El color favorito

By Valeria Tentoni

Sample translated by Emmanuel Boakye

I've been interviewing writers for almost two decades and I still haven't learned how to write. This isn't something that worries me at all. Maybe it even makes me happy.

D. T. Suzuki says that Buddhism is essential for maintaining a learner's mindset. That in the mind of one who's just begun, there's space for everything. That the worst horse is the best horse. That, in theory, a horse like yourself can still improve.

My teacher, for example, never went to a literary workshop, he said that he had formed himself simply by reading. There was something that he repeated when he felt that we were depressed: he had never had a pupil write as poorly as himself when he first started.

'If there was hope for me, there is hope for everyone,' he chanted.

As for me, in that time I never learned how to write, but I learned other things. Before interviewing writers in the meantime I interviewed a wide variety of people. I interviewed doctors, stars, actresses, collectors, shopkeepers, luthiers, child violinists, adult violinists, families of geniuses and geniuses themselves. There were burglary victims, victims of fires, victims of the state, lawyers, activists. Not soldiers though, even though one time I did board a warship. Why, I interviewed animal rights activists and once met a woman who raised a rat how someone else would raise a child.

On request, and in over the top fashion, I interviewed a widowed couple who had decided to melt the rings of their first marriages to cast the rings of the second. They went to the cemetery together to mourn and consoled each other upon returning to the house. The woman spoke to me about her first husband like she was infatuated; it was obvious that she preferred him in spite of his passing. As thanks for the interview, which lasted several hours, she gave me a copy of the first issue of the newspaper that I was writing for. Like everything she told me, I don't remember where exactly I've stored it. But I do know that I have it.

I also interviewed the best pianist in the city: he was hidden away like a gargoyle on the top floor of an art deco building, which had the vibe of a government office. He had silently returned to the country after having spent years in Europe entertaining the last princes of this world. To my surprise, because he had a limp, when I entered his home I found him on his feet, upright like a flagpole. He used one hand to support himself with the table and the other to sweetly encourage me to have some tea. If this took a lot of effort, he didn't allow

me to get a whiff of it. He flashed the same smile that he had offered me upon arriving: it was a great smile, a frank and enthusiastic one. A sincere smile, hopeful, and full of promises.

The first thing that I asked him was what was the most beautiful colour that he had seen in his life. I don't know why I asked him that, but I haven't stopped asking that question since.

Understanding the impact of a question isn't so easy. Irrevocable, even the most well-thought-out questions set off unknown triggers from a different time, with a misguided casualness towards the interviewee.

A question is like a marine animal that opens and closes, a jellyfish. It advances, agile and determined, galloping through the black ocean. Hidden in its translucent body is a fluorescent pearl and its path illuminates, sometimes faintly, sometimes blindly, forests and deserts. It's not running away. Its movements are more sincere than those of someone that's evasive. We follow its trace with the inkling that, sooner or later, it will surrender its light to us, and with the power of a lightning strike.

For a very brief moment, so brief that we doubt its existence, we will be aware alongside our question. The instant is as short as the time that a body is without shadow at midday. But the answer is a result that we are barely responsible for: the question is a lantern of inappropriate light, like a moon that rises before a sun.

In 1993, I was asked a question that changed my life completely, even though I couldn't have known it then.

I was seven years old and the teacher issued reading comprehension exercises. We took turns and finished reading aloud a story about a magician and a rabbit. I copied the questions from the board in my notebook. Around the pencil, which started to smudge over time, the teacher's blue ink endured. So I find, intact, her massive support: 'How lovely!' it says in the left margin. The sign of encouragement had been caused by one of my answers; the answer to the second reading comprehension question from the story.

The question was simple.

The answer was simple, even though a bit unexpected.

'Would you like to be a magician?'

'No, because I am going to be a writer.'

The jellyfish opens, the jellyfish closes. Should I have responded I do? That being a magician was fine? That it was a sufficiently spectacular destiny to follow at seven? That I would have been satisfied with taking out and putting back rabbits from a hat? Could I have

simply said no? Was it that day that I fell in love with questions, of what a question can provoke in someone else?

The colour question, for example, has different frequencies. Sometimes it's more relevant than other questions, and I still don't know why they answer it, what hidden nerve it's touching, but nobody refuses to answer it. I do know that I need indirect paths, secret passages of ambush. I need siege strategies that cause mutual surrenders, because in the gentle war of an interview surrender begets discovery.

Once I interviewed a musician and writer that also painted. He welcomed me to his workshop, surrounded by canvases. He relaxed in a swivel chair and spoke how he started, how he continued, and how he was going to finish.

He was on the cusp of turning ninety.

I asked him why green was the most prevalent colour in his work, brimming with forests and rural paths, of flowers and rivers. He told me that he disagreed that green was his primary colour, which forced me to rephrase.

'So what colour would you not be able to stop painting with?'

'Purple. It's everywhere. Since purple is the decomposition of light. When it's sunset, light appears purple. And yellow is purple's other half, since it becomes purple afterwards. Meanwhile, it's yellow, on route becoming purple… There are colours which are the legacy of each. Do you want me to tell you the truth? People don't know what's inside of them. Nor the reason for it. Each human being is a universe. And that's why I think no two paintings can be the same. Your sense of self is constantly in flux because with the passage of time you will be another. I never thought, for example, that I was going to paint a purple face like that.'

The teacher had given us, without hesitation, a powdery weapon that lingered in the air as white chalk particles. Now I too could use words to say something; I could organise them in a row and give them feeling, direction; a destiny.

Soon, and also without hesitation, I started to write stories. I don't remember anyone encouraging me to do it, but neither did anyone stop me. It was a solitary and private game that expanded the limits of my room, the insignificant radius of my celestial sphere.

For many years I remained inside of this secret world, writing in absolute innocence and it was recently in another city that I realised, as if a wild, nocturnal looting had occurred in a certain part of my conscience, that would not be enough. That enthusiasm would not be enough. That will would not be enough. That writing was not a gift, a natural advantage, a gift from the sky, a never-ending lucky day.