

## **Recovering Our Conversation From The Fray**

Hello All, I'm happy to be with you today. I bless you all for holding this space with me, feeling alone most of the time here in a foreign land as the world around us seems to break apart at every corner. I have been involved in social justice work since I was 14 so please forgive me if I might come across as intense. Hopefully my Filipino humor is still intact.

I've been told that I am the first out lesbian minister in the whole non-Western world. I'd give you a dollar if you could prove that wrong. Meanwhile, I work on that premise, being extra mindful of the fact that one day there might be one queer person who may, in their research, stumble upon my work and I don't want them to be disappointed. I want them to feel empowered and strong. But this sermon will not just be about me speaking to my LGBTIQ community and how they often feel isolated.

I'd like to share what I have learned in all years of being with people who have experienced oppressions in general, including myself.

Are you familiar with the figure of speech called metonymy? Well you should be, because it is English! It is better known as name-calling. For instance if I called you names and slurs, that's metonymy. Or it could also be like calling horse-racing *the track* or calling a person in corporation *the suit*. That is metonymy.

Sometimes we view life as a metonymy. The very tattoo on my arm says, “Maya Nei Jevan Ho” or *Love IS life*. And you know what, it’s not. Life is bigger than love. Life is life. So I guess my tattoo will be one of those things that are forever wrong.

A big earthquake that killed 9,000 people and injuring about 22,000. One year later, when help had thinned out, I decided to volunteer in rebuilding homes. I worked for a month. But one week I was sick because of a parasite. I went down the mountains, travelled 4 hours to get medical help in the city Kathmandu. Fortunately, it fell during the Holi festival. So even as I was very weak, I got out of bed at 4pm, a little late in the day for Holi, and rode a rickshaw drawn by a man on a bicycle. He took me to Durbar Square. It was no longer full of people, but there were still visitors scattered. A young student, approached me and asked if I wanted some colors on me. Then, she blew and poured colors on me. She asked me if I wanted a henna tattoo, “What would you like?” I said, “Whatever you want.” I knew she will be charging me and I was really just doing her a favor. I didn’t care what she would write. She made a multi-colored work of art on my arm. She said, “Love is life.” I said, that sounds about right. I walked back to my hotel to rest.

When I recovered from my illness in a few more days, I went back to the worksite about a mile high in altitude at the mountain terraces of Sindhupalchouk through Melamchi.

There were about 120 volunteers from 50 countries there. All living and working under crazy conditions, changing weather, and aftershocks.

My buddy, Uttam, a Bangladeshi, said, "That's a nice tattoo, Tet, would you like me to make that permanent?" I said, "Only if you're a tattoo artist". And to my surprise he was. He had brought all his professional equipment including new needles. News spread among volunteers that I was getting a tattoo from Uttam. When the time came, volunteers started milling around at the lounge. You can imagine, Indians, Australians, Irish, German, American, Israeli, Egyptian, British, and all waiting for my tattooing. A party had ensued.

However, when two of our Nepali friends came by, they were shocked and asked to find that it didn't say, "Love is life, but Forehead is Life." Something was wrong with the Sanskrit strokes. The Irish started saying, "Don't change it, Tet, it's so darn poetic!!" They all started chanting, "Forehead if life! Forehead is life!!"

I said, "No, It's my first tattoo and I want to have it right". So poor Uttam, he had to tweak some strokes. He was more upset that I was, to tell you the truth. I just wanted weird inscriptions on my arm and a good story behind it. Now I am getting that good story as it was unfolding. Just as his last stroke of the needle left my arm, the power went out. That's when the party started to really get loud.

The next day rumors went around that my tattoo still said Forehead is Life. But the kindhearted Nepalis were assuring me it's good enough. That was last March. Last April, I was already home in the Philippines, I got a Facebook message from Cerese, an Australian volunteer who was with me. She sent photos of other volunteers --- Rury from Ireland having F.I.L on his body and Paul from New Jersey having F.I.L. on his thigh. And then she said, Tet you're legend. FIL, Forehead is Life! FIL. A few weeks later, I get another photo from her. It was scanty graffiti on the upper wall of Everest Bar in Kathmandu. And someone wrote there, "Forehead is Life!" I may started a cult without meaning to.

All I really wanted was Love is Life. And yet even that now is no longer my narrative. My engagement just broke off a few days ago. And I am starting to recover my conversations with life again. Let me share a poem by David Whyte (the repetitions are his). The title is "Everything is Waiting for You."

Your great mistake — Your great mistake is to act the drama  
as if you were alone. Your great mistake is to act the drama  
as if you were alone. As if life  
were a progressive and cunning crime  
with no witness to the tiny hidden  
transgressions. To feel abandoned is to deny  
the intimacy of your surroundings. Surely,  
even you, at times, have felt the grand array;  
the swelling presence, and the chorus, crowding

out your solo voice  
You must note  
the way the soap dish enables you,  
or the window latch grants you courage.  
Alertness is the hidden discipline of familiarity.  
Alertness is the hidden discipline of familiarity.  
The stairs are your mentor of things  
to come, the doors have always been there  
to frighten you and invite you,  
and the tiny speaker in the phone  
is your dream-ladder to divinity.  
The tiny speaker in the phone  
is your dream-ladder to divinity.  
Put down the weight of your aloneness and ease into  
the conversation. The kettle is singing  
even as it pours you a drink, the cooking pots  
have left their arrogant aloofness and  
seen the good in you at last. All the birds  
and creatures of the world are unutterably  
themselves. Everything, everything, everything is waiting for  
you.

Sometimes we could get stuck in our reductions, our  
metonymy, our One Thing In Life. There is no such thing. I  
have worked with lesbians recovering from crisis for a while  
now. They will usually just send me a message on Facebook,  
some are friends some are not. And what always works is I  
bring them back into conversation with everything again,  
which essentially is a self-conversation. "Everything,  
everything is waiting for you". They are waiting for what

you think of them and how they shall serve your life. Where will you put them? You are in conversation with everything and everyone all the time.

Oppression is really a suppression of conversation --- losing the exchange, detaching from your own power, ailing alertness, lack of clarity, getting drowned in the dominant discourse, getting no affirmation about your story, missing your own narrative, being forced to belittle your story, your spirit. When we are not inclusive, we lose in the conversation with everything. When we are not allowing ourselves to be broken by new experiences, we are losing alertness and indeed familiarity.

If I had a cult, I would tell my followers to chill. Life is bigger. Life is bigger than your idols. Bigger than right and wrong, bigger than whatever it is you have esteemed and you hold to direct yourself. The best form of empowerment is to reconnect people to everything, not just to you or to your blessings, but to direct them back to the everything called life. Each one of us has a conversation with everything. We cannot let other people voice theirs for us. We cannot let media say the Kardashians are important for us. We cannot let haters silence us. We cannot abandon Mother Earth and surrender her to the clutches of the greecy. We don't just converse with her, but also the Great Unknown, and everyone who cannot even make it to a Unitarian church who believe in freedom and justice. We cannot leave people

hopeless in believing that all religious organizations are the same.

That sense of connection to everything is what many people call God. And as the saying goes, “Where there is God, there is no need.” Alternatively, “Where is connection to everything, there is no need.”

Deepak Chopra said, “Evil is a constricted view of reality.” I say evil seeks to constrict our view as well. Sometimes we call it a schtick. “Oh, grandpa’s schtick is carburetors. He may have been bad at everything but truly he was good at that one thing.” It’s easy to let one thing be everything specially if it’s rewarding to us. I have a professor who still thinks he needs to be always right. Maybe I’ll serve him better if I said, “That one place you had to be always right? I don’t care if you call that home. That place is a non-safe environment. You have to let that go.”

Isolation is a devil. George Monbiot says, “Neoliberalism is creating loneliness. It’s unsurprising that social isolation is strongly associated with depression, suicide, anxiety, insomnia, fear and the perception of threat.”

The field of study of human social networks is fairly new, about a decade only. But what we are finding out is that hubs, or people with links to more people works the same way as places with links to more places in that they develop better.

That might just be what our faith can offer people, to be the hub of more diverse connections.

So be the protagonist of your own narrative. Help others be the protagonist in their own lives. Take back your story, help people take back theirs. Restore your conversation with everything, help others restore theirs.



## **BENEDICTION**

Wayfarer, the only path  
Is your footprints and no other.  
Wayfarer, there is no path.  
Make your way by going farther. (Antonio Machado)

Caminante, son tus huellas  
el camino y nada más;  
Caminante, no hay camino,  
se hace camino al andar.

Biyahero, ang tanging landas  
ay ang iyong mga yapak at walang iba.  
Biyahero, walang landas.  
Gawin ang iyong landas sa iyong paghayo

## **STONE IN WATER PRAYER**

May water soften hardened hearts, may water bless the hard times, may stones bleed into the water, may water help us flow, may stone give us courage, may water onto stone be relief onto hardship. Like water may we take the form we need to help us flow around the stones in our path. May we be rid of the stones in our shoes as we walk the path. Bless the water, bless the stone, they both make us wiser.

