

Writing from My Heart

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The occasion for this essay was an invited keynote for a writers' festival. The theme, based on the signature "heart reef," the remarkable coral formation that features on many tourist brochures promoting the Whitsunday Region, was Writing from the Heart. The heart has long been a potent symbol in literature of undying love ("the heart is a red, red rose"). It is also invoked in writing guidebooks, such as Ray Bradbury's *Zen in the Art of Writing* which encourages writers to write from the heart. To be honest, I'm not sure this metaphor is apt for Australian literature, where the heart may perhaps be more often associated with heartbreak or inner turmoil. This may explain my own lack of inspiration in response to the task of writing to this theme.

The truth is, when I sat down to respond to the theme of Writing from the Heart, I couldn't find the narrative. I struggled to find my way *into* a story. On most days, words are my friends. They are almost always with me, and we have an understanding, Words and I, that we will write hard and edit even harder to create something—to create Story—together. I trust that in time, the words will come. The story will test me because it insists on commitment. If I commit to honesty, the words and I will serve the story, and the story will stay with me until it's told.

And *still*, I could not find my way into this story of writing from the heart. It's been six months since I delivered the last edits on my last manuscript, and as is always the way with me, I lose confidence in myself. My heart is insecure and my courage (something we often think of as residing in the heart) is intermittent at best, and entirely absent, at worst. I listen to the voice that tells me my last five novels were a fluke.

Instead of even attempting to offer universal wisdom, then, I will tell you about writing from *my* heart, which according to the Oxford English Dictionary, is *a hollow muscular organ that pumps blood through the circulatory system by rhythmic contraction and dilation. In vertebrates there may be up to four chambers (as in humans), with two atria and two ventricles.* I learned this from my father.

When I was a child, my father was given a dead goat. He's a doctor and some forty years ago, he helped a farmer who had been living with acute and debilitating pain. My father operated on his back and helped him return to work. To say thank you, the farmer brought a dead goat to our house, fully skinned but fully intact (to the extent that one is intact when one is skinned). As all Sri Lankans know, food is our primary love language, and my father gratefully accepted the goat. He used our washing machine as an operating table, covered it in layers of the *Canberra Times* to keep the top loader sterile, gently set the goat down for surgery in our laundry-now-makeshift-O.R., and proceeded to dissect the goat.

I remember my brother, tiny and breathless, perched on the edge of the sink, peering over the post-mortem subject. I stood just under my father's elbow, mesmerised by the sight of muscle and the smell of blood. I watched as he used familiar implements from our kitchen in ways that were completely unfamiliar to me. He spoke a language we had never heard before, a foreigner in our laundry, who said "watch carefully children as I make a 120 mm incision, and slowly retract the dermis to reveal the manubriosternal joint"—who talks like that in the laundry?

He used bulldog clips from our stationery drawer to clear the field for surgery, and removed entire organ systems of the body transferring them from the cadaver onto our family

bread board to explain how the renal system worked, the hepatic system, the digestive system and the cardiac system of course, but not the reproductive system because we were only in primary school and considered much too young to be educated about that yet.

From time to time, my father's knowledge of anatomy seemed to fail him. "It looks a little different in a goat," he would say apologetically, and my mother would leave what she was doing in the kitchen, to join him at the operating table and clarify what we were seeing inside the goat. Her anatomy, she explained matter-of-factly, had always been better than his.

My father rounded out the post-mortem by cheerfully listing the most common causes of cardiac failure in humans and perhaps goats. I understood from him that the heart is a vital organ. It is comprised of powerful muscle and tissue, it has *four chambers with two atria and two ventricles*, we could not live without it, and so we should take care of it.

My mother took the pieces of the patient and made a massive Sri Lankan goat curry that she shared with the neighbours. I understood from her that the masala of roasted coriander, cumin and turmeric are just as vital as the heart, we could not live without it, and a woman's physical and metaphysical anatomy was to be respected.

When I wrote my first novel, I returned to this place and to this story—not just to the laundry where the heart of a goat was splayed for our examination, but the places where my young heart was formed. My first writing began where I did—in a village in Jaffna, with grandparents and parents who navigated the impacts of colonisation, war, genocide, and forced dispossession, who bravely embraced a new home and mourned the loss of their old one. I wrote the stories of generations of powerful men and women who loved, protected, and sometimes failed their families. Of fathers who converted laundries into operating theatres and mothers who could carry the outcome.

My first attempt at novel-writing was motivated by love for my ancestors—with love in my heart, it was my way of saying thank you to them for their courage and sacrifices. It was also my love letter to our four children. My way of saying, "As you go into the masala of the modern world, remember the richness of the ancient world you came from."

But my writing was and is also motivated by rage and grief. In 2009, my heart—to use this over-used but still apt expression—felt broken. On the news, I watched tens of thousands of Sri Lankan Tamil people displaced and slaughtered. I watched women who looked like me, carry the lifeless bodies of their children, who looked like mine, from a jungle that was on fire.

There were no trials, no convictions, and no justice. Only mass graves, entire villages, communities and families erased, and platitudes of peace, truth-telling and reconciliation. Fifteen years after the war ended, there are grandmothers, mothers and wives who still protest, who still stand outside government buildings, holding photographs of their children, demanding to know what happened to them.

I wrote my first book with a raging, grieving and confused heart that wanted to know why this had happened, how it was allowed to happen, and whether there would be any justice for the living and the dead. I wrote to rewrite the wrongs that the institutions of power and justice had ignored. If Sri Lanka was prepared to pretend these atrocities hadn't happened, and the world was prepared to let it go, then I would prosecute those war crimes the only way I had left, through fiction.

I've been to Sri Lanka many times over the last ten years for research. I've travelled to the former warzone and been privileged to interview many survivors of genocide as well as journalists, activists and lawyers who risk their lives to talk about what happened there and demand that it does not happen again. All these people speak, write and act from the heart. They are prepared to return to their trauma, and incur more, so that they can communicate it to others, in the hope that we can learn from the terrible things that were done to them. Many of these people, when they speak, begin by placing their hand on their heart. The place where love and pain live.

This is the place in my heart where writing starts: with something that makes me angry about the world, something that I simply do not understand, that I know will be transformed for the better when I write about it. And so, I begin a novel. My heart is motivated and made resolute by the rage and confusion. But anger is exhausting. I am an Angry Person, and it fatigues me, deep in the cells of my body. The process of writing takes me slowly from this place of rage to one of love, the emotion most associated with the heart. The process of writing pulls me through the rage towards the energising, empowering and liberating feeling of love.

The hardest interview I ever did in Sri Lanka was with Dr Sathyamoorthy, who stayed with the thousands of refugees in the final months and days of the war, when these refugees were pushed by the Sri Lankan government and the Tamil Tigers onto a small stretch of beach where they were slaughtered. Dr Sathyamoorthy amputated their limbs without anaesthetics, he used torn clothing as bandages, and he stepped over the dead to protect the living.

When I took his testimony, I put my hand on *my* heart, as I do with all of the people I interview, and I told him that I was cognisant and respectful of the fact that I was asking him for his lived experience, for his truth that would form part of my fiction. He said, “In Sri Lanka, we are not allowed to speak the truth about what happened and without the truth, there can be no healing.” He said, “Fiction is an important way of telling the truth.” Fiction can explore and interrogate the truth. We live in an era of unprecedented access to information, to the truth. And yet power and authority often present fiction as fact. In such times, literature must present facts through fiction.

When preparing to write this essay, I googled the words “writing from the heart” and came across a writing workshop with this title. The workshop outline talked about how a writer’s best work usually “*dwells in the caves of shame*,” and it included exercises that would help the participant write “*about discomfort*” and write “*through discomfort*.” I don’t disagree with any of that. Accessing and acknowledging the truth can be very uncomfortable. Giving words to the truth can be very uncomfortable. Sending those words to a publisher perhaps even more so. Seeing them in print for others to read, critique, and know you better, is profoundly terrifying. It goes beyond discomfort, and I welcome any writing exercise that helps me with all of the above.

And yet, I would also like to challenge the notion that writing from the heart involves discomfort only, and instead suggest that writing from the heart involves moving through *some* discomfort, but even *more*, it involves a movement towards safety. The writer’s job is to take the reader into humanity’s heart of darkness. To do so, the writer must make the reader feel safe, and from within that place of safety, punch them in the heart with the discomfort of this world’s terrible truths. In doing so, the writer helps the reader see the truth, reflect on the truth, recognise their part in it, and perhaps do something about it.

In this way, the challenge, responsibility, and privilege of writing is that we call on our heart to speak to the heart of another. We put our egos aside. We put our pride and vanity on pause. We write with curiosity because the heart is curious. We write with humility because the heart is humble. We seek to find and share the truth because the truth is important and sharing really is caring. Shared discomfort in a place of shared safety.

The great Toni Morrison has said:

The writing is—[where] I’m free from pain. It’s the place where I live; it’s where I have control; it’s where nobody tells me what to do; it’s where my imagination is fecund and I am really at my best. Nothing matters more in the world or in my body or anywhere when I’m writing. It is dangerous because I’m thinking up dangerous, difficult things, but it is also extremely safe for me to be in that place.

In Sri Lankan Tamil culture, we greet each other with the Tamil word *Vannakkam*, which is translated literally as “welcome” although the word has no real English translation. We fold our hands together, as if in prayer, we hold our hands at our heart and we bow a little. We’re not saying hello. We are saluting the divinity inside the other person, recognising that the other is no longer the *Other*, but instead they are connected to us, and we are the same.

In Sanskrit, one of the ancient languages of Hindu doctrine, the word for heart is *hrd* or *hrdaya*. This word can be translated as heart, mind, or soul, and it is often used to refer to the innermost aspect of a person or being. The heart, in Hinduism, is more than a hollow muscular organ that pumps blood through the circulatory system by rhythmic contraction and dilation. It is the Self. Hindus have been taught through the greatest story ever written—the *Mahabharata*—that there is formless Divinity inside all of us and around us, and that this is our true and shared nature. Our true purpose is to realise it. Trapped in a cycle of birth and death, we can free ourselves through right conduct, devotion, pursuit of knowledge, and control of the mind and body. Unfortunately, I am not very good at those things. Instead, writing is my prayer and meditation. Writing, like praying and meditating, connects me to something pure and strengthening. I am not so much writing from the heart, as writing towards my heart.

I go back to the goat flayed on the laundry room table. The shock of the real, the honouring of family and ancestry, the anger of a deeply broken world. I write through anger to connection. *When I write, I am writing from a blood and guts heart, unsentimental*—a deep source of rage, pain, and grief. A place of truth, discomfort and safety. A home where words and story reside.