

Writing for Reconciliation: A Musing

bell hooks

One of the questions most frequently asked me as a writer is whether I think writing is healing, whether I believe writing has a therapeutic dimension.¹ Clearly, writing can be a dynamic and powerful means of self-interrogation, which can be therapeutic. However, there is no recovery or healing without reconciliation. When we begin, in whatever dimension of our lives, to seek to reconcile, we enter a domain where there is conflict, tension, denial. Writing is that place of sanctuary where all can be revealed, exposed, acknowledged.

Reconciliation enables us to move toward the place where we feel damaged and broken. It allows us to take the bits and pieces of the heart and put them together again. Memory and re-membering are essential to the process of reconciliation. Often, we remember to forget. Writing the autobiographical memoir of my girlhood, *Bone Black*, allowed me to come to terms with my childhood in a deep, psychoanalytic way, one that was liberating. Once those memories were down on paper and made into a book, I no longer felt obsessed with them. I no longer felt the need to revisit them. Significantly, healing came because I was bearing witness, bringing the memories out of the dark into the light.

Anytime we “confess” in a public context, reconciliation becomes communal. It engages us in a practice of mutuality. Time and time again, I hear from readers that I am writing their childhood, their pain, and their hope. Thus the process of reconciliation becomes circular, moving from the self into greater community.

No matter the circumstance, time, or distance, reconciliation is always possible. Since much of my recent work has been on the topic of love, I have found it useful to see reconciliation as a transformative practice. All that we reconcile opens our hearts and therefore makes it possible for us to love more fully and deeply.

At our June 2006 conference on writing for reconciliation, we all wrote about a topic that we all are struggling to reconcile ourselves to: that was the issue of death. As writers, we gathered and read aloud our thoughts about facing death. Listening to one another’s insightful, sad, funny musings created among us a powerful sense of the dynamic connection between writing and reconciliation. Late into the night I could hear the mutual give and take of our words—the sounds of deep listening. They entered my dreams like a kind of music—luring, inviting me to sleep with the certainty that death will one day surely come. And that, when it does, I can call out, greeting death tenderly—with complete reconciliation. ☹

¹This musing grew out of the AEPL Summer Conference in Berea, Kentucky, June 2006, at which bell hooks was the keynote speaker.

International intellectual and scholar, bell hooks is the author of more than 25 books. Her analysis of national politics and policies focuses on race, class, and gender. Recent publications include The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity and Love, and We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity. She is also the author of several children’s books, including Happy to be Nappy and Be BoyBuzz. Currently a Distinguished Professor in Residence at Berea College, hooks has taught literature, women’s studies, and African American studies at Yale University, Oberlin College, and City College of New York.