

THINK POSITIVE.

Writing helps author overcome grief after father's murder

by Richard Amery

If anyone knows how to turn a negative into a positive, it is Calgary-based poet/author Margot Van Sluytman, who was in Lethbridge to speak at the Restorative Justice conference at the Lethbridge Lodge on Saturday.

While she has always written poetry, her father's 1978 murder during a Brinks armoured car robbery when she was only 16, outside a Bay store in Scarborough led her to start writing as catharsis for her personal healing.

"He was in on his day off for an hour or two and never came home," related the Guyana, South American born woman, while the Dixie Chicks' "Not Ready to Make Nice" plays in the background of the Cotton Blossom Lounge.

"It was devastating. I felt that I had died," she said. But while "Not Ready to Make Nice" might apply to other victims of violence, it definitely doesn't apply to this upbeat 46-year-old, who in 2001 decided to use her writing to help both victims and perpetrators of violence. It has reached a lot of people, most notably her father's murderer Glen Flett.

An e-mail from Flett eventually led to the two meeting and "making nice".

"I was shocked," she said, adding forgiveness might be too strong of a word to use in the situation.

"Forgiveness is a big word. Forgiveness is about each individual, not about what society tells you to do," Van Sluytman said, adding she was returning home from receiving an award at the National Association for Poetry Therapy conference in Portland, Ore., when she received an email from someone named Flett with a \$100 donation for her independent press, Palabras. It ended up being from Flett's wife, but it sparked a relationship and a meeting.

"I'd never received a donation before," she said, adding she later learned he didn't want to send the e-mail because he thought it might cause problems.

Her books and program called the Sawbonna Project (South African for I See Your Soul) explain the meeting. The workshops, which sprung from the books, are used in colleges, universities, healing and spiritual centres and online.

“I’m glad she (Flett’s wife) sent it,” she said. While she received an apology from Flett, who served 14 years of a life sentence for the murder, it wasn’t enough. She wanted to meet him in person and read his body language to see if it was genuine, so they met on July 16th 2007 then formalized the ceremony with a native smudging ceremony in New Westminster, B.C..

“I told him my heart believes you but I want to see your face. It was very powerful,” she said adding after a lot of correspondence, she met Flett’s wife and kids and found, much to her surprise, that they had very similar personalities.

“I’m extremely intense. I’m single minded about hope and gratitude. I’m difficult, I challenge people but my energy is quite positive,” she said.

“I met his 11-year-old daughter Victoria and she said ‘Dad, she’s just like you,’” Van Sluytman related, emphasizing she would not recommend all victims and offenders meet.

“I don’t encourage anybody to do anything other than trust their heart,” she stressed adding both victims and offenders need to be respected for their humanity.

“This is not about my family. I can only speak for myself. My family doesn’t really understand it but they love me. They were more concerned about my safety. They wanted to make sure it wasn’t affecting me physically and emotionally,” she continued, emphasizing restorative justice always comes down to a personal choice.

“It’s not about meeting the victim or meeting the offender, it’s about the process of restoring your humanity,” she continued adding she is thankful Flett found a chaplain to work with while in jail.

“Restorative justice speaks to hope and possibility. This was a small miracle. It’s not a prescription to do anything but it can offer hope,” she said, adding while poetry and writing is her voice for dealing with her grief, it’s not everybody’s. Her new book, *The Other Inmate: Mediating Justice-Mediating Hope* was released in September and she is already working on her next.

“Victims have to grieve and feel their pain in their own way. They should never feel ashamed of their grief or anger,” she said.

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FINDING A SONG ~ Dancing the Words

by Margot Van Sluytman

For those who wish to sing, there is always a song.

Swedish Proverb

Senseless violence with the murder of my father, Theodore Van Sluytman, in Toronto, in 1978, completely devastated me. At sixteen, I was thinking about marks, pimples, and volleyball. When I found out from a very tall police officer that my Dad was dead, my world changed. Forever.

As if rooted in the soil of anguish and pain, I felt that no matter how fat or thin I was, I could not walk without dragging the entire universe of sorrow with me. At that time, healing from that anguish was not even a concept. One healed a bloodied knee, or a broken bone; one did not fathom what it might mean to heal a broken heart, to never again enter the world without unspoken anguish and raw incomprehension.

In a very simple, profound, and subtle way, I did enter healing, however. Words not only saved my life i.e. reading and writing. But eventually gave me my life back. In reading about an award I received from the Foundation for the National Association for Poetry Therapy, for your work in facilitating growth experiences through experiential workshops in writing and healing voice, Glen Flett, the man who murdered my Dad contacted me. And I chose to respond. We met. We shared hope and forgiveness. My Father, Theodore Van Sluytman, was renewed, resurrected, alive once again in my soul.

I now use the words/palabras/poetry in my unfolding vocation working in Restorative Justice. I now know restoration and transformation. And I know something else besides, and it is this: No one can tell you how to feel. No one can ever enter your personal journey, your story, and your life. Your journey through healing is your own. I do not believe that any of us is exempt from raw savage pain. I do believe however that compassion for ourselves and for others leaves room for the beginnings of dialogue, challenging dialogue, with what it means to enter our life with a view to finding and or creating new normals that can in time include renewed hope. Words, writing my own, reading those of others, have nourished and continue to nourish me; and offered me the gift of being able to share hope and possibility with others in my work with victims and offenders.

I am filled with utter gratitude because the man who killed my father cares about what he did. His actions and words express that, and that matters to me. This is one aspect of Restorative Justice and hope. Only one. Ram Dass' words speak to me in relation to the fact that Glen Flett and I have met, and have shared in ritual of hope and transformation:

You and I are the force for transformation in the world. We are the consciousness that will define the nature of the reality we are moving into.

I believe that the encounter we have shared asks me to acknowledge how I might participate as a force of transformation, and reminds me that my pen to the page, that sharing my work with Expressive Writing with others, can and does bring about new and required paradigms. A deep sense of being supported continues to fill me. In sharing this short essay now, I feel supported. You are too. That we have choice to give and receive kindness and hope has been highlighted for me in knowing that life always asks us, as Gandhi said, to participate in being the change we wish to see. We can find the songs we need, we can in fact write them, we can read them, we can trust. And we need many, many songs. Many poems. Many dances with words.

© Margot Van Sluytman

Margot Van Sluytman teaches individuals how to write their voice to find healing and transformation.

*She is the author of twelve books of poetry, including: *The Other Inmate: Mediating Justice-Mediating Hope. Poetry and Workbook for Restorative Practices and Dance With Your Healing: Tears Let Me Begin to Speak.* Her book *Sawbonna: Dialogue of Hope*, to be published in 2009, received praise from Sister Helen Prejean, who wrote *Dead Man Walking*.*

Margot has been invited to share her work with victims and offenders across Canada and the US.

<http://www.Sawbonna.com> <http://MargotVanSluytman.com>

<http://www.nald.ca/litweb/province/ab/acea/newslet/sept07/1.htm>

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