

Book Review: Changing Harm to Harmony

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Book Review: Changing Harm to Harmony

Dave Seter

This reviewer met up with Joseph Zaccardi, editor of a new collection on the subject of bullies and bystanders, at one of his hangouts in Marin County—Aroma Café—to discuss the collection. At the time of our conversation Joseph was nearing the end of his two year term as Marin County’s Poet Laureate. His own published works include: *Vents* (Pancake Press, 2005); *Render* (Poetic Matrix Press, 2009); and *The Nine Gradations of Light* (Bark for Me Publications, 2013).

In *Changing Harm to Harmony* Joseph collected 104 written works (mostly poems) by 85 individuals (four of whom chose to publish their work without attribution). In choosing the title for the collection he pondered the similarity between the words “harm” and “harmony” within the context of their origins. From his introduction to the collection:

“harm comes to us from the Old English, meaning grief, sorrow, and physical injury, while harmony, a much older word, comes from Latin, meaning a joining. My goal then was to find a way to change what I believe is harmful to both perpetrator and victim: to bring about a harmonious interaction between two words whose meanings have no basis for comparison.”

Given Joseph’s interest in etymology, and given he was born in New Jersey and now lives in California, I asked him whether word choice is similar for the two cultures. He described the New Jersey communication style as “blunt.” In contrast, he said he’s heard Californians called “too polite.” He gave as an example the simple transaction of a smoker borrowing a match, which in New Jersey might be phrased: “Can I steal a match?” This is language at its most direct. At times blunt and at times indirect, the writing in this collection demonstrates bullying transcends boundaries; not only geographically but also in terms of human relationships where a line can be crossed even among friends and family.

A Review of Selected Works from the Anthology:

“Looked at Him” (Gerald Fleming)

The lead-in poem to the collection challenges the reader to pay attention to the nuances of words. Subtle in its description of a bully reaching out later in life to a victim, the poem describes the childhood encounter:

In high school he picked a fight with a kid he knew he could beat. What had the kid done? Not a thing. Looked at him.

The bully sends the victim a note:

... “Not a year has gone by I have not thought of that day. It makes me feel so bad.”

The victim responds:

“I see that you have not changed a bit.”

This thought ends the poem. Left to ponder the victim’s reaction, the reader backtracks over the lines and comes to understand the bully’s words are not exactly an apology, merely a reflection on how he felt as bully. He does not ask how the victim feels.

“Fat Kid” (Peter Schmitt)

This poem is written from the point of view of the school friend of a heavy-set seventh grader named Sid. The reader of the poem meets the two friends as they play together in the school band. Sid takes a playground beating from a bully, a preordained event of school life. Though Sid and the speaker of the poem remain friends their relationship isn’t without discord:

We learned instruments, we rode the bus.
His mother, who might have outweighed her son,
kept to the cool back rooms of their dark house.
But she had to be glad to see him with friends,
even ones like me—as I would kid him too,
once in a while—and he would punch me,
hard in the arm, because it wasn’t all right,

and he’d make damned sure at least somebody knew.

The friend serves as an outlet for Sid to fight back and the reader is invited to reconsider the nature of friendship.

“Not Me” (Rose Black)

This poem explores the bystander relationship within the family context of brother/sister. The sister is five years old to her bullied brother’s nine. At summer day camp, waiting for the bus home, the pair is surrounded by a group of boys. They insult the brother, calling him “freak,” “sissy,” and “kike.” When the mob asks the sister whether her brother is stupid she shakes her head to say yes. She explains why:

I chose their side so nothing bad would happen. But I wasn’t on the

side I belonged. When it began to rain, the big boys left, my brother shaking, and everything got quiet.

Ending on the word “quiet,” the poem reinforces the extent to which acts of bullying are hushed. The sister at five years old would understandably feel threatened by a mob of older boys yet the pain of her act of denial is acute.

“White and Black, Black and White” (Matheus Carvalho)

This poem speaks to the duality of love and hate while dancing above that ground, suggesting our positions and even lives are provisional. To the extent the poem can be interpreted literally (its narrative is non-linear) it speaks to racial conflict. The speaker of the poem is native to Brazil and an immigrant to the United States. He speaks of his love and hate for the two nations:

I hate America where I'm black not white where whites
Love being white and blacks love being black I hate

Crime and rats and black men beating black men white
Men stopping turning from black men walking this way that way

Victims of bullying can feel a lack of belonging, or specifically a forcible exclusion through words or acts by their peers. This poem seems to ask indirectly whether we all have both the bully and victim inside of us.

“To the editor or to whom it may concern” (Teddy McLaren)

In Joseph Zaccardi's introduction to the collection he explains his intention to represent various points of view. This letter is perhaps the most pointed example of that. The writer, self-titled veteran and voter, expresses skepticism for the value of a collection on bullying, and deep skepticism as to whether his work would be included. He writes:

... I'm a retired autoworker, a union man through and through, and
I know fighters win, wimps lose....

This suggests the fortitude to resist and overcome bullying comes from within. Although this piece thematically cuts against the grain, the collection would seem incomplete without it.

“Running River” (Kimiko Shiro)

The last poem in the collection was written by a high school student. It speaks to an undercurrent of hope in the human spirit. Acknowledging the dark side to human relationships and referencing human mortality, the poet writes:

The hands of a clock slowly move forward
Scratching deep wounds into our sorrowful souls

The poem however seeks to mitigate the toughness of human nature through the outlet of the natural world:

Even though the trail might be hard
Full of many turns
Painful waterfalls
And many selfish people
There is always a calm ocean to comfort you

It's interesting that the poet chooses to portray the ocean as calm when it could as easily be described as violent. Such is the duality of human nature and the natural world.

When asked about the reception of the book so far, Joseph Zaccardi remarked that students and teachers in particular have called the collection "real." Readers unfamiliar with poetry have appreciated the inclusion of prose and the accessibility of the collection as a whole. If the best art is said to provoke reaction, this book is succeeding.

In his introduction to the collection, Joseph paraphrases Wendell Berry (poet, essayist, and agrarian) regarding environmental disrepair: If you think there is only one answer, then you are implying that there is only one question. In this context, in our conversation Joseph talked about the Carvalho and McLaren poems (discussed above). In the case of the Carvalho poem he struggled over whether to include it: what would readers think of its language of love and hate? And yet, he observed: what a beautiful coincidence that this taxi driver and poet ended up in Philadelphia—the City of Brotherly Love.

As a whole the collection completes its own narrative arc: first asking us to consider the nuance of language and how we choose our words in speaking to one another; navigating territory of belonging and exclusion; and finally concluding with a poem of healing. Changing harm to harmony will require more than just words but this collection proves words are some of the best tools we have.

When I told a friend I was thinking of writing this review, she gave me a copy of *Changing Harm to Harmony*: a harmonious interaction between two people. Now in that spirit of

harmony as I sit in a café reading the collection I want someone to look over my shoulder and say: “When you’re done, can I steal that book?”

Dave Setzer is a civil engineer and poet. His poems have recently appeared in *Evansville Review* and *The Mackinac* and are forthcoming in *Asheville Poetry Review* and *Paterson Literary Review*. His chapbook *Night Duty* was published in 2010 by Main Street Rag Publishing Company. He is currently enrolled in the MA in Humanities Program at Dominican University of California.