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Words lie at the heart of poet's worldwide social justice ministry

by Sr. Camille D'Arienzo

Conversations with Sr. Camille

Luke Nephew

Age: 32

Profession: Poet

Lives in: the Bronx, N.Y.

***Sr. Camille:* Luke, a mutual Jesuit friend alerted me to your stupendous talent as a poet and added that this gift is one way you live your faith. Please tell us what that means.**

Nephew: That was generous of him. I am guilty of being a poet. And I think our poems are often our promises. I recently sat on a stoop in Brooklyn to rest my legs. As I sat there in the shade of a huge oak tree, I spoke to an old woman about God. We laughed and debated for an hour. At the end of the conversation, she said, "Yes, God is love in action, but what pushes us into action is words." Exactly. My poetry is my push. It comes from the same place within me that my courage and my compassion live. When words emerge from there, they take the shape of a map. If I rap about the need to stop mass incarceration, then I hear about a protest of solitary confinement or the school-to-prison pipeline, well then, that map tells me right where I need to be.

Can you identify the source of your concern for others?

I was raised by a tradition of Catholicism that is all about compassion leading to this kind of action. That said, my relationship to organized religion has had enormous changes over the years. While I became disillusioned by a hierarchy that abused power and maintained oppressive structures of patriarchy, I could always hold on to the courageous action that was taken by some in the name of their faith. From Jesuit

priests who put their lives on the line to organize and fight for justice to the Missionaries of Charity who dedicate their entire lives to joyfully loving our brothers and sisters who are in severe pain and danger, I have worked with people who live their faith. And so, while my relationship to anything that might happen in Rome faded away long ago, my spiritual and revolutionary practice of love continues to be informed by mentors, teachers and friends who practice Catholicism past the dogma and into the gritty challenges of a world full of war and oppression.

My community of radical Catholics continues to inspire me with acts of generous love, civil disobedience and brave solidarity. It's an honor to offer this community my art.

Please give us an example of what motivates you.

One of the struggles we've been largely engaged in is against torture. As a member of Witness Against Torture, I've offered poems and songs to our protests for years now. Many of the members of WAT are faith-based activists. We are walking and singing our faith. We are using our faith to hold a mirror up to the brothers and sisters in our military and our government. We ask them if they are willing to transform themselves from practitioners of torture to promoters of justice.

Finally, I've been blessed to learn about many different religions, and this has allowed me to practice my "faith." I believe my faith, meaning my spiritual life, transcends the titles and dogmas of organized religions. I was raised Catholic, and the teachings of Jesus are central to how I live my life. I have also found immense guidance and solace in the teachings and practices of Islam and Buddhism. In this way, I'm sure that when I write and teach and struggle and love with the amazing medium of poetry, I'm practicing my faith.

When were you aware of this talent?

When I was younger, I joined a poetry group called Lyrical Circle in a community organization called The Brotherhood/Sister Sol in Harlem. On the first of many Friday nights I spent in this circle, I shared a poem. Those gathered that night were some of the most amazing artists I'd ever heard anywhere. When I finished my piece, the whole group showed me madd love. I figured I might have something worth exploring.

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What is "madd love"?

"Madd" means "a lot."

Did anyone inspire or mentor you?

Yeah, absolutely. I think until today, my biggest inspirations are the other members in my crew, The Peace Poets: Enmanuel Candelario, Frank Antonio Lopez, Frantz Jerome, and Abe Velazquez. Beyond these brothers, there are many more artists and activists that have guided me and helped sculpt my commitment to justice. Daniel Berrigan was a teacher and has become a dear friend who offers a humbling example of consistent love.

Really, there are so many beautiful people in my life who have inspired me to write and fight for dignity. I couldn't possibly name them all now, but what's important, I think, is that they span the range of experiences from rappers like Gameface and the General. I got to know a mother of seven from a *campo*

in Mexico, who is like another mother to me. From the little kids I teach poetry to in the hood to the men I met while I was living in a shelter in the South Bronx. I consider them all inspirations and mentors. They've taught me so much about life and why it's worth struggling for justice.

Can you pinpoint the occasion that set you on this path?

One moment was being in El Mozote, a small village in El Salvador. There, I met a man who years before had arrived at the village the day after 1,100 people were massacred by U.S.-trained special forces. He explained that he had been taught that men don't cry, but that day, they all cried. His voice was like rising water. He slowly and surely made me understand that the United States is an imperial power waging unspeakable violence. I came to see that it was our duty as citizens to do everything in our power to stop the slaughter.

Is it true that you share your love of poetry across cultural divides?

Absolutely. Poetry is just an acknowledgement that within us all are temples full of music that are seducing us into dancing. It doesn't matter where you're from; if the words strike a human chord, you'll dance.

To what places or countries have you brought poetry?

Well, not in this order, but: Bolivia, Paraguay, Brazil, Ecuador, El Salvador, France, Germany, Spain, Italy, Niger, Benin, Togo, Ghana, Liberia, Colombia, Guatemala, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Palestine, Mexico, Kenya, Haiti, Cuba, Argentina, Uruguay, India, Nepal, and Afghanistan.

This is an extraordinary list of destinations for anyone, but especially for someone as young as you. How do you pay for all this traveling?

Well, at first, it was about just saving my dollars little by little. While some people save money for nice sneakers, new clothes or the latest technology, I was wearing old shoes and buying plane tickets. Since I started traveling pretty young, I recognized how passionate about it I was, and I just made it my priority. So ever since I started working, a significant slice of my income went straight into finding a way across another border.

Then something else happened. My travel experience combined with my accomplishments as an artist and educator turned out to be a desirable package. International organizations doing humanitarian work from a cultural perspective began to offer jobs using poetry for peace and justice. I worked with the United Nations, the U.S. Agency for International Development, Save the Children, and others. So over the last seven years, during which I've been to most of the 30 countries listed here, I've been traveling for work. Not a bad flip of the situation, where I once had to save every dime to travel -- now traveling is how I make my dimes. All that said, I will never have enough words to express how grateful I am for the immense privilege that I believe it is to be able to travel.

How do your responders find their own expression?

For me, it's about undefining poetry and reminding ourselves that we're all used to communicating. When we let our expression flow naturally, it's already powerful. When we then play with it, we're exploring poetry. But it's all poetry to me.

How is this sharing an expression of your faith?

Again, my faith is about love in action. If I can use poetry circles to communicate our preciousness and facilitate the building of a space where everybody can drink a little bit of that love we're all so thirsty for, then that right there is the realization of the beloved community, a sacred corner of the kingdom being built by all of us who struggle. That's most definitely an expression of my faith.

What poet or poetry inspires you?

Anaselines Rodriguez, Diamond Brown, Nehanzi Mohohlo, Lupe Fiasco, Kendrick Lamar, Rebel Diaz, Jamila Lyiscott, Tahani Salah, The Peace Poets and all the poetry that stands up beautifully in front of the bulldozer of racism, patriarchy and white supremacy.

Please say something about what you've learned from this exchange and also about the individuals you've encountered and encouraged.

Well, I've learned that if you listen, you will learn. And that no matter how tempting it is to talk or look away or anything else, truly listening and looking with love is transformative in the right direction.

Did you have a favorite influential teacher?

Well, the first people that come to mind are my mother and father. They taught me both love and courage by loving me. I mentioned Father Berrigan as someone who through direct action invited me to live a life of honest committed resistance to violence and injustice. And I have to say that I truly consider all of the thousands of students that I've had over the years all my teachers.

Who are the important people in your life today?

My partner, my crew, my family, and all the beautiful people in the movement who I also embrace as my family. Important isn't strong enough. Each of them is precious.

From where or whom do you draw inspiration?

Really, everywhere and anywhere. Anyone and everyone, especially my comrades in the struggle for dignity, peace and justice. I see and feel our struggle to be so beautiful that the countless stories of people within the movement always inspire me to work harder, fight louder and wear my gratitude as visibly as possible.

Do you have a favorite Scripture passage?

Yes, it's from the Quran. It reminds us that one has not truly believed until he desires for his brother what he desires for himself. This scripture always reminds me that I must constantly keep walking toward true belief because Lord knows the journey is long.

How do you pray?

By breathing and listening. I pray before and after I eat. I pray when I wake up and before I sleep. I pray by smiling and by singing. I sit at the kitchen table in the morning and ask a question, inhale, exhale, and write what comes out.

How do you relax?

I play fútbol in the Mexican leagues in the Bronx. I play the guitar loud when nobody's home. I freestyle.

I cook. But truth be told, I'm calm but not relaxed. I'm always thinking of work needing to be done. That said, I don't know if I want to relax.

What gives you joy?

Seeing my partner when I wake up in the morning. Tacos. Kids everywhere. Knowing that we will win because every act of love that affirms dignity is a victory so monumental that no words can suffice in celebrating it. Chilling with my best friends. Listening to my father tell stories. Dancing. Successfully convincing activists to sing instead of scream. Hearing my students celebrate and amaze each other. Eating *tres golpes* with my brothers. Walking through cities alone. Swimming. Talking to strangers on the train. Hearing my mother laugh. Interrupting business as usual. Kindness. People passionate about street art. Street art. Rooftops. Questions that 7-year-olds ask about art. Latin American protest music. Salsa. Hugs. Listening to my elders tell stories. Working hard. Getting off work. And seeing my partner at the end of the day.

What saddens you?

Mostly cowardice. Then laziness. And prisons. And how beautiful people are destroyed within them. And decent people are destroyed working in them. And devious people are profoundly destroyed on a spiritual level by profiting from them. Yup, prisons sadden me. Including all the prisons within capitalism that go by different names -- exploitative labor practices, individual and institutional racism, machismo and misogyny, domestic violence and materialism.

I'm saddened when I see people perform music on the train and nobody applauds. I'm saddened when mothers smack their kids because they were smacked as kids and nobody on the train is going to say a damn word about it because they're not their kids except they are their kids because we are all obviously family and the baby is crying not just because her face hurts but because she doesn't understand why she is being hit and you are watching her learn to do what your favorite student got suspended for last week because we learn violence. And violence saddens me. And my own pride and ignorance sadden me. And even though I think the sentiment is closer to outrage, racists sadden me because ignorance is contagious, and that's depressing. And some days ending on a happy note really saddens me because it doesn't feel real, and one thing I know that's sad for sure is being fake.

What else would you like us to know?

Well, I'd like you to know that I love you, just in case nobody told you that today.

Thank you, Luke, for that and much more.

[Mercy Sr. Camille D'Arienzo, broadcaster and author, narrates *Stories of Forgiveness*, a book about people whose experiences have caused them to consider the possibilities of extending or accepting forgiveness. The audiobook, renamed *Forgiveness: Stories of Redemption*, is available from Now You Know Media.]

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