I find myself repeating the criticisms I heard when I was

younger: *That's just one author, so that's not the truth... writing doesn't do anything... it doesn't change anything... I don't have a solution, so why bring up the issue?*

These doubts rush into my thoughts full force, like a charging dust storm, clouding my ability to re-connect with my foundation, with my own hope and vision. I have to remember and you have to remember, that you never know who will read what you wrote. You will never know that someone read it on the bus on their way to a meeting and it shifted their whole group's strategy. You'll never know that old curmudgeon who, when researching articles online late at night when he can't sleep, comes across yours about trans identity and calls his kid for the first time the next morning. You'll never know of the seventeen-year-old, wanting to run away from all the ignorance, hiding your book in their algebra textbook in class. You might even have forgotten yourself, reading the words that shifted your own life, making you feel for the first time like you belonged.

But don't let those fears stop you from speaking your voice. By writing, we invite others to act and live in conviction. To open up to possibilities of action and to the safety of knowing that they are not alone. We can be catalysts for change by introducing and supporting radical ideas, and we strengthen the possibility of equity in human rights for all when we exercise the privilege to speak out. To speak up. You are part of a collective vision. You are not alone. By reaching out, you can reach someone. Just as others have reached out to you, become part of the dissemination system. Become one of the many in this horizontal movement for justice and community. A movement can't grow, deepen, and become more dynamic without every voice giving it shape.

Remember that just as the lives you are fighting for count, yours does too. We are not just bodies. We are voices. So look for those things that sing in your bones. The ideas that ring full in your body. These are worth fighting for. If we stay silent, we take away the chance for someone else to feel empowered to speak out. If we stay silent, injustice continues.

So when you think about activism, remember to write. Remember the power of words being read by anyone, anywhere, at any time. Reclaim this sacred space of soul and structure and use it to tear down the walls and give shape to what is being built in its place. By writing, we speak for the future just as much as we speak for the present. We strengthen the ability to practice our capacity for change.

You have the ability to restructure history, and to give voice to reason, shape to dreams, and hope to cynics. People want to be a part of this; no one should be hopeless, left out, forgotten. So write to re-write history. Write to stand up and shape action. Write for those who have lost hope. Write for those who stay silent. Write for those who can't speak. Write to liberate all of our voices. Write to liberate.

Write.