

Spiritual Archery

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As I trace back through my memory, I've never wanted to be a writer. But I have always loved listening attentively to stormy weather while safely tucked in bed, reading a good book. Once I dreamed of traveling all over the world and becoming a magician.

It may sound very strange, but for five years, from when I was twenty to twenty-five I never went out of my room. I had failed an entrance examination for a university, and couldn't get a job. I had nowhere to go. But worse, my immediate concern was the fact that I didn't know what I wanted to do and what I wanted to be. That was the most serious problem in my entire life. So I tried to find an answer in my own room. That was how I started reading books, every minute, every hour for five years. That was quite a long time. That was my "bloom of youth," feeling dejected and frustrated most of the time. I had no job, no friends, and no pride. I felt inferior to others. Extremely fat, I was a semi-derelict. But I strongly believed that everyone has a talent all their own within them.

When I was about twenty-three, I began to hear tender and determined voices from books and from deep inside of me at the same time. The voices were telling me that I wanted to write poems. Fortunately, this advice turned out to be the most valuable of my life. I started university at the age of twenty-six. One day one of my professors, who was a well-known poet, persuaded me to write a novel instead of poems. I think that a great writer must also be a great teacher. I thought that writing fiction was a bit against my destiny. I still believe that a great book shows you the way to a greater life.

In 1996, as a twenty eight year old undergraduate, I debuted as a fiction writer. That same year my first novel, *'Time for Baking Bread'*, won the 1st Literary Community New Writer's Award. Suddenly, I became famous. So, was it the happiest day of my whole life? Was that why I had been losing weight?

I know that I was happy, but only for ten minutes. And then I didn't know what to do, what to write, how to write any more. It was so lamentable that I was already addressed as a writer without ever having thought about why I write what I write. I realized I was completely lost and that I didn't know which way to go. I read my first novel over and over again, but it wouldn't live up to my expectations and I thought it wasn't my 'own' novel. I felt as if it was a mere imitation of the styles and forms of the other writers which I had read. Sometimes, I had a nightmare in which I burned all the books in the world. I remember how scared stiff I was. I was really devastated and ashamed of myself. But, those times were very precious in that I speculated a lot about the meaning of my literary life and writing characteristics. It wasn't easy at all to think about why I wrote and what I wrote. These were difficult questions for me to answer. But when I look back on those days, I realize I was happy more than ever. I was serious and earnest about my literary life.

Have you ever had a supernatural experience? Sometimes, I feel an additional presence between people or I hear extra voices. Actually, I'm very interested in the presence of things unseen. Michelle Victor once said that "a fiction writer is someone who notices the whispering of things unseen and listens to that whispering in order to make a sentence." Now, I have come to know what he means. It took a long time though. I'm just a scribe and a bridge between here and there, the world that is seen and the world that is unseen. I'm waiting for some presence to speak to me, sometimes purposelessly. I don't like making stories that embellish and exaggerate or ones that use force and technique. In Asia, if one really wishes to be a master of an art such as archery, one must be able to embrace the spiritual part of the art that exists beyond the technique.

Where does writing come from?

A few years ago, I began to see trees in my dreams. I felt as if the trees wanted to tell me their stories and sadness. At first, I just turned away from their faces and voices. But the trees appeared in my dreams over and over. I couldn't sleep very well for a long time. I remember that my face became dark and gaunt at that time. I supplicated to trees in my dream, "Please, stop bothering me, please!" At that time a tree was just tree for me. One day, I met one of my friends who is a painter. We went to a restaurant and met the owner of the restaurant for the first time. As it turned out, the owner knew my friend's first lover. He revealed to us that her lover had killed himself four years ago. I didn't know that she had never forgotten him. She burst out weeping unceasingly. At that moment I thought of the trees in my dreams. I thought about trees and studied about trees. Eventually, I realized that trees existed on this ground long ago, part of a wood that provided shelter for people. Legend has it that trees have the ability to communicate with one another. Even if they are separated by large distances, trees can signal each other. I believe that people have the ability to communicate with one another in the same way. I wrote a new short novel, '*Simultaneously*'. In this novel, I used trees as a symbol for people. And I've never dreamt about trees since then.

Why do I write? It is an inevitable question for all writers. I think about this question differently today than I would have nine years ago when I started writing. I'm not sure that for some it isn't an act of seduction, or motivated by glory, or praise, or money. But for me, what is it? I eagerly want to know, but I've never succeeded in solving this question. Sometimes I feel I am at the end of my tether. But I don't want to discard this question. I hope, in fact, that it will be the centripetal force in my life. Writing is like a birthmark on my back. I wouldn't give up this spiritual archery for all of the world. Because I'm fragile, I always need something to fall back on. I'm nothing without writing. But, if I were to be born again, I wouldn't choose to be a writer. It is an extreme hardship as well.