

On the power of showing up and speaking your truth



Poet Aja Monet discusses finding language in what you've lived, art as a form of service, the oral tradition as a way to live forever, and being drawn to wordlessness.

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As told to Mark "Frosty" McNeill, 2753 words.

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When did you first realize that words could make a powerful impact?

My grandmother, she's a santera but I gravitated towards the church because I knew that there was something deeply spiritual about the way I saw the world as a young girl. I was always into other realms and curious about magic, and the power of the spirit. And prayer was a really big thing for me. So, I would say my first real relationship to understanding the power of language was really in relationship to the church. And maybe not so much the church, but at least the Bible, "In the beginning was the Word." And growing up in New York, understanding that your word is your bond. That used to be the slogan of the time, "Word is bond." All those things were a part of my upbringing.

Culturally, as a Black woman in the world, your word has always had weight in terms of one's capacity to tell the truth. Standing by what words you offer and also, the ability of words to offer new ideas or to speak goodness over someone, to transform and heal. I knew that prayer was a big part of spell casting and magic making, and if one prayed powerfully enough... I grew up in churches where the women who prayed could change the course of one's life with the power of the words that they spoke over you. So, I was always aware that language and the marriage of voice and intent and vibration, that all of those things went hand in hand. They were never separate. That's been my orientation in the world and it's followed me everywhere. It's a big part of why I can't see language as just something that belongs on the page. It is alive, a breathing thing. That's a bit of where my relationship to the power of language comes from.

Did you start to play with words and the craft of actively shaping them early on?

I don't think I gravitated towards the craft of the words as much as I did the energy and the sound of what was being said. And then, I started to listen more intently to what was being said, and how someone could say something in a way that could move you and truly touch your heart. I liked the oral tradition and just gravitated towards it, whether that was with music or elders talking in the kitchen, gossiping, and laughing. I was the nosy kid that wanted to learn more, to hear more.

One of the most visceral stories that shaped me very much was when I was a young girl, my mom used to leave me with this woman who babysat me—my godmother's grandmother. She was an old woman and she loved having me around. There's that relationship between the child and the elder that's always been unique. Spending time with her was so important for me because she would take me with her to the senior citizen community center and here I am, four or five years old, just enamored and amazed by elders. And these old folks would love to talk to me. I mean, they would talk my head off. And what did I know about anything they were saying? They would tell me stories about

going to war, and their first marriage, and their second marriage. Here I am, this little kid that can't fathom how these people can hold all the stories that they have in their heads, and I just remember being in awe. And I remember, viscerally, that being something I wanted to do. I remember naming that, "Wow, one day, I want to be able to hold that many stories in my head."

I think I gravitated towards people's relationship to the oral tradition because I knew that the oral tradition was a way for us to live forever, that somehow, in that experience of telling stories we were transcending this moment in space and time, and that in the stories is where we live. I found safety in storytelling, and I gravitated towards the greatest storytellers of my life. Any elder that I could come across that could tell a story, I would sit at their feet in awe. And that's a big relationship to why I write or create. Maybe if my mom had more money and could have afforded to pay those clarinet lessons and piano ... Maybe that would have been the way I would have told stories, but a pen and paper is a poor man's art, right? You don't need much, just you and your imagination. The most consistent medium in my life was the voice, pen, and paper. Those mediums were always around me so I could always lean on them. It can alter the way you see the world, and I want to do that. I want to make people feel the way words make me feel.

Storytelling keeps the fabric of the inter-generational continuum together. It sounds like you were an early deep-listener, which is not something everyone is good at but it's very powerful. What do you tap into and access from past generations to bring forward into the next?

I learned how to listen very young, realizing that part of learning from life was to look at those who've come before and just being intrigued by that. It was like every elder I met, they were always reflecting and had a way of being like, "Be as present as you can. You better make the most of life because you never know."

Black folks, I think we've always had a relationship to our mortality. This isn't to be judgmental, but I do think there's more propaganda around whiteness and western society being fascinated with immortality in the stories and traditions. And I think from my history as African and Black tradition, we eat death for breakfast on Tuesday. I have a line in one of my poems, "Death is a cousin, or a family member you didn't know until you meet." And so, I think it's just one of those things that, for me, when you talk about your elders and when you talk about listening to your elders, I think it's about having a sense of humility and grace that there are those who have come before us who have endured and suffered and dreamed and imagined and loved and thought us up. And so, it is our obligation to be in service to that. To learn whatever there is to know so that we can take those things and create something else, and imagine and dream something else up, but informed by our relationship to our ancestors, our genetic memory, and the legacy that we follow in. Time is not linear, but it's a way of being, an all-encompassing approach to one's breath and life and existence. I listen to my ancestors when I write and I look forward to the day I can be that sort of elder for someone else.

There's a zoomed-out awareness of the inter-relationship between generations, but there's also micro-awareness of the moment. You recently wrote on Twitter, "How you respond in times of crisis or difficulty, that's who you are." Can you unpack that a little?

You learn who someone is in moments of trial and difficulty. I think that how you respond in those moments is a huge way of seeing what you value, what you care about, and who you are at your core. It doesn't mean that we don't falter. Let's say you're good friends with someone and they lose their mom or have a nervous breakdown and they don't know how to be a friend to you. Who you are in those moments of difficulty is what makes that friendship meaningful. It's how you show up for each other that I think shows where someone's heart is. It doesn't mean that we don't change, and it doesn't mean that we don't learn things that push us to be better and grow, but for me, I've learned the most about the people in my life when things have gotten hard.

A big part of my measure of one's capacity to love me is how they show up for me when I am least lovable, when things are extremely difficult and we don't know where or how to move forward. That doesn't mean that you have all the answers in those moments, but whether you continue to be present and to love in times of difficulty, I think, is the measure of someone's heart. Those moments are informative. I think there's a personal aspect to that, and then, there's the political reality of where we are as a country, as a people. How do we take responsibility for who we are in the moments of difficulty and moments of heartbreak and harm. Who do we choose

to be? And I think that says a lot about who we are.

There's a beautiful line in one of your pieces, "I know I don't like money. I only want it to buy mangoes, and cinnamon, and rice, and water, and a place to live, and bathe, and love, and raise growing things." Challenging times reinforce the truth that community is more important than money and by fortifying a community means that when you really need it, it can really be there powerfully. How important is the coexistence of a social practice with your artistic practice?

I'm a part of the many voices in the air, I'm a reflection. I'm introspective about that often. I also have to be honest with where my limitations are. What are the things that I struggle with, as a person who's been culturally shaped by this society? I have to talk about and question my individual wants. Some of it is superficial, "I might want to decorate my room this way, so let me get this cool fabric." And that might seem not important, but those are the things that the artist in me gravitates towards, the ways to beautify spaces around me, and to believe that the pursuit of beauty is valuable and worthy, especially in the time of revolution and uprising, has always been my struggle. To believe that I am worthy of beauty, even as I suffer the ugly around me, has been part of my journey in this time. And to organize around that beauty, to believe that it is worth fighting for has been a big thing. I don't believe in art for art's sake in some ways, but I do believe in creative freedom and artistic freedom.

I think as we learn to create a world where it's more free and just we are going to have to constantly be in negotiation with one another around our shared values and how do we all participate so that this can be a more equitable society. And then, we're each taking on the role of changing this society around us. I think art is where we struggle with ideas. It's where we think through, imagine, and create what we want to see. When all else fails, I go to my art because that's where the depth is for me, that's where the nuance and the complication is for me, and that's where things are less black and white, right and wrong, good or evil. That's where I can be my most full, complicated self. Art is not a place of just window dressing. It's a place where one becomes more critical and thinks through the importance of being here and the purpose of sharing with one another, creating with one another, and developing campaigns and ideas out of those questions, out of that struggle, is where art is made.

I find in moments of uprising or upheaval in society and communities, art is the way that I can be of service. The same way we need to find ways to provide housing and affordable healthcare and food, we need to provide soul. Soul is a food too. Spirit is a food too. These are things that human beings need to survive. If one's mental health, spiritual health, is not in good standing, then what is a meal? What is a house? If I cannot sustain myself, if living here is not worth living, then what is it all worth? Art forces us to think about how we feed that quest for purpose, meaning, depth, and connection. It's healing. It's my way of practicing self-determination. I always say we are the stories we tell ourselves. And so, I think that I'm interested in what new stories we want to create. How do we tell the truth about the moments we live? For so long the lie has become the norm, and we have found a way to make it so that everyone has believed the lie, and people are sick off of eating lies.

And so, I think that we're in an incredible place in this country, in this moment, in this world, to start to tell the truth to each other about who we are and why we're here, and to really connect, to do the work and provide for each other. We have everything we need. I want to find ways in every instance to provide more beauty and abundance to all people.

That's beautiful and important. In closing, I have a question posed by our mutual friend Def Sound, "How do you access the vocabulary of the vulnerable?"

I personally have not found language for things I have not lived. And so, in the living, I start to find the words. The words come to me. And in being of service to my experience and to the experience of those I love around me, I start to find a language for that., and I think vulnerability has to come from a deep place of love and care for one's self, and therein, by extension, those around oneself. When you are vulnerable, you start to create more space for others to be vulnerable around you, and that happens vice versa. When we witness someone being vulnerable, I think it gives us permission to be vulnerable in a way, and we start to learn the language of

that.

As someone who is working with women all over the world and thinking about how we really challenge and grapple with patriarchy, I think when more men start to find the language for their own vulnerability and see that in women as a strength and as a source of power and wisdom, then it will become contagious and it will permeate everything because, then, we are all giving ourselves permission to show up deeply with one another.

And so, I look forward to that place and I'm learning. I think every day we are working through this existence together, and every day, I'm trying to be better at showing up in the world more deeply and in a vulnerable place, and I have to be that in order to find the language for it. Part of what I find words for is when I'm listening deeply in my breath, and in my being, and in my way of moving in the world. And when I can do that, the words start to come.

And there's some things there are no words for. Sometimes my mind starts to wander into this realm of wordlessness, and I try to pull myself back to earth with the words, you know? The words, somehow, keep you on planet earth when you want to wander into other realms. And I'm learning to fall in love with that, too, which is a tricky place to be as a poet, right? Because you can't make a living off of wandering in wordlessness. Although, I've found that musicians have found the answer, so a big part of my progression and evolution as an artist is sound and my relationship to sound, and learning that those who do sound are doing something incredibly powerful for the spirit. And I'm fascinated by that. That's where I feel called—the blues, the jazz, and the soul of sound. I find home there.

Aja Monet Recommends:

June Jordan

Lovers Rock by Sade

sacred medicine

the ocean

seedhead dandelions

Name

Aja Monet

Vocation

Poet

□

Bradley Murray