

Poetry as a Spiritual Practice: An Interview with Wendy Brown-Báez
by Gaia Richards

from the September 2008 issue Edge Life

Wendy Brown-Báez is passionate about bringing poetry to fresh, unique venues such as cafes, galleries, schools and cultural centers. In 2004 she released a poetry CD, *Longing for Home*, and has performed nationally and in Mexico, solo and in collaborations. A collection of love poems, sensual and celestial, is forthcoming from Plain View Press. Wendy believes that our true home is in the center of our being and in the arms of the Divine.

She has published poetry and creative non-fiction in dozens of literary magazines and was the recipient of a 2008 McKnight grant to teach a bilingual writing workshop. She recently facilitated a writing workshop on Madeline Island during A Celebration of Women and at Amazon Bookstore Cooperative. Her upcoming events include The Midtown Global Market 9-11 Chant for Peace Event at Lake Street and 10th Street South in Minneapolis, from noon to 8 p.m. on Thursday, Sept. 11 [see midtownglobalmarket.org] and a workshop "Common Threads, Unique Voices," at the Women & Spirituality Conference on October 11-12 at Minnesota State University in Mankato [see <http://sbs.mnsu.edu/women/>].

Wendy finds her earthly home in Minneapolis, Santa Fe and Puerto Vallarta with family and friends. She spoke to us about her art...and much more.

Wendy, you are a Bardic poet who portrays her craft as a spiritual practice. Will you elaborate?

Wendy Brown-Báez: I am a storyteller from the Bardic tradition and I'm offering my stories so that you can see that you have a story to tell, also, within you. A Bard was a person that went from village to village and told poems as a way of passing along information, news and gossip. A Bard preserved the legends and myths, as well. I want to bring poetry to people who are not experienced in listening to poetry and so, it should be easy to understand.

Some of the poems that I perform are not about me. They are about other people who may not have a voice or they are about my witnessing of situations that are difficult.

Such as?

WBB: For examples, I have a poem about a suicide bomber, about a pregnant woman in Baghdad, about a beggar woman in Mexico:

"The old woman paused in front of us / hardly more than a corpse / fingers of bone cupped open / the palm a bowl of destitution"

That's painful. But you have experienced the death of someone close to you, haven't you? How has that influenced you?

WBB: Just like a lot of writers, I was influenced by Natalie Goldberg's book *Writing Down the Bones*, which gave us the concept of writing as a spiritual practice. But in my own journey, part of what happened to me was that when my son Sam died, I lost my ability to write. I couldn't pray and I couldn't meditate, because I was just so devastated. I lost my inner support system of poetry and other spiritual practices.

That's a heavy experience. But you've had the opposite experience as well.

WBB: When my partner Michael died at 54, his death wasn't unexpected because he had been suicidal for years. And his death was a choice he made to end his suffering, and it actually liberated a great burst of creativity in me. I really started performing poetry after his death.

When Michael died, I did use the poetry and performance to kind of mentor myself through the grief. It helped me to be able to express the grief. But when Sam died, the opposite happened. I totally shut down to my own creativity process for a while.

I'm not surprised. Tell me more.

WBB: I was part of a writers' group. After some months, I went back and found that once I had my pen in my hand, it was automatic to put pen to the paper. It was like riding a bicycle, so I was able to free write.

With writing -- with your poetry -- as a spiritual practice, do you believe that you channel anybody?

WBB: The way that I write is that I brood a lot and daydream and I'm in kind of a state of contemplation -- and all of a sudden it will just come.

But not entities like your son or Michael?

WBB: No, no. The muse is in the writing, the process, the creativity self. I don't know if that's channeling.... But back to the writing thing: There was a period of time when I was doing a little bit of writing. I forced myself to take some writing classes to try to jump-start my creativity; I went on a retreat to a Christ in the Desert Monastery, and I did write a piece from that experience; but the breakthrough really came when I did a "Dia de los Muertos" poetry performance in Puerta Vallarta.

What happened?

WBB: I did poems that I had already written and included some work from Neruda and Octavio Paz, and something happened in the interaction between myself and sharing the poems with an audience and having the audience give me their attention. That experience was very healing.

I had a poem in that performance where various names of death were called out -- the Mexicans have all these different names for death, "Lady Death" -- they call her "the

Bony Faced One," "the Dog," "the Hag," "the Stinky One." Because they recognize that death is something terrible, but also have a sense of humor about it at the same time.

My co-performer and I were calling out these names in Spanish across the performance area to one another. I had the realization in a visceral way that death comes to all of us. It put it in context for me that death wasn't something that only happened to me, but it happens to all of us as part of living here on this earth.

How do you come to be here, now, in this genre and venue?

WBB: From Puerto Vallarta, I came to Minneapolis and started writing with the Midtown Writers Group and started posting work on northography.com, which is a writing workshop website. And so there I was, back to a discipline of writing, free writing every Saturday morning with a group and responding to visual prompts on the computer. It unblocked the energy to start accessing my creativity on a regular basis.

So what you're saying is that somebody, anybody, who joins a writing group and practices on the computer will access their creativity and have a spiritual experience?

WBB: I would have to say that in conjunction with those things, even though I didn't feel in touch with my spiritual foundation, it was there -- after years of meditation and prayer and sweat lodges and retreats.... I kept trying to get back there by going to Unity church, going on a retreat at Arc, lighting the candles in honor of the holidays and the cycles of the seasons, watching the Guadalupe festivities in Puerto Vallarta, participating in everything I could.

What was the one quickening, if you will?

WBB: Basically, I think that happened when I took a writing performance workshop at Intermedia Arts with Heidi Arneson. I started writing a lot about Sam; I had a poem I wanted to perform about Sam that was very emotional for me. At one point when participating in that workshop, I had a realization that my story could be a story to be shared with others. In other words, it was something that I didn't have to hold onto or own. It was something that happened which connected me to other people, and that's when my relationship with the Divine went through a reconciliation.

God does work through people.... But what about your commune living? Did that connect you with the Divine?

WBB: The commune was based on imitating the lifestyle of the original disciplines that followed Jesus, so it was very idealistic. It was supposedly based on spiritual principles.

Was it polygamous and all of that stuff like you hear about on TV right now?

WBB: Well, we didn't believe in nuclear families; we believed that we were all brothers and sisters in Christ, and the ideal was to share everything together, including raising our children. It was communal in the work, as we were taking in homeless people, feeding people, visiting people in prison. We were doing what Jesus told us to do.

As happens in communal situations, one person gained more and more power and started to manipulate us more and more, emotionally and spiritually. Then in the late '80s we fled the United States because we were brainwashed into believing that we were living in the Apocalyptic times. And then things got very unbalanced.

While we were in the United States, as long as we were taking care of people, everything we needed came to us. We lived by faith and whatever we needed came so that we could take care of others.

Wow. What do you make of that?

WBB: I believe that Spirit was taking care of us, because we were living by our faith and the principles of compassionate loving-kindness. But once we stopped doing that, the funds dried up.

Why'd you stop doing it?

WBB: When we went to Europe, it was just a lot harder to do. Our leader was crazy and he was getting more crazy.

Did you write anything?

WBB: Not in the ten years I was in the commune.

But the experience is grist for the mill for your writing and performing now.

WBB: Actually, the group broke up when we were in Israel. When we were there, the experience was so profound, I started writing again.

Poetry?

WBB: Yes. And then when I came back to the States I took a writing class at the extended University. The first thing I worked on were my memories of Israel, because it had been such an incredible experience. I felt I needed to get it down on paper -- and that reconnected me, because as a child I always wrote, and as a teenager I always wrote, and then I reconnected to the creative writing part of myself.

Will you share any poems from the Israel experience?

WBB: My poem called "Eating Falafel" starts like this:

"I will wear you as a scar across my heart / I promise not to forget / that you breathed on me winds from the desert / that make simple men go mad / and breezes from the sea / to flesh out my desire for salt"

My whole life, I have been inspired to do community service and often it has been with my hands and my physical ability to help. Now I am approaching that time in my life when I feel my community service is to offer a safe, supportive environment for others to be able to access their own inner voice and their own inner healer through this craft.

One of the things I find appealing about you is, well, your affect, the way you dress, your style.

WBB: I was part of a workshop called "Earthwalks for Health" and we would spend weekends with the indigenous people of New Mexico learning their spiritual traditions. One time we were taught about how to listen to the river speak to us. After Sam died, I went to the Monastery of Christ in the Desert for Thanksgiving. I walked to the Chama River where I'd throw his ashes to see if the river would speak to me.

The River said, "Take the pieces of your life and put them together." It was the first intimation I had that there is some meaning to all that had happened to me, the commune, Michael's death, Sam's death, and my desire to help others.

Poetry, my poems, are my own unique expression and I use my body, not just my voice. I embody the poems. When I start to rehearse a poem, I ask, "How does this poem want to be presented?" I let the poem tell me how to dress, how to move and use certain gestures and intonations. For example, in "Beggar Woman," I wear a typical Oaxacan apron and *rebozo*. By contrast, I dance a little when I recite "We came to listen to miramba music..."

I set up an altar and light candles after each poem and dedicate them to individuals, other poets, or peoples who are living through intense situations, such as the children of Afghanistan. This way, I create a beautiful and meaningful stage setting and it is a kind of prayer.

After my last performance at Banfill-Locke, the audience came up to the altar to see the photos and to continue a dialogue with me and it was very moving to me, very special.

The last thing I want to say is that I believe anyone can write and share their story and that stories connect us to each other. My slogan is "You don't have to be a writer, just a willingness to find your own words." For me, writing is one of the ways I stay connected to the Divine, listening to the still voice within, and performing is letting that Voice speak out loud so I can be connected to others.

For more information on Wendy Brown-Báez, please visit
www.wendybrownaez.com

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