

Our Stories Matter

Episode 6: Healing Through Poetry with Annalisa Enrile

Sam Lazalde: [00:00:00] Welcome to *Our Stories Matter*. I'm Sam Lazalde.

Susie Hess: [00:00:32] And I'm Susie Hess.

Sam Lazalde: [00:00:33] *Our Stories Matter* is hosted by Trauma Informed LA and the amazing music by Torrence Brannon Reese, founding member of the music group, Street Corner Renaissance. *Our Stories Matter* at Locals Only acknowledges the Gabrielino and Tongva peoples as the traditional land caretakers of the Tovaangar, the Los Angeles basin in Southern Channel Islands. We pay our respects to the Honuukvetam, our ancestors; the 'Ahihirom, our elders; and 'eyoohiinkem, our relatives and relations past, present, and emerging.

Susie Hess: [00:01:13] Today, we are excited to introduce my good friend and colleague, Dr. Annalisa Enrile. Annalisa Enrile is a professor of social work at USC Suzanne Dworak-Peck School of Social Work, turning classrooms into brave spaces to train the next generation of change makers. She traces her roots back to the Philippines, where she became a human rights defender and anti-trafficking warrior. She continues to work on both sides of the Pacific and across other oceans fighting to end modern day slavery.

Annalisa believes in the transformative power of stories, the beauty of poetry to heal, the strength of community and the promise of innovation and design. Her poetry book, *The Bliss Point*, is available to order. So please contact her directly at annalisaenrile@icloud.com.

So, welcome!

Annalisa Enrile: [00:02:00] Thank you for having me. I'm so excited to be here.

Susie Hess: [00:02:02] Yes, I'm so excited to have you and to hear you. So maybe we could start off by just talking about your why in terms of healing through poetry.

Annalisa Enrile: [00:02:10] I've always written poetry. So ever since I was a child, I, you know, would write little rhymes, which I realized was poetry.

And in high school, I realized that I loved words. I loved how they sounded. I loved how they really fit together, but mostly I loved how they made people feel. So sometimes I found that I couldn't express myself, but if I wrote a poem, it carried the messages of things that I wanted to say.

I always think back to when you're an adolescent, it's really hard to know yourself, right? There's a lot of things you go through. And I realized that pressure of wanting to be seen and how people see you, you know, it is really difficult to navigate. So my, the beginning of my poetry, I think started by really trying to have that expression of explaining who I was. And I think that, you know, 30 years later, that's kind of still what I'm writing about.

So my first piece is about people seeing me. And it's called, *How Is It That You See Me?*

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How is it that you see me as silent shadow, unable to move beyond you?

A little girl on the sidelines, my arms lifted up, waiting for you to carry me away from my reality.

How is it that you see me that you think it would be so simple to knock me down, knock me around, bring me to my knees.

Is it because I looked at you with trusting eyes or believed in you so openly?

What am I to you that your need is to conquer me?

Do you see a woman so full of desperation, she would swallow any amount of degradation; a girl, so needy of romance, she'd throw away her every dream, her every chance?

But what you may view as cowardice, as weakness, as a fault was nothing more than human error, me loving you at all.

The heart you attempted to destroy, the soul you thought to keep, the body you chose to be all made of steel, iron courage, enough to rise out of your betrayal, walk away from your deceit.

How was it that you saw me? So meek, you were so certain that it would be so easy to crush me.

Was it because you saw my hands, so manicured and ladylike and folded on my lap, like I wouldn't fight you back?

These hands? These are the hands that have worked in the fields, birthed babies to their first breath, handled M16s and held Lola at her death. I have been in the fire of revolution. I am part of the discussion of origin and evolution.

In a few short years, I have been beat down, thrown around, wrote the book, became a professor, joined a mass movement, started my own chapter; took back the night, joined in the fight against police brutality; worked in unions and pickets, trying to end modern day slavery. I have been a Fulbright Scholar and traveled around the world. I have lived with peasants and with queens, battled the multinational capitalists, fascist regimes of the US and the Philippines.

I am a sister, a daughter, a friend, a ninang, an auntie, a teacher, a student, a komare, a wife, and a lover. I'm an activist struggling with my community. I'm a poet needing justice to be free. I'm a pinay with a PhD.

So how was it that you saw me? When you never did at all.

Sam Lazalde: [00:05:27] Wow.

Annalisa Enrile: [00:05:28] Thank you.

Sam Lazalde: [00:05:31] That was beautiful.

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Annalisa Enrile: [00:05:32] Thank you.

Sam Lazalde: [00:05:33] Thank you for sharing that with us.

Annalisa Enrile: [00:05:34] Thank you.

Sam Lazalde: [00:05:35] In your poem, you listed a number of things you, that you've done through your healing journey. Being that you're teaching at a university and you're, in being of influence on all these different levels, what does it mean to you to address trauma through poetry?

Annalisa Enrile: [00:05:52] A lot of times, we think that there's some magic formula when you have gone through a difficult experience and there's different stages like that you have to go through. You know, coming from a low income community, being a woman of color, I know that sometimes those steps don't fit. You know, poetry for me, has really been able to kind of bring truth to my story. And sometimes it's just so difficult.

I think also, it's been a comfort and I know that for other youth that I've worked with and women that I've worked with, sometimes there'll be like a line of poetry that will just get them through a hard time.

Sam Lazalde: [00:06:28] Yeah.

Annalisa Enrile: [00:06:28] You know, Mary Oliver's one of my favorite poets and she wrote a, "tell me, what is it that you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?"

Isn't that a great line?

And so sometimes when I'm really down, like I think about that. Or when I have to make a difficult decision. You know, when you're in a trauma space, sometimes, you know, we always think about fight or flight, but there's also freeze, especially, for those of us that have gone through trauma.

I think that poetry is a great way to address trauma because like I said, it tells our stories in kind of a simple way. And it's also like, you know, in a narrative or in a piece of fiction, you have a long time to unwind your story.

Sam Lazalde: [00:07:07] Yeah.

Annalisa Enrile: [00:07:08] But sometimes, when you're going through trauma, you feel things so intensely about one specific thing and that's both the trauma, but also the healing. So I've always found also that poetry helps to make sense of the trauma that we've experienced.

So I wrote this book called *The Bliss Point* and I wrote it at a time where I was really understanding my trauma and coming out of it. So when I was starting to feel alive again, and I realized that my poetry didn't have to be about making a political point or, you know, telling someone what it is and dropping the mic, that could it be, it could be softer and it could be about these other feelings that we don't always talk about.

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So I'm going to share one with you.

Sam Lazalde: [00:07:52] Yeah, please.

Annalisa Enrile: [00:07:53] Okay. So this is many favorite poem out of the book. It's called Navigations. It's a little bit sexy. So I have that to...

[laughter]

My mouth travels the terrain of your skin

Hills and valleys, lips that race the shelter of your back, broad stances and muscles

that jump at my touch, at the juncture of your hip.

Leading smooth planes into promises, tongue swirls over your heat.

Corundum wrapped in silk pushes past all boundaries, eclipsing all thought.

Eyes caught in yours, guiding through arroyos of emotion, deep cross cutting so that I cannot speak the words out loud. Instead, I memorize the coordinates of your pleasure, sketch the meridian so that I might find them in the dark.

I settle into our confluence and follow. Leaping off palisades into your embrace, you will hold tight bringing down my presidio of uncertainty until rivulets of desire pool into an ocean of craving, ebullient waves. Toss me back and forth.

Me, a girl from an archipelago, islands buffeted by storms and harbors and sweet winds crashing against you. A boy landlocked and rooted.

It takes my breath away.

The topography of you and me.

Sam Lazalde: [00:09:10] Sexy [laughter]

Annalisa Enrile: [00:09:14] To be able to kind of get in touch with those feelings, that's really what poetry has been able to do for me. When you're going through trauma, you just feel almost enveloped in it. And, between what you're feeling and what's, you know, you're really experiencing, there's like a lot of layers, and for me, poetry has been of like the knife that cuts through that.

Susie Hess: [00:09:35] After you do write, what are you feeling afterwards, like as compared to before you start writing?

Annalisa Enrile: [00:09:41] I think there's a lot more clarity, if I'm writing about a particular situation or experience. But also there's this sense of satisfaction of being able to put something that I thought was so big, whether it be good or bad and kind of immovable, being able to capture that on paper. And maybe this is something that a lot of different artists feel, you know, depending on their media, but being able to like, just kind of capture that bit of art and this kind of immense satisfaction, like at being able to create something.

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The first thing I do is like call my best friend and I'm like, listen to this. You know, like no matter where she is, and you know, and usually she's okay, quick, quick, quick. And that's really funny. Like it was, hard to kind of write about, you know, those softer spaces, but I think also we're learning more and more that those are so important, in the healing process.

Susie Hess: [00:10:30] They're beautiful and they're powerful and healing for me. And I'm wondering, as I was thinking that, how do you see this as community healing? How do you see poetry as community healing?

Annalisa Enrile: [00:10:41] I have at some points taught community organizing at the School of Social Work, and I always tell my students, because it seems like very difficult, like to think about huge communities or cities, but I always tell them like, communities are composed of people.

And so in this sense, I think communities are composed of stories. And I've always been the kind of researcher that really kind of wants to get in there and get immersed in a community. You know, I wrote a book on human trafficking and the best part of it was like listening to like thousands of stories that people told, even though they were difficult to hear like the beauty of human survival, I think.

And so I've written a lot of poems based on stories that people entrust me with and also as an opportunity to be aspirational or inspirational to communities. So you think that just like putting up a beautiful mural in a community, poetry has the ability to galvanize with words, communities.

Sam Lazalde: [00:11:39] Speaking of communities, is that, would you say that's what would drive this towards maybe being a little political?

Annalisa Enrile: [00:11:46] Definitely. You know, Audre Lorde calls poetry a revelation of experience. And she says that poetry is not a luxury, but it's a necessity because it takes our hopes and our dreams and it turns them I'm into survival and change. First through words, then through ideas and then into tangible action.

And that's really what political means to me is the ability to move towards social justice and literally move people, like to have words that move people. So I wrote this poem, for Violence Against Women Day, which is November 25th. It like of kicks off the 16 days of activism against gender violence.

This is the one I really am excited to share with you. Okay. This is also going back to the community piece, a collection of stories that I was able to get from women who are trafficked or who were political prisoners, and could easily be like a book of X amount of chapters. But again, the power, I think of poetry to bring it into one space.

[music]

I have been touched by violence.

I stand before you scars raised

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over satin skin bruises,
black, blue, yellow, deep within.
Words lashed into my back
bitch, slut, whore,
curving over, breaking me in half
no protection from attack.
I have been held captive by violence,
cradled by ironworks of backlash,
shackled for your gain,
a hot commodity pulsing pain
by eyes that follow each step
surveillance and impenetrable regret
trapping me in its oppressive confines
house arrest, ties that bind
900,000 women trafficked.
I have been raped by violence.
Body used, loss of freedom, no expression.
Every six minutes.
This is not about sex.
It is about teaching me, a woman, a lesson.
So call it what you will.
Date, stranger, weapon of war, it is still violation.
I have been brutalized by violence.
Fists raining down, kicks to the ground
pound, pound, pounding away the need to resist.
Sitting on cold blocks of ice cigarette burns into my flesh
sensory deprived blinders to my eyes.

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Ascorbic acid takes lives.

I have been raised by violence

in legal hallways, rules of thumb, sexist speeches, hold my tongue

testimony strung out and rearranged, low bail, low sentence, TRO,

but no one is restrained except for woman's fate.

VAWA it's here now, but it is decades late.

I have been witness, judge and jury to violence.

It's tears, cascades, slowly, rivers of fury

from streams of devastation, anguish so keen

that I can't even see the way to retribution.

Is there justice or as Faith put it, only justice by way of a piece

And if I find them, hunt them down and hurt them, will that buy me some release?

Cause I drown in violence, choking on a cataclysmic world.

So imperialistic that I am to be owned, cowed, and beaten

capitalist plunder, colonial surrender

the sword, the cross, indigenous loss

land slipping through our hands, wrestled into slavery.

Bury my heart at wounded knee.

I have lived in violence.

But I say enough,

stand up, speak out, raise my fists, soul tough

because violence cannot contain me

rename me, blame me, victimize, tacticize, eulogize, confine me, define me

because violence does not get a victory

because I always find a way with no apology

fight to return to the women we could be, used to be

not one in three, but a billion, a trillion, an endless line, strong sublime

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fierce women because

I always get up again.

You always get up again.

We always get up again.

Always find a way to hope again.

Relentless violence does not get to win.

[music]

Susie Hess: [00:15:43] That is incredibly powerful and also coming from my own personal experience of intimate partner violence, that just gave me goosebumps and is incredibly healing and moving. And for me, and I'm wondering for other people, if there is that connection of not feeling alone in the pain, And knowing that you're getting back up again and also I'm hearing you and thinking, I wish I could write like this.

I wish I could be, I would be able to discharge a lot of that pain through poetry. And so as people are listening and feeling and connecting and maybe wanting to try, what are your thoughts about how someone could start?

Annalisa Enrile: [00:16:26] So I think everyone can write, and I think that poetry is a medium that anyone can engage in. You know, as a survivor of different types of violences myself is the power of words to heal has been incredible because of the people that hear it and resonate. So you don't hold it in yourself.

Even when I've been able to heal, I always think about all the other women especially that haven't been able to. You know, that's really what made me an activist was, you know, we can, we can always fix ourselves, but how do we fix these like unjust systems that have really exploited us.

I always say you have to love words, you know, you really kind of have to love words to go into poetry, and part of what that means is being really precise. And this is where I think it also helps with the trauma, having to really name what you feel, what see, what you hear.

So like don't say blue when you mean indigo. You know, don't say amazing when you mean fireworks. And you know, when you first write, just let it be for you, let it be your own process, and it doesn't even really matter what it sounds like as long as it's your truth. And that's really what people hear is your truth.

Sam Lazalde: [00:17:38] That's so awesome. And right away just brings to mind to me, you know, you're saying the power of words and what that's done for you and your journey through healing. I'm not a poet by any means, but in my own journey, I've utilized journaling to be able to reflect on the different experiences that I've had.

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And, you know, you you said right now, how freeing that's been for you when you share your poetry. Right away, what came to mind is, you know, some of these journal entries, some very special ones, I've taken the time to share with certain people.

Annalisa Enrile: [00:18:13] It changes. It changes you. And I think it also changes them, even if it's just by the act of sharing it.

Sam Lazalde: [00:18:20] Yeah.

Annalisa Enrile: [00:18:21] Yeah. And so that's why a lot of people get hung up on how good is it sound? But, but like I said, it's not really about how good it sounds. Cause I think what people are really hearing is the feeling.

Susie Hess: [00:18:33] I mean, I'm wondering if a lot of it is about, like you said, being real and being authentic and vulnerability does breed connection. So hearing you like, I even I feel like more of a connection with you through what you just read.

Annalisa Enrile: [00:18:45] I definitely agree with that. And, you know, I mean, I have to say, I think I've kind of alluded to it earlier, but when I first wrote this poetry book, which is all about, you know, the different stages of love and, and not just romantic love, but also finding yourself and loving yourself, I was kind of like embarrassed because I thought, Oh my God, I wrote a whole book about love. I'm supposed to be writing about things like violence against women and human rights.

But, but I realized, you know, a really good friend of mine, who's also a great clinician, she said, well, these are the very human feelings that we have to also write about. Also, kind of, get out there.

Sam Lazalde: [00:19:24] I mean, I was, I was just going to say as, as you're saying that what immediately comes to mind is at the core of all of these movements of any sort of social activism is love.

Annalisa Enrile: [00:19:35] Yeah. And that's kind of a revolutionary statement that you just said, I think, cause I think that as a society, we're just learning how to talk about it and saying we're okay with it.

Sam Lazalde: [00:19:46] Yeah.

Annalisa Enrile: [00:19:46] Yeah.

Susie Hess: [00:19:48] So if listeners want to just start putting their thoughts and feelings on paper, what would you suggest that maybe their first steps be?

Annalisa Enrile: [00:19:58] I think just, just starting. There's this, really great project that I do with a colleague of mine, Dr. Smith-Maddox, called keeping it 100. And, when we work with young girls, you know, we tell them sometimes just to write a list of the things that they're feeling or the things that they, think are important.

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And sometimes just creating something that looks like a poem then gives you the confidence to continue writing and continue kind of assembling your thoughts. I think with this generation, also with social media, we see a lot of Instagram poets that are just like these really strong one liners.

Sam Lazalde: [00:20:39] Yeah

Annalisa Enrile: [00:20:40] And I mean, that blows my mind. I'm like, woa, that was a sentence.

Sam Lazalde: [00:20:45] Yeah.

Annalisa Enrile: [00:20:45] But, you know, like really utilizing any way that makes us comfortable. And so, you know, for some people that might mean a journal and for other people that might mean going on their social media and just starting to write their thoughts down.

Susie Hess: [00:21:01] We appreciate you so much. And I mean, you are a deep, badass new friend. I mean, I'm just, I'm blown away by your poetry and I think it's incredibly powerful. And I do feel like there is that depth, like you were saying, Sam of love, and especially in today's current political landscape, people are not seeing it out there as much, which is why we wanted to do this podcast really focused on people's healing journeys. Cause there's so much trauma out there.

Annalisa Enrile: [00:21:27] Yeah, no, I agree. And I mean, I'm so grateful to be able to share, you know, this piece of it. A lot of times, you know, I get asked to speak upon my academic expertise, but I think that there's no almost more articulate expression of these really great experiences that I've been able to engage in, you know, other than the poetry that I've been able to write. And again, you know, I think that, that's really where you see a power in community. I think in two main spaces, other than the love that we were talking about but that's really in how people are connected and how we show up for other people. And I think that the strongest part of storytelling is that we are witnessing each other. That's what a story is, you know? So thank you so much for having me.

Susie Hess: [00:22:20] Yeah, well thank you for allowing us to witness your healing journey. And if folks are interested in checking out her amazing poetry book, *The Bliss Point*, then you can email her at annalisaenrile@icloud.com.

Annalisa Enrile: [00:22:32] Thank you.

Sam Lazalde: [00:22:33] Annalisa, thank you so much.

Annalisa Enrile: [00:22:35] You wanted butterflies pumping through your veins,
pulses racing, chasing one breath after another
lost in excitement and enraptured with possibility.

You wanted something novel and original and unique working double time

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to get you what you thought was a creation,

a figment of your imagination come to life.

But how could you have all that?

When the sun rose and set the same way

in every part of the world you found yourself in

how could you have closed your eyes and spun arms outstretched

when you were weighed down by your own pessimism?

When people ceased to be wondrous and everything was shockingly ordinary?

Thrill seeker on the age. on the edge of space time banalities

could you stir your spirit and the simplicity of the sublime

or has all intention, meditations on the extraordinary left you cold?

Have you forgotten or shunned everyday miracles, minute, but profound connections.

The slight touch that sets off ripples of change,

the imperceptible shift of a crossroads.

This is the dark side of satisfaction, of immediate gratification, of access and abandon.

And as much as you long for something to move you, to push you, to hurl you, headlong into ecstasy it does not happen.

You do not let go because you still fall into the grooves of the same patterns that keep you bound to mediocrity and chained to the status of expectation.

I don't know the answer to true liberation, but I know that it can't be bought or sold, commodified or serviced.

It is hard won in conflict ridden, moral high ground in grassroots exhilaration

pouring out of something that breaks open when you risk the chance to feel

compelled to taste the independence and unfurl wings.

Butterflies do not flutter lightly in our stomachs.

They break through cocoons and then they revel.

[music]

Sam Lazalde: [00:24:36] *Our Stories Matter* is brought to you by Trauma Informed LA, whose mission is to foster resilient communities that promote healing and wellbeing through

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collaboration, education, and community engagement. Check us out on Facebook and Instagram at Trauma Informed LA.

And our website, traumainformedla.org. Please give us five stars on iTunes so more folks can have access and donate to traumainformedla.org so we can keep recording and healing through our storytelling episodes.