

In Search of the Common Thread

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“How do you teach them not to hate?”

Veteran journalist **Christiane Amanpour** has been quoted saying that, and we in **Writer’s Block Philippines** often use that, when teaching our freelance writing workshop, as an example of a powerful quote.

The question is powerful because it is loaded with meaning on so many levels. First, hate itself is such a strong concept—stronger than anger or loathing, not quite just the opposite of love, a misunderstood and often-misdirected emotion that is known to cause destruction and loss on many levels. Second, it assumes that hatred is a learned concept—that it is not just a reflex reaction and felt instinctively, but cultivated and developed in thought, belief, and action until it manifests itself in concrete, solid form. Conversely, the question leads us to think that, if hatred can be learned, then it is also possible for us to unlearn it or block it from fruition.

Ironically, that thought came to my mind on the wake of my first wedding anniversary. I got back from a weekend getaway with my husband on the day the world commemorated the ninth year of 9/11; and in the Philippines, gloom still hung over the country and its erstwhile friend, Hong Kong, as both neighbors struggled to cope with their painful losses and the institutional ineptitudes that caused them. When dealing with pain, our initial response is usually to find someone or something to blame. In the case of the United States, it was Al-Qaeda and Bin Laden; in the case of Hong Kong, it was the Filipino police and their national leaders. In both cases, it bred fear of and hatred toward the Misunderstood Other.

How do we reverse hatred once it starts to set in? And how do we teach the world to unlearn centuries of collective programming so that war, destruction, and death can be avoided? How do we, as nations and as peoples of a single human race, even begin to reach out and move beyond our fears and pains?

The questions are larger than the sum of the fragments of available answers, But I’ve realized that one strong and powerful reason why I write is that I would like to believe that, somewhere deep within the stories of people, places, rhythms, and sensations, lie the common threads that make us all more alike than we think we are.

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Two years ago, I met Adel Salameh, a Palestinian musician who performed at the Rainforest World Music Festival in Sarawak, Malaysia. During the press conference, I found myself drawn to Adel's story because he chose to be an artist in a country where art and all forms of expression are forbidden, where decades of Occupation have snuffed out his people's concept of identity, where exuberance has no place because all that exists is an encompassing mass of nothingness. There are no songs, no stories, no artists, no musicians—Adel had to fight to be able to travel to London, where he could move about freely and create as any sentient human being could.

He spoke of a project that he had worked on while in London, which involved bringing together young children from both Israel and Palestine to co-exist, communicate, and create under a single roof for two weeks. Adel observed that the children had no difficulties adjusting to their new playmates—they were even making friends and playing with each other quite happily—but it was the adults who were filled with fear and had difficulties accepting this short-term reality. The children made beautiful music together, Adel shared, while their elder counterparts—parents and other adults running the program—were paralyzed into inaction.

I asked him then what message he wanted to communicate through his music, and he shared a vision of a world where people could communicate, connect, and create without fear, where people could embrace their identities and share this with the world without fear of hostility and suppression.

It's been two years since that interview, and I find myself wondering whether the children that Adel Salameh and his colleagues had brought together once would someday recognize each other on the Israeli-Palestinian border and call out to each other as brothers and friends, as they once had.

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It's stories like Adel's that are worth the "labor pains" of writing, worth the pittance that we writers get paid for all the hard work of running after an interview, asking the right questions, faithfully transcribing the answers, and—brick by grammatically correct brick—building a story that can stand up proudly in terms of both structure and form. No one picked up my story on Adel Salameh, but I wrote it anyway (in two

parts) and put it up on a blog because it was a story that HAD to be written and shared.

In essence, I write not necessarily because I care about what readers or editors want to read—although that counts a lot, too. I write because there are so many questions that need answers, and we owe it to ourselves as human beings to at least ask, explore, and discover.

I am obviously an idealist-optimist-hopeless romantic. Where others see war, destruction, and pain, I see the triumph of the human spirit. Where others see loss, I see opportunity. Where others see mud, I see the ground that can be built upon. I often see the world not as it is, but as how it should be, and it gives me hope that the world CAN be a better place.

Can writing stories EVER help teach people not to hate? I don't know. I have to admit that I haven't tried hard enough. But if I could uncover and write one good, hopeful story a day, it would be enough to keep me writing for the rest of my life. Hatred is such a strong and powerful word—an emotion and an experience strong enough to break down a fortress—but the search for humanity's common thread is far stronger. It goes back as far as the beginning of time, to the advent of mankind's search for meaning and truth. Imagine what we could achieve with our words if only we gave ourselves the chance.

The stories in themselves are nothing if not for the elaborate process of excavating meaning and sharing them with the rest of the world. Imagine how the world would be if we could break stereotypes, crush prejudices, eliminate biases. Imagine if we could tell stories that would help us look into the eyes of our adversaries and see the same thread of humanness that we see in our own selves... Maybe, just maybe, we would have moved one step closer to stopping hate.