

SNAPSHOT 4: AND I SANG

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I first met the work of Nicolás Núñez at a workshop in Glasgow, that I attended on a whim. I knew instantly that I had begun the process of experiencing the ‘seat of my soul’. Soon afterwards, before I knew it, and without any rational thinking, I was travelling over 5,000 miles to Mexico to participate further in work that I was not sure that I understood in any way. In the workshop in Glasgow, I was a mess; I was terrified to close my eyes, I sent my partners crashing into others, I was stuck, and out of flow... in hindsight, I was depressed.

In Apan, Núñez’s workshop space in rural Mexico, I learnt of the root of my depression. In one session, a participant asked how she could engage in the work whilst suffering from an injury, and Nicolás responded by referencing the words of a poem: a human must be *a tree that dances*.³⁴ Unconventional as this advice appeared to be, the image clearly made perfect, and personal, sense to the person asking the question. In that moment, I also understood the root of my depression, of which I had not been conscious until this point.

Gabrielle Roth once said,

In many shamanic societies, if you came to a medicine person complaining of being disheartened, dispirited, or depressed, they would ask one of four questions: When did you stop dancing? When did you stop singing? When did you stop being enchanted by stories? When did you stop being comforted by the sweet territory of silence?
(Roth & Loudon, 1989: xv)

This statement encapsulates the depressed state I found myself in at the first workshop; I had stopped being enchanted by stories! I had turned my back on the acting profession, due to the profane nature that the art form

³⁴ A reference to *Piedra de Sol*, Octavio Paz (1957).

seemed, to me, to have adopted. Theatre no longer seemed to be posing the question, 'What does it mean to be a human being?' Staged work no longer appeared to give us the opportunity to deeply communicate with others, or to be ambassadors for any meaningful message in relation to questions such as, 'How must we act as human beings?' and 'What must I do as a human being who is alive here and now?'

Prior to arriving in Apan, I was stuck, numb, operating on automatic; I was a high-functioning depressed person - I did only the activities that were necessary to keep my life operating and no more. A few days into the workshop, I could feel something begin to shift. Nicolás talks of us being like a closed box that needs to begin to allow energy to pass through, so that we can be in the optimal state of 'flow'. Whether this process began to happen for me, or whether it was through the work and the contemplative practices allowing me to feel more grounded in the earth, my levels of inspiration began to return. One day, whilst standing on top of a hill with the group, in silence, after completing one of the dynamics, I looked over and saw a cactus that had clearly, at some point, caught fire from the blazing sun. The mantra, 'Just because I've been weak doesn't mean I can't be strong', entered my mind, inspired by the evident areas of regrowth that surrounded the heavily burnt areas of the cactus. Its suffering and rebirth became, in that moment, synonymous with my own. I was beginning to yield to the life-breath that was ever present around me and the mantra, discovered that day, still lives with me and has seen me through further challenging times.

On one of my last evenings in Apan, when I felt most settled in myself, whilst sitting around a burning log fire, one of the other participants spontaneously and with no prompting asked me to sing. Until that point, I had danced gleefully, been enchanted by stories and been comforted by the sweet territory of silence; however, I was yet to sing.

I learnt in Apan that to 'love' - both self and others - is our authentic mission in life. With this, I also inadvertently found the answer to those questions that I had been struggling for years to answer through my art form;

'What does it mean to be a human being?', 'How must we act as human beings?', and 'What must I do as a human being who is alive here and now?'
And I sang.

REFERENCES

- Paz, Octavio (1957) *Piedra de Sol*. Mexico City: Tezontle.
- Roth, Gabrielle & Loudon, John (1989) *Maps to Ecstasy: Teachings of an Urban Shaman*. Mill Valley, California: Nataraj Publishing.