

UNITY INTERVIEW W/ MARIETTE

1. When did you first hear the Call of Creativity? What was your response? (3 min)

As a child... figuring out how to cope with some family challenges, I found solace and safety in reading and writing in diary. My earliest memories of reading are from kindergarten. The sunken library at St. Angela school. Then writing... buying a light yellow hard-cover diary with a lock at a huge mall when visiting my dad... I felt belonging among the characters in the books I was reading. If I ever got money, I wanted to buy books to read or write in! I loved the library at school and WPL. The call was like an offering, like a hand extended from a safe place... it came from books, from the spaces books were in... and because I was alone a lot and using my imagination to create myself a new safe environment, reading books and writing in a journal began to cultivate my identity as a writer. Read-a-thons, library fieldtrips with the school...these were highlights!

2. You have been faithful to the call all through the years! How did identifying as a writer impact your life? Your inner life also? (3 min)

My identity as a writer was entirely all-encompassing. From the morning when I woke up to when I lay in bed before sleeping, I was 'a writer'. I was thinking about reading and writing. My schedule needed to have some kind of reading and writing in it or I felt like I was not being 'me'. This mindset continued through elementary and secondary school. My favourite classes were English, of course! I was entering writing contests and feeling the ferocity of competition. My first poem was published in The Windsor Star when I was 12. I didn't feel...happy, I felt terrified of the event and to read aloud...That was when I first met someone who would become a mentor/publisher...and play a significant role in my writing life. In university, I was too afraid to take 'English'... but still felt like a writer inside and took some creative writing classes.

Every thought I had, and therefore every choice I made, even as I became wife and mother, funnelled through this identity as a writer – I 'needed' to be reading or writing to feel...whole, to feel productive, to feel 'me'. It was an entirely ego-driven identity, wrapped in an internal measurement/value system that I told myself resulted in 'success' according to the rules of the system. Even when I was a new mom, nursing an infant, I was thinking about freelance writing, making money, building my resume and trying to get published.

Success, at that time, was happening. I got published traditionally, I worked for publishers, kept getting articles/poetry published... I started teaching and editing. I opened up my dream creative writing space... was building community and making money. All my writing dreams were coming true... so that when a poet's dream job

was in reach, to be Poet Laureate, I was ready. I applied... my application was nearly 80 pages long with all the support letters...

3. You made your dream job come true! And then what happened? (7 min)

So...I got the job! And the destruction began! Or, the deconstruction of the dream began...of my identity as a writer. Mariette was with me during this momentous achievement and the horrible results that followed. I was personally and professionally attacked on-line by a fellow community member. The collateral damage expanded quickly and fiercely. The attacks happened on all social media outlets and spread within our community. There was a grand polarization that happened. Life-long friendships in the writing community began to... shift. My memberships in both provincial and national groups were infiltrated and affected. While I never responded to the attacks directly to the person attacking me, I did my best to stand up for myself within the larger community. Including fighting to keep the dignity of one of my published poems alive. It did not work. The poem was unpublished, and I was told I had to 'apologize' or they would unpublish the poem. I chose to have it unpublished. Other poets who I'd known and worked with for years, were writing horrible posts about me and agreeing with the vitriol the attacker was writing. One woman even sent me an email saying she didn't want to be in the same room as me.

Within weeks, this bully's power fully affected my writing career, including a very obvious narrative to 'cancel' me, inciting a false accusation that I was racist colonizer with no education. His power was real, alive and changing my writing life – externally and internally. His words were sinking deeply into my worst parts... and I started believing that what he was saying about my writing was true: I was a fraud, I was uneducated...maybe I was a racist... All my internal fears as a 'writer' that I wasn't good enough, that I'd never win any awards, that my writing was bad and I didn't know what I was doing... all these beliefs that I'd secretly believed but never said out loud, lifted up like fire... and it was killing me.

I got very sick, losing the ability to see properly in one eye. I was having double vision, and couldn't drive. I had to see various doctors because no one knew what was wrong. At one point, there was a fear that I had a brain tumor or MS. I decided to close down my dream space because I didn't have the energy to keep working/teaching. I became terrified of being alone the space and going to events in fear that this bully would show up. And, the worst of the collateral damage, worse than getting unpublished even, was that in the process, I lost my best friend of 35 years.

So, my identity as a writer, which was entirely connected to who I was a full human-being: all my parts: mother, wife, daughter, sister, friend...were shattered because this one person said things that triggered my own internal values and beliefs, that I was not actually smart enough, good enough, etc. to live this dream... my 'spirit' – that is my core, my heart, my soul – was throttled because all of 'me' was wrapped up in this identity.... I had to choose what I was going to do about it. How I was going to heal myself, my spirit, as well as heal my career. I had to completely change my relationship with my 'self' as a writer – and redefine who I was, and how I was going to validate and heal my broken spirit...

4. So, you're saying that this person's external words/narratives affected your internal beliefs about yourself? At the same time, the dream disintegrated into ashes... and you decided to explore a new identity, a different relationship with your creative self. (5 min)

I felt grief on a core level. Like parts of myself were dying... my dream certainly died in that by the fifth month as Poet Laureate, I resigned, closed my small business space, and took a sabbatical from all of my writing life/community commitments so I could heal. I was diagnosed with an acute auto-immune disease in my eye and had to go on meds (which I continue to take). I shut down all my social media accounts, and stopped blogging. The bully continued to post about me, despite my literal resignation and absence on-line.

I was faced with a reality I'd never imagined, and began to see my writing life in a completely different light... and darkness. I started seeing a psychotherapist. I was looking back in my journals to find clues to the parts of me that believed what the bully had written. I realized that by funneling my 'self' into this one identity as 'writer' I had, in fact, lost myself... in the competitive, polarizing, inauthentic systemic narrative for writers that had a toxic structure I could not and now, would survive in.

I'd never felt so alone, so scared, so wrong in the community that I'd spent my literal life cultivating when I realized that who I actually was – was not someone who 'fit into' and/or 'belonged' in the system I thought I was a unconditionally a part of.

And this...was how I'd felt as a child... amidst the violence and abuse around me... when I'd first realized that reading a book and writing in a journal was how I could cope with the problems. But it didn't stop the problems, nor did it show me how to be 'me' without being in fear of someone all the time, without needing someone else's validation in order to believe that my skills as a writer as a creative person were authentic and loving – in order to feel safe...

Who am I if I'm not a writer? Giving myself permission to take off this funnel, to remove this narrative that my value and worth is measurable according to someone else through the creative expression that is 'writing' was the ultimate, critical change I made so that I could face the parts of me who were afraid, who believed I had failed, that I was wrong, that I didn't know how to do this thing I loved...

Yes, I am a writer, but that is one part of me. And that part, now, is stand-alone authentic and doing her best to value herself and find joy in the acts of writing. I can choose who I want in my creative life based on my intuition, my self-love, and the process of trusting my body and mind in any creative process I undertake. I made new friends, new writing groups, and though I still mourn the losses incurred, I feel more 'me' than ever before.

5. What are the key components to cultivating the courage to continue the creative journey no matter what happens? (5 min)

1. LISTENING - Listening to your body. Listening to your intuition – which for me, is a communication in my body. Listening to your ‘parts’ ‘selves’ because they have important messages, and emotions come up to protect me from my core fears.
2. PAUSE – To pay attention to the what my body/spirit is saying, and to decipher what is fear-based/coping and what are next actionable steps. This is the space of ‘not knowing’ – it’s the work part of figuring out how I’m feeling and why.
3. ASK FOR HELP – I could not heal alone. I needed help from everything to packing up my space to figuring out what was wrong with my eye. I needed to ask for help because I didn’t know how to not feel so afraid...
4. MOURN – giving time and energy to grief, to acknowledging the ‘deaths’ in changing because change is necessary and can take time and can be difficult... but it is also incredible and divine...
5. KEEP CREATING – courage lives in all the components, but it especially lives in the choice to continue to create – whatever it is! – because creativity as an outlet for our suffering and pain, and also joy and love – I continued to write despite the voices that were screaming I didn’t know how and I was wrong and racist – I also started sewing, and collaging, and dancing and swimming – being in creative endeavours to heal.