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As told to Emma Cohen, 2616 words.

Tags: Writing, Adversity, Education, Process.

On viewing your work as part of a larger conversation

Writer, broadcaster, and academic Octavia Bright discusses spirals as important symbols, pushing through denial, and literary inheritance and community.

The spiral is a big part of your book, both in a structural sense, but also in a symbolic sense. The volcano [in Stromboli which you visit] appears throughout the book narratively and symbolically. Do symbols rise naturally from your writing, or are they touchstones that you bring into something you're working on?

I'm very symbol oriented, I've always been naturally drawn to patterns. Visual symbols are important. Also, for my sins, I'm deeply superstitious about certain things, inherited from my mother's line. They're from the West Country in England, which is a very superstitious part of the country. Saluting at magpies and things like that. There is something folkloric about it. I am someone who's interested in levels of consciousness that evade our day-to-day, front of mind way of being. The part of the brain that is more open to spiritual connections and more able to be in touch with the natural world, planetary world. I think the spiral is such a beautiful symbol—the perfect ratio, the divine ratio, you see it in seashells...

The Fibonacci sequence?

That sounds right.

The pine cone.

Exactly. And whirlpools and tornadoes. The spiral is a naturally occurring symbol. It came into the book when I was thinking about how I was going to structure the story. I knew I was going to write about recovery in the context of my addiction recovery, and my father [and his experience with Alzheimer's]. If you think of the central point of the spiral [in the book] as the word 'recovery', I was going in one direction and he was going in another direction. And so this idea of us both spinning, but one of us was tightening and one of us was loosening, felt like a good centrifugal force for the way that the book was going to be structured. And then I found the Louise Bourgeois quote that became the epigraph.

["The spiral is an attempt at controlling the chaos. It has two directions. Where do you place yourself, at the periphery or at the vortex? Beginning at the outside is the fear of losing control; the winding in is a tightening, a retreating, a compacting to the point of disappearance. Beginning at the center is affirmation, the move outward is a representation of giving, and giving up control; of trust, positive energy, of life itself."]

It was one of those moments of creative bliss where you're like, I'm on the right path. Suddenly it gave the whole project this kind of organizing principle.

And with the volcano, I always knew I would have to write about it. And as I was writing, I was thinking, why is this so potent? Of course, we have very strong evocative memories of places that are out of the ordinary, and a volcano is pretty out of the ordinary. But then I thought of the volcano as a symbol for the addict, for the addictive personality, if you want to call it that. A volcano can be erupting or it can be dormant, but it can never be disposed of. So that felt like a very useful metaphor. And one of the things I was trying to do in the book was to write about the experience of addiction in a way that would make it intelligible to people who don't experience it. Because that's something that I found really

interesting as I got sober and stayed sober, was that there were people out there who really didn't know what I was talking about.

I'm curious about your relationship to magical realism. When I was reading the passages with Wormtongue, which is the name that you give to-how would you describe it? An inner voice that's a critic?

Yeah. The negative introject.

There was something interesting to me about the way that you use a formal element of magical realism. It reminded me of *The Master and Margarita*, or Calcifer from *Howl's Moving Castle*. This non-human companion or presence. And it was really interesting to me because obviously the book itself is not magical realism. It's a memoir. Is magical realism a form you engage with, and how do you think genre bending can bring out a sense of reality?

The Master and Margarita is one of my favorite novels of all time, and I love work that kind of gets to have it all.

For me, one of the reasons I love magical realism so much is because I think it's kind of true to how I experience the world. I do think that if you have a mind that's open to things like seeing symbols or noticing moments of weirdness, the slippages in the everyday, then that's a mode of writing that makes a lot of sense to you. And I think it's also very true to the experience of being in active alcoholism, because your grip on reality slips and you end up in this place where you're in an altered state, so you're in a kind of altered reality. And then it applied very much to my father when he was in the midpoint of his Alzheimer's where he was hallucinating and he was in the present and the past at the same time, or he was straight up time traveling.

In terms of Wormtongue as a formal device, the decision to include it really began as a way of being faithful to my experience at the time. I was in this constant dialogue with this other voice in my mind, and when I was structuring the book and trying to work out how to explain what that was like, it was very dry to just describe it. And one of the books that really, really helped me understand how to do it was this phenomenal memoir called *Blueberries* by Ellena Savage. I don't know if you've come across that?

I actually have it on my shelf right there.

It's a fabulous book. So you know the first essay where she has those two internal voices disputing with the narrator's voice. Reading that I was like, oh, of course. Of course, he can be there on the page. I just need to put him on the page, because I could hear him in my head. I'm going to make the reader hear him in their head too.

And what I really wanted to show in the book, and it was actually one of the things that was the hardest to try to get right, was the Jungian idea of integration. Jung says that the path to a kind of, let's say, mental stability, is integration, and that we all have the self and the shadow self. So Wormtongue is a version of the shadow self, a version of the id, a version of the addictive personality. My experience of what recovery offered and what therapy offered was learning to live with this internal voice, slow integration. And I wanted to show in the pages of the book what that might feel like.

If this next question is a bit of a jump, just let me know...

Do it. Do it.

You write throughout the book about blackouts, denial, memory loss, and you're mostly writing about it in relationship to addiction and Alzheimer's. I was thinking about how you put this in a restorative framework. You write about Simone Weil's concept of accepting the void, a turn away from linear thinking towards the spiral or the ouroboros.

And I was wondering-and this is where the jump happens-if these modes of personal consciousness that you're exploring in the book could map onto a wider cultural or political consciousness. It made me think of [Jenny Offill's concept of] "twilight knowing," and the way that we're culturally avoiding, denying, blacking out things from our memory, the climate crisis, or political histories and realities, for example. I wonder if these restorative frameworks you bring up in the book could apply there too?

I think there's a question throughout the book of: how useful is denial? Can we ever really avoid it? I think the answer to that is no, but denial is a psychological mechanism that's designed to protect you. It's just that if you get stuck in it, it becomes a problem. I think when we're thinking about huge global problems that politicians and generally the population are being robustly in denial about, some people are trying to burst the denial, and when you poke someone's denial, they often respond in anger.

Denial is already a psychological defense, then if you add more defensiveness on top of defense, you just get an impenetrable wall. So the reparative, restorative way of dealing with it, I think, is to apply radical empathy to the process and say, of course, we're in denial. It is so frightening not to be. When I first got sober and when I first was told that I was probably dealing with alcoholism rather than manic depression or any of the other things I imagined for myself, my initial response was to be very angry with myself, for not realizing. And the only way that I would be able to accept recovery was to let go of that anger and accept that the denial was part of the process. If we approach that denial with a lot of gentleness and a lot of compassion, then maybe we can help each other come through it.

You have this line, "Acceptance meant knowing and mystery was important to me." I really agree with this idea of mystery as important. And I was really interested in the tension that you set up there. How can one still cultivate a sense of mystery without being in denial or avoiding reality?

Mystery is exciting, it's creatively inspiring and interesting. And I had this total misconception that to be in reality meant I would never experience mystery again. When actually it was that I would no longer be living in fantasy. And that's not the same. Reality contains plenty of mystery. Love is a great mystery. Nature is a great mystery. The cosmos are a mystery. You pull back enough layers and fundamentally at the heart of it, you find a mystery.

Mystery is not the same as fantasy. Fantasy is in opposition to reality. Mystery is contained within reality. Fantasy is about control. Mystery is about having no control at all. And that's quite a subtle distinction that it took me a long time to understand. That's another spiral, isn't it? Fantasy and mystery: one is a spiral tightening, and the other one is a spiral letting go.

When you relinquish the fantasy version of yourself, the fantasy version of your own life, you can reckon with the fundamental mystery contained within the reality of who you are. And then you learn how to accept it and live with it. And then you learn how to listen to—whether you call it intuition, whether you call it self, I don't know, but there is something else there. There's that other voice basically, the part of the self that is knowledgeable.

I loved [your NTS show/podcast] Literary Friction. You've done so much interviewing in your career. What's your relationship with interviewing and what compels you to return to that form of conversation?

With *Literary Friction* specifically, the most amazing thing about it was that it meant that I had to read outside of my comfort zone. You really don't know what's possible in text until you encounter it.

One of my favorite things in life is to have good conversations. I wish it could be my only job, like writing and then just talking, that would be my dream. Because I think that what is magical and mysterious about conversation is that ideas are brought into being in dialogue. I guess I'm a classic Grecian philosopher in this respect, but I really believe in the Socratic method. I love it as an endlessly varied form of making thought a collaborative experience.

On the show, sometimes the conversations we had off-air were even more helpful. Hearing about how [writers] structured their lives, how they made things work, how they related to their work, all of that. It was finding community, I guess. And also it made a lot of things feel normal, like the idea that writing is difficult. When you see someone like Maggie Nelson, whose work I admire hugely, saying writing is really difficult, in her voice, you're like, *I believe you*. And if you find this hard, then the fact that I find this hard doesn't mean I'm bad at it. It just means it's legitimately a difficult thing to do. And there is great value in pursuing that difficulty.

Deborah Levy and Olivia Laing both blurbed your book, and I love both of those writers, and they both have written in a sort of experimental or unconventional memoir genre. I don't know that they would refer to their books as memoir necessarily, but they are pulling from life and writing about themselves. Do you think about your writing as part of a lineage? What do you think of mentorship or inheritance?

I think about that a lot, and I think that's partly also from my academic training. I was an academic first, which for me was definitely a shadow career.

Writers like Olivia Laing and Deborah Levy and Maggie Nelson, they all in their different ways use the kind of text-based work that I learned how to do as an academic in a totally non-academic framework, in this way that breaks down the ivory tower. When I was in university, I loved the teaching and I loved the learning, but the thing I couldn't bear was the pomposity of keeping this all closed off. I think if you've got interesting, important things to say, you should be able to say them in language that anyone can understand. And that's what I really admire and respect so much in those other authors' work.

The other thing about coming up through a master's and a PhD is you learn that no idea is original. One of the skills you're learning as an academic is how to always place yourself in a lineage of thinkers and movements of thought or territories of learning. And so I carried that instinctively over into my writing. So in this book, there are lots of quotations from other authors, whether as epigraphs or whether they're discussed actually in the text. And by and large, they are all people who I hope to be a descendant of, in terms of their way of thinking or writing or interrogating. It's a way of saying, I'm not the first person to think about this. It's a difficult thing to balance in nonfiction writing, where you need to write with authority, but I really shy away from that very totalizing way of talking about the world. Thinking of one's ideas as existing within a lineage of thought is a way of saying, this is a perspective and it's been shaped by these other perspectives. Here it is. I'm offering it up to you, see what you make of it.

Octavia Bright recommends:

Any of Helen Garner's diaries on audiobook, read by the author

All Fours by Miranda July

Roasted aubergine with tahini yogurt and herbs

Judy Chicago's Revelations (the exhibition at Serpentine North and the book)

All the Beauty and the Bloodshed (a film about Nan Goldin's life, art and activism)

Name

Octavia Bright

Vocation

writer, broadcaster, academic

Fact

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