

WHEN MOURNING TURNS INTO DANCING *

OUTING OUR UNTOLD STORIES

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Foreword

Seeing that I am a fulltime writer and not a narrative therapist, I felt particularly honoured when Elize Morkel invited me to do a presentation at the October 2009 Narrative Therapy Conference in Cape Town. When she read my book *Miriam Dancing*, Elize noticed that many of the ways in which I had collected and recorded women's stories, shared significant similarities with the ways narrative therapists work with their clients' stories.

1. Introduction

Published in August 2009, *Miriam Dancing*, an anthology of women's narratives, is the result of two years of personal interviews and email correspondence with a group of South African women who are romantically attracted to other women. All of these women have been subjected to the hetero-Christian story perpetuated by the church, conservative communities and their families. Feelings of guilt, shame, isolation, depression, spiritual confusion, and internalised homophobia are the consequences of trying to live according to the norms of this hetero-Christian narrative. Trying, time and again, to suppress the narrative of one's love for and physical and emotional connection to other women, culminates in a sense of isolation and disempowerment.

Sometimes a suppressed story feels like a silent scream from the heart. This unheard scream grows and grows inside of us until it feels as if all our inner space is filled with this voice that may not speak out. Life in the closet for a lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or intersex person becomes the secret place where we struggle with the pain of feeling unheard and unaffirmed – pain that affects the very way we live and breathe and have our being.

In spite of a remarkably tolerant and inclusive constitution, homophobia is alive and well in South Africa, and manifests in its most unadulterated form in religious fundamentalism and hate crimes against LGBTI people – black lesbians in particular.

* My title refers to a text in Psalm 30: "God, you turned my mourning into dancing; you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy, that my heart may sing to you and not be silent." (verses 11-12)

When I started *Project Miriam Dancing*, I had three primary objectives in mind:

- To provide a space for a group of lesbian, bisexual and transgender women to tell their own stories, emphasising the ways in which they endeavoured to integrate sexuality and spirituality in order to celebrate their true identities.
- To produce a book that other women in similar situations could read - so that they might recognise their own experience and discover that they were not alone – that they were part of a host of like-minded and like-hearted women.
- To create a tool (the book) with which I, and others like me, could challenge the church to a greater awareness of the terrible damage that is being done to many women in the name of a heterosexual male Deity.

In Section 2 I describe the process of researching and producing the book. Two excerpts from the women's narratives are presented in Section 3. In Section 4, a letter to the narrators highlights sparkling moments. Section 5 focuses on an interview with one of the narrators, and Sections 6 and 7 touch briefly on the audience participation that concluded my presentation at the conference.

2. *Miriam Dancing* – research and production

2.1 The story behind *Project Miriam Dancing*

“There comes a time when silence is a betrayal. And some of us who have already begun to break the silence of the night, have found that **the calling to speak is often a vocation of agony, but we *must* speak.**”

(Martin Luther King, in a public speech in 1967, criticising the USA's war in Vietnam.)

In more ways than one, the writing of this book was my own vocation of agony. As a lesbian Christian, I carried the emotional scars of homophobia in my own heart. Having been a counsellor in a predominantly gay/lesbian church for many years, I was aware that many people shared similar scars. South Africa, in particular, is made up of very conservative communities, and the norms and values of these communities are firmly founded in religion. The hetero-Christian narrative has one version of what love should look like – a man and a woman loving each other, and celebrating and deepening their love through marriage – this is what God blesses. Any other kind of love between two human beings is “wrong, sinful and unacceptable

in the sight of God". Even to acknowledge such love, is to risk judgement and rejection.

This became my issue: How could I challenge this situation? How could I make a difference? I needed to speak out, to do something positive in order to find a path to inner healing and spiritual equilibrium. *Miriam Dancing* reveals an alternative narrative that I and others like me, may tell to ourselves, our families and the church, and may keep on telling, and telling, until we believe and are believed. To my surprise, this book has become much more than just an alternative way of looking at love; much more than a diary of mourning about the unfair ways in which we have been treated. It has become a symbol of celebration – the dance of a strong woman – of many strong, brave women, who have had the courage to speak their truth – to tell their real stories, come what may; to turn their mourning into dancing.

When I started *Project Miriam Dancing*, I decided to focus my research on South African women who had grown up in Christian families, and who had belonged (or still belong) to a Christian church of one kind or another; women who loved women. I interviewed women of all ages, women representing a diversity of races and cultures, city women as well as women in small towns and rural areas, women who were open and out about their sexual identities, but also women who were hiding their identities from their families. I wanted to capture their stories, to give a voice to people who have had to remain silent, for many years, about who they really were. Initially I planned to interview only lesbian women, but I was introduced to bisexual and transgender women along the way, and included them in the project.

Several women were silenced before they could tell their own stories. (*WE WEEP FOR OUR SISTAHS*, one of the narratives, mourns their deaths.) Recently a number of black lesbians in South Africa were raped and killed in hate crimes. I decided to honour these women every time I present my book – so that we may never forget those whose voices have been silenced.

2.2 The process

Before launching the project, I compiled a questionnaire. These 20 questions centred around women's experiences of discovering their own identity, finding a spiritual home, dealing with the challenge of coming out, being "different" in a conservative community, dealing with homophobia, falling in love, and forming perceptions of God,

Christ and the Bible. This questionnaire was mailed or emailed to women who considered participating in the project.

Responses to this questionnaire gave me a first indication of specific areas in a participant's personal experiences that might eventually become the core of her story. This enabled me to formulate three or four particularly probing questions that would take our first face-to-face interview to a deeper and more intimate level. (I reassured the women that at any stage during the process, they were free to withdraw their participation, whatever their reasons might be.)

Once I had received a participant's responses to these follow-up questions, I arranged a first interview at a place of her choice (her home, a coffee shop, the house of a friend, or her place of work). Our meeting typically lasted from one to three hours, and in most cases concluded with our arranging a second meeting a couple of weeks later. During my interview with the participant, I did my utmost to write down a verbatim report of her responses to my questions, as I wanted to capture not only specific factual details, but also the tone, style and idiolect of the woman. At this stage, the participant would already be aware that in order to capture the story on paper, I would act as the "scribe" – a peculiar mix of editor and biographer. I assured the narrator that ultimately she would have the final say regarding every single aspect related to her story. She could decide which details would be included or omitted. She had the final say regarding the names of individuals and organisations that had played a role in her life, and the title of her story. I would also respect her choice of terminology around God, religion and her sexuality. I made it clear that her story would be presented under her own name (or her chosen pseudonym, should she prefer to remain anonymous).

In the period between the first and the second interview, I made a selection from all the material available to me (written responses to the questionnaire and additional questions, as well as verbatim recordings of details the interviewee had shared with me). Then I sat down to write a first draft of her story, trying to be sensitive to central metaphors and symbols emerging from her telling. Such a metaphor or metaphors often served as the "backbone" of the particular story, to be fleshed out later with finer details, sequences of events, as well as the narrator's personal interpretation of her reactions to experiences. Before meeting the woman for a second interview, I would email or phone her again to clarify specific details or to verify biographical information that I needed to include in my initial draft of her story.

During the month after our second interview, I elaborated on my first draft, adding information obtained in this interview. Once this was done, the participant was sent my second draft of her story, so that she could correct my errors and comment on elements that did or did not reflect her own perception of what she had shared with me. This step in the process taught me precious life lessons, honed my skills of observation, and also made me aware of the challenges of portraying somebody else's words and ideas. Every one of the participants, without exception, used this phase to change, delete, or elaborate on a significant number of things I had included in my writing of her story. This stage of the process proved to be a tough one for most of the participants, as the majority of them were seeing their personal stories in print for the first time in their lives! In addition to this, they were looking at themselves through the eyes of an observer – a “scribe” – and realising how much they had revealed about their personal perceptions, feelings, and experiences. Many emails, several telephone conversations and in some cases, third and fourth meetings, would follow, until the participant was satisfied that the story I had written, more or less reflected important aspects of her *own* experience in her *own* voice.

As I crafted my final versions of these women's stories, I did my utmost to focus on, what is called in narrative therapy, unique outcomes, or sparkling moments that had emerged from the tellings – moments where courage, humour, love or amazing resilience and inner strength shone through women's experiences of loss, confusion, shame or rejection. In the majority of stories, the narrator and I managed to find a clear, strong thread of hope and beauty shining through her story.

But I also had to accept, in the case of a couple of the stories, that the narrator still found herself in a place of such outrage or despair that she was unwilling to let us proceed beyond her place of suffering. And because this was my undertaking from the word go, I accepted her decision to, as we called it still keep the story “in the dark” – my term for what is called in narrative therapy “the problem-saturated story”. Healing takes time, and for me, as an author and lay counsellor, it was a point of honour to recognize and acknowledge an individual's own emotional rhythm.

2.3 Illustrating our stories

Each story is illustrated with a photograph of either the narrator, or her partner, or both. In cases where narrators preferred to remain anonymous, they were photographed with their faces turned away from the camera, or a good friend agreed

to pose in their stead. Although I took most of the photographs myself, I was fortunate enough to include some beautiful pictures taken by other photographers.

3. The narratives

Miriam Dancing is a collection of 28 stories that share many similarities, but vary in tone, contents, style and genre. Below are excerpts from two of these stories:

3.1 *SHALOM* by Theresa Davids, aged 35

On Good Friday in April last year, when I decided to share my secret with my brother, Peter, we were visiting my grandfather's farm outside Vredenburg. Oupa Edward's family loves this farm, which he inherited from his mother, who inherited it a long time ago from her parents. This farm had belonged to a white farmer who stipulated in his will that his slaves should inherit his property. After the death of the farmer, my great-grandfather decided to call the farm *Shalom* (Peace be with you). My brother, Peter, and I were again sitting side by side, as so often before, under the enormous poplar tree at the river. This was our special place, which we sought out every time we visited Oupa's farm. Some distance away, we could hear my brother's sons playing cricket with their cousins.

"Peter, there is something I want to tell you," I said carefully. This was going to be a difficult conversation: "You are the first one in our family to hear this from me now." Peter lifted his head to look at me across his shoulder, waiting for me to continue. "Peter, I am gay. I have known this for years and the time has come for me to tell the family. To come out."

Peter said nothing. Once again I became keenly aware of the sounds of the children's game in the background, and of the two sets of bare feet, Peter's and mine, next to each other here on the riverbank. Patches of sunlight broke through the thick foliage of the poplar tree, making patterns on our legs. Sometime later, I spoke into Peter's silence: "You are welcome to ask me anything you want to know." Peter did not respond. I broke off a blade of grass and crushed it between my fingers. My brother remained silent, unwilling to even make eye contact. After what felt like an eternity, his wife came down the stairs of Oupa's front *stoep* and approached us. As soon as she saw Peter's face, she realised that he was upset.

"What's wrong?" Hannatjie asked.

"Nothing," Peter said gruffly. My sister-in-law turned to me, looking baffled.

“I am gay,” I told Hannatjie, “and today I am going to tell Daddy and them ...”

Half an hour later, my whole family was gathered in the *voorkamer*. Daddy was sitting, dignified, and solemn, as always, in his favourite armchair. Mommy was sitting in the chair next to Daddy’s. My sister, Margaret, sat down beside my Auntie May on the couch. Peter and his wife sat somewhat removed from the rest, next to the front door. I got to my feet and for the third time that day made my announcement: “Today is the day I have to tell you this; I am gay.” (I could have added quite a lot more, like I am still the same Theresa you have always known. I still love God – nothing has changed, really.)

“Now, what nonsense is this?” my mother asked, adding: “I’m one of a whole bunch of sisters and not one of us has ever been like this – doing this kind of thing.” My father cleared his throat and asked: “Theresa, are you going to leave the church now? What will the other men on the church council think of me?” Daddy is the chairman of the church council of the *Volkskerk*.

“I’ll never leave the church, Daddy.”

Today, more than a year later, my family still avoids the subject. Nothing is said about my news. I could just as well never have made my announcement. Yet, Peter is extremely uncomfortable in my presence. For this, I forgive him; whatever his issues are, they are not mine. I have no idea who else in our wider family circle has been informed. But someone must have said something, because last Christmas holiday, when I rushed to the hospital one night to be with Daddy after he had suffered a slight heart attack, I overheard my cousin in the corridor asking my auntie: “Mommy, is it this thing of Theresa’s that broke Uncle George’s heart?”

3.2 THERE IS LIFE AFTER THE 7DA by Gorgeous Rose, aged 40

For the first two dozen years of my life, I was a Seventh Day Adventist – a 7DA – born and bred under the burden of the rigid rules of this mind-boggling belief system. I compiled a list of some of these golden rules. Here is one of them:

Golden Rule 1: The Sabbath is holy

You might not be aware of this, but the “Sabbath” falls, in 7DA (Seventh Day Adventist) speak, on a Saturday. With “holy”, I mean totally, in-your-face HOLY. In

the book of Genesis, we read that, following the six days' travail of creating the world, God took off the seventh day to relax and enjoy some time out. So, what were the practical implications of this enforced Sabbath rest during the years of my childhood? From sunset on Friday evenings, until sunset on Saturday evenings, the following human activities were absolutely prohibited: work of any kind, sports, doing shopping, watching TV or movies, participating in school concerts, school debates, swimming galas, all play, all parties, school outings, even doing one's homework. The list continues. Do you get the idea? Okay, so what was allowed on the Sabbath? C-H-U-R-C-H, sister, church and more church, morning, noon, and night. And youth outreaches in between, to keep us on our toes, so to speak. And out of trouble. And in favour with God.

If I had to make a movie about a typical Friday evening of my youth, I would zoom in on my elder sister, myself and the rest of the 7DA teenagers being dropped off at the local drive-in with plastic bags full of religious tracts to hand out to the poor sinners. This might be the very night of their salvation, and we would be the fortunate ones to catch them for God. Our urban mission field, on these drive-in evenings, smelt of popcorn, hot potato chips and sin; many of the car windows were steamed up in no time as the couples inside sat smooching energetically. But Gorgeous (that's me!) and company would diligently feed our pastel-coloured tracts through the front windows of Opels, Volkswagens, Minis and battered Fords while John Travolta and Olivia Newton-John were break-dancing each other into a hot frenzy. The giant silver movie screen reminded me of the apron of Satan himself, stretching across the starry hips of the sultry and enticing night.

4. Celebrating the sparkling moments

Instead of providing a lengthy description of my collaboration with each participant, I decided to include a letter of appreciation that I wrote to the narrators:

Dear friends

Here we are – all of us, joining the ancient dance of Miriam of the Old Testament – a dance that has taken us through twilight valleys of despair, but also upwards towards hills of hope, where we could lift our faces and feel the sun shining on us.

Thank you for honouring me with your stories – for allowing me to visit you in places of pain, confusion and suffering, and for trusting me to explore those places with you. Thank you for being willing to share those vulnerable places with other women like us. Your stories will encourage them to open their closet doors, when they are ready, and to join the dance. Thank you for showing me the many ways in which hope and beauty emerged in your lives to shine, sparkling like stars in the Milky Way.

- Thank you, Theresa, for allowing me, a white Afrikaner woman, to see you as a young girl, carrying your candle of hope from District Six to St George’s Cathedral during a time when Apartheid forced people of colour to leave the homes they loved. Thank you for revisiting the time when the demon of homophobia made your own family unwilling to believe or accept your brave coming out story.
- Thank you, Elma, for sharing with me your delight in the beauty of a woman’s body – for telling me how the statue of the little mermaid in Denmark allowed you to acknowledge your love for the delicate strength of a woman’s neck and shoulders, her softly rounded breasts and the curve of her hips. Thank you for sharing the poetry of Antjie Krog and George Weideman with me.
- Thank you, Bulelwa, for returning to your chair that harsh Thursday morning in that sad café in Observatory, to continue telling me about the unbearable pain of being beaten by your father, and of losing your little son. I will honour your courage until the end of my days.
- Thank you, Heidi, for insisting that your anger and your sarcasm about fundamentalist attitudes be included in this book – and for boldly refusing to soft-soap the clarity of your criticism.
- Thank you, Jackie and Vera, for sharing with me, and with everyone who will read our book, the precious event of little Dirkie’s birth. Thank you for the hours you giggled, posed and played on your wide double bed in the sunlight, so that I could take an intimate photograph of the three of you: two lovely moms and a baby.
- Thank you, Hester and Lies, for agreeing to stretch far, far beyond your comfort zone; to face my camera, knowing that you would now be outed, and visible, forever, to friends and family.

- Thank you, Chrissi, for being willing to grace the cover of *Miriam Dancing* and for asking me to conduct the sacred union ceremony of you and Morag.
- Thank you, Brandy, for the letter you wrote from your prison cell, providing me with a delightful title for Sharon's story: *LET MY PEN DANCE ALL THE WORDS*.
- Thank you, Judith, for inviting me to your beautiful wedding; where I could see for myself the magnificent floral arrangement your mother had created. Where I could witness your dad signing the wedding register. Knowing you and being allowed to hear and record your story have enriched my life.
- Thank you, Gorgeous Rose, for your humour; Beth Murray, for turning pain into poetry; Crystal, for giving me the metaphor of a swallow being set free to fly; Amanda, for declaring love by means of the voice of your cello. Thank you, Almaaz, for running from the shadows of your past into the sunlight; Karen, for allowing me to use your love story even when you preferred to remain in hiding. Thank you, Lesego, for showing me your grandmother's polished red stoep and your childhood dream of being a Christmas angel. Thank you, Jenny, for redefining sacredness; Koba, for embracing truth; Janine, for your wisdom; Nokuthula, for not giving up; Letty, for celebrating sensuality; Diana, for your lovely Venus image; Retha, for your vulnerability; Irene, for the joy of snowflakes; Prof Elize Botha, for your prayer; Liesie and Jomarié, for poetry.

Thank you, every one of you who contributed her precious story to this volume. May your words sparkle, and dance, and touch thousands of hearts. I respect and honour you. I celebrate the gifts of your vulnerability, your honesty, integrity and your awesome, amazing generosity.

May God bless you and keep you.

Elise

5. Interview with a narrator

Reverend Judith Kotzé agreed to be my presentation collaborator at the conference. (Judith is senior program manager at *Inclusive and Affirming Ministries* and senior trainer at the *More to Life* program.)

Below are the questions I asked Judith:

- Please recall the day when I interviewed you for the book. How did you experience reflecting on themes and issues close to your heart?
- Some weeks after our interview, I sent you my draft of your story. What was your response to seeing your own telling in print for the first time?
- What have you learnt about yourself in this process? What did your story teach you?
- What are the challenges of having a lesbian story to tell to a church that is predominantly hetero-centred in its understanding and teaching of Christian morality?
- Does being a lesbian Christian provide you with specific skills that enable you to listen with empathy and understanding to LGBTI stories?
- How can *Miriam Dancing* be used to initiate meaningful dialogue around the issue of LGBTI sexuality and spirituality?

Our interview lasted about 12 minutes, and the gist of Judith's response was that:

- being interviewed for *Miriam Dancing* gave her a profound sense of really being *heard*;
- seeing her story in writing confirmed her sense that someone had listened to her, had taken her seriously, had understood her message and had valued her story;
- having been part of a research team appointed by the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa to find a way forward for the church and her LGBTI members, felt empowering, but also confirmed a couple of personal frustrations; although Judith is a fully trained theologian, she is not allowed to be ordained as a Dutch Reformed minister. The fact that she is married to a woman and unwilling to remain celibate for the rest of her life, prevents her from being a Dutch Reformed minister. Working alongside Reverend Pieter Oberholzer, the director of *Inclusive and Affirming Ministries*, has provided Judith with meaningful opportunities to fulfil her calling. (The book *Miriam Dancing* is one of the tools *IAM* is using to encourage dialogue with churches.)

6. Reflection

After my interview with Judith, people who attended my presentation were invited to ask questions and to reflect on what Judith and I had talked about. One of the participants suggested that I made a point of keeping the narrators in *Miriam Dancing* informed of how their stories were impacting on the lives of readers.

7. Dancing our stories

At the end of my presentation, I asked participants to celebrate the outing of our true stories. After being handed a scarf (which represented a participant's own story), everyone was invited to take part in a free dance. The way in which we chose to move and incorporate the scarves in our dance, would express how our own silence could be turned into music and how mourning might be transformed into dancing.

When the music ended, we formed a circle, connected to one another by means of the scarves, illustrating how the narratives of our lives connected us to one another and to the rest of humanity.

Endnote

Copies of *Miriam Dancing* (also available in Afrikaans under the title *Miriam Dans*) are for sale at a launch price of R100, and may be ordered from Miriam@iam.org.za. (Postage fee: R20.)