
THE PSYCHIC SAVING VALUE OF WRITING

by

Constance Larsen

In late 1973, I arrived in Madrid from Mallorca, fresh from ending my marriage to an American and so Madrid became a reaction more than a planned move. The city was foreign to me - no friends, no command of the Spanish language and no idea as to how to get work. This latter point was an irony, because before coming to Spain I had spent almost eight years in Chicago and Minneapolis in the field of social work, including an MSW from the University of Chicago. But an artistic restlessness, shared by my husband, made us renounce our professional lives in the States in exchange for a new life-style begun in Mallorca. Such a drastic change contributed to the demise of my marriage.

To just drop yourself into the mainstream of a new culture while mourning the loss of a "best friend" - my former husband - is not an everyday occurrence. The simple, though energy-consuming pragmatics of shopping, making phone calls and sending out an S.O.S. for a plumber, all in a new language, were difficult but also like "occupational therapy tasks" one performs in a hospital to maintain psychic leverage. With so much happening, I needed to talk to someone. My Spanish was too inadequate for any

therapist in Madrid, had I bothered to look for one. The truth was that I had become sceptical about the helping professions in the States as they were practised in the 1960's, especially the psychiatric realm so heavily dominated by Freud. So to relieve myself of my distress, I began writing long letters to a designer friend of mine, Helen, in Australia. This was to become a pattern from then until now. Always keeping copies of my letters, I unloaded everything to her: the sorrows, the joys and later on the metaphysical preoccupations which came to dominate the more I got myself emotionally put together. Her honest replies about her life began to match my own, we were both products of cultures where the honest expression of one's feelings was not readily condoned unless in the privacy of a doctor's office. So both of us benefitted by using letters as a reservoir for stress. Yet there were many inhibitions in me about "truth telling" as I noted when working on a first biographical novel in Madrid in those early days. Somehow I had to make contact with some source that could help me with this problem of inhibition. Little did I know then that I was going to tackle the "unfolding of consciousness" which would become a lifetime task.

My search took me among books, not that I believe the "word" is any substitute for life, but my daily struggles with Spanish made it necessary to have contact with my own language. Coming across some books by the controversial Henry Miller was a perfect discovery for me. His works contained a robust honesty of a life-style slightly parallel to my own which buffeted my timidity around until a few roots were janked out. I wanted to apply his kind of honesty to myself and my writing about the "interior landscape" of people, an aspect that wasn't Miller's forte. Then Helen sent me some books by Anais Nin. Her poetic novels demonstrated that one could transform the photographic surface of people and penetrate their interiors. Influences from these two people began working away at me. One day I wrote a short story that surpassed anything I had ever written. I had first made a rough draft and then took on the role of a poet, or an alchemist, and turned each sentence into a poetic, yet sharp expression of psychological functioning - my own. Bits of insight jumped off the page, especially an awareness of how I was trying to make a man I knew step into the shoes of my ex-husband. As with my letters, I experienced a reduction in my private sorrow. Creativity and self-therapy were proving to be mutually nourishing.

I also began a new career at this time - teaching English to Spaniards, while also teaching myself their language. Every so often my awareness of the nature and value of language got expanded. One day while teaching "should" I stopped the class and cited this as an excellent

example of how people learn to be intolerent. "Everyone is telling you - you should do this and should do that. Maybe the "shoulds" in life should be substituted for "what is". People might spend less time converting others into their own images and needlessly frustrating themselves when a situation can't be changed or isn't ready to be changed". A simple vignette which I've just recounted. But isn't language the key to teaching and exchanging information between people? And if we are unconscious of our use of language, could it be because we are also unconscious and/or inexperienced with the experiences that the labels (words) of language represent? (I'm speaking of the non-material world of language). Are we really exchanging meaningful information or just platitudes of noise that have been automatically accepted without question or inner reflection, This suggests that the therapeutic arts cannot operate effectively without a close connection to the world of linguistics. But this is beyond the scope of this article.

Another new part of life also began for me in Madrid, the frequenting of cafes and bars, a custom that wasn't part of my former American life. The easiness of talking to strangers and the normality of meeting people in bars provided good practice for a shy person such as myself. I often carried away impressions of people, jotting them down in diaries as well as letter so I wouldn't forget key details. Gradually I developed into a rather gregarious, articulate person which surprised me. But I suppose that my writing practice and my teaching were the essential ways of

sharpening my forms of expression. Also, acquiring a second language has the benefit of mirroring back the delights and pitfalls of one's native language. But the most important aspect of the bar scene were the many opportunities I had in listening to intimate details and plights of people in difficulty. Sooner or later they would vibrate doubts and confusion within me which would send me back to my writing world.

With a better hold on my psychic equilibrium once culture shock had eased up on me, I was ready to fan out my interests to a more cosmic world, not just the intimate world of twoness. I began reading philosophical material and religious things, including parapsychology because of certain psychic experiences that had begun when I was in Mallorca. Oriental religion caught me in its throes but it was not until I came across Krishnamurti that I saw the application of it to everyday life. Beginning with his simple though acute observations as to how most of us never really perceive the here and now, I was able to become more aware of which dimension I was in at any given time - the past, the future or the more difficult one of entering the "present". It became easy to see how I was falling into the normal human trap of superimposing the past onto the present. Adding Jung's observations to this, I saw how unresolved dramas of one's past got projected onto present situations. If I thought I was trying to move into a more cosmic world, I was once again brought back to myself and the fact that the cosmic world is really a large scale mirror for the miniature one. I also became aware that I had

more unfinished business with my past but how to resolve it remained unclear.

The path opened up to me in a slightly oblique way. I had begun my fourth year in Madrid. One morning I awakened with the feeling that the two female Siamese cats I had once had in the States were jumping around me on the bed! This brought back a memory of the time when one of the two had given birth to three kitties; one of whom was stillborn. The mother, in what looked like a grief reaction, grabbed the other cat and kept putting her in the box with the two live kitties! It was quite a visual statement of replacing a lost loved one with a substitute. Something vague must have been vibrated in me that morning for I found myself going to the typewriter and instinctively starting a story about two cats. The only major event going on in my life at the time was an unsatisfactory love affair, but I was not overly disturbed about it. So I began writing what seemed like a short story but it ended up as two stories. Then I realized that I had two books. Which one to follow? A series of unmailed letters to my loved one suggested I write about our relationship, from the point of view of a cat as suggested by my dream. From this was born my recently published novel SEDUC-TION BY A SOLAR SMILE.* For the next three years I would work on this without any outline, contrary to the traditional notions of fiction writing. By now I had a growing belief, sustained by the work of Anais Nin and the instinctual world of my Latin surroundings that I should let my "unconscious" dictate whatever it wanted. At times I

became aware that my writing was a form of spading down into my soul and my unconscious following an uncharted route that might lead to some good psychic dividends. Two important things happened. The cat mourning for her dead kitten became me mourning for my ex-husband. I still had not properly finished my grief reaction for him and it was interfering in every other relationship. Finally, my ex-husband was emotionally buried the day I wrote the chapter I call Solomon. It comes late in the book. It is basically a dialogue between my "every day clumsy self" and the spontaneous appearance of a wise old cat called Solomon. (A somewhat classic archetype in Jungian terms). The flow of words back and forth resulted in a changed attitude in me, an acceptance at last of the fluidity of life. It was a change both at the personal level as well as seeing the universality of "change" as an inevitable part of nature, of which we are one of her many faces. An immature part of me was expelled and a mature woman came forth with a strong feeling of inner beauty.

This did not preclude vestiges of discomfort left within me. The rush of insights that came at me upon the completion of the book proved somewhat overwhelming and I began to develop strong anxiety attacks every time I left my house. Finally, I had to hospitalize myself for a week's bed rest and sedation, followed by a quiet month at home with no stimulation. At the end of four weeks I was able to resume letter writing. But much more time had to pass before I understood my "breakdown". The paradox of

"falling apart" came some months later when my psychic functioning became better than ever! Eventually an article written about "spiritual crisis" (from Esalen) as an undiagnosed emotional disorder, helped me understand that my anxiety had been a temporary complication of a "transformative and evolutionary process".* I had involved myself as a novice in a risky business by giving my unconscious full rein, though the writing helped to restrain it. My ignorance of the consequences made me erroneously think I was having a breakdown when in fact I was in the incubation stage of a metamorphosis. Automatically, I returned to my letter writing as a way of writing out the changes in attitude that had taken place, a post metamorphosis time of assimilating the insights. I could see that the process of transformation, expanded consciousness or evolution (all synonyms for the metamorphosis I'm talking about, I think) means that we gain something but we also leave something behind such as a lost innocence which we must mourn before we can fully integrate the new changes. So there is a time of adjustment needed both during and after a metamorphosis.

Four years have gone by since the end of my novel. Another one has been started, another journey into my psyche. The use of novel writing is a way of throwing my conflicts onto the written page, domesticating my demons so I can rob them of the energy that they will take from me if I don't have a place to put them. This is one good way to conserve one's energy - focus it, rather than let it swarm around wastefully. Letter writing as I do it,

provides the "raw ingredients", the conflicts, irritations, perplexities etc. which will get the book going. The "unconscious" will then guide the rest. Probably novels as creative reservoirs are better than short stories when the objective is to resolve a long-term conflict because the length of time to complete it and the continuity of chapter after chapter make this experience akin to the therapeutic process of talking to a helper for many months. Understanding now that there is a potential risk, makes it easier to spot any unusual emotional development. I no longer feel I'm working in darkness. I am trying to mix together unconscious processes with conscious ones by using the written page as a mirror to identify them and then to unify them. The

desire is to continue expanding a feeling of "wholeness" that has come over me these past four years. Having eliminated certain polarizations or splits I used to feel between the material and the spiritual world, the intellectual and the emotional world, the rational and the instinctual world, I think I may achieve another unity or transcendence in an area that still has points of conflict in it. In a sense, this is a very natural progression in the unfolding of human consciousness. Just as an athlete strives toward maximizing the use of his body, so too the same can be said for psychic development - after all, to become fully human is not only a twenty-four hour a day task, it is a lifetime profession!

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** The Spiritual Emergency Network (SEN) was created by Christina and Stanislav Grof of Esalen Institute in California in 1980.*
