

Furman Engaged: Pain and Hope in the Stories of Women

What does success mean to you? When this question was posed to me last week, my immediate answer was “inspiring others with my words.” I have a love affair with language. I am an English major and a poet because I am fascinated with the human ability to construct chronologies out of the cacophonic chaos of symbols, sounds, and synaptic firings, enthralled with the way we tell stories that give our lives meaning and purpose. I long to pen words that move people, and I believe in the power of stories to make our minds and lives better.

Before I can embark on a journey of linguistic humanitarianism, however, I have to listen. The greatest writers are astute observers of the world around them. They have curious minds and hungry ears, and they recognize the power in the rite of storytelling. In the best cases, these writers listen to both the stories that are oft-told and the ones that are often ignored. Many of these ignored stories are uncomfortable and feared because of the change they might bring, so they are repressed. Their repressors prefer to live comfort rather than truth. Eventually, though, the indefatigable force of truth, like magma too long ignored beneath the surface of the earth, erupts. The eruptions spew stories, ones that are uncomfortable and powerful and good. In the eruptions, we hear phrases like “Sí se puede,” and “Me too,” and we find hope, even amidst pain.

During the 2018 Furman Engaged, I was invited into stories of hope and pain, specifically into stories that discussed the imposed limitations and defiant triumphs of women. I am not a woman. This said, I strive to be a man who cares and listens to the stories of those whose experiences are different than my own. I long to be a part of the movement in my

community towards equality for all people, using my passion for language as a medium for love and change. The first step is listening.

Fortunately, Furman Engaged gave me many opportunities to listen. The first presentations I attended were given by the Women's Gender and Sexuality Studies class. One class presentation I especially enjoyed was about gendered toys¹. These are toys that are earmarked for either boys or girls. The most concerning example given was paired sets of toy kits that suggest for boys a blue "My First Doctor Kit" and for girls a pink "My First Beauty Kit." There is nothing terribly shocking about a boy owning a toy doctor kit or a girl owning a toy beauty kit, but when the two are a corresponding gendered set, they send a limiting message about the differing options available for boys and girls. The presenting group described these toys as leverage points. When toys present stereotypical messages that could teach children limitations based on sex, they offer opportunities for critical conversations between parents and children. Parents get the chance to engage with their children and teach them how to engage with stereotypical messages in a constructive and critical way. Unfortunately, many children do not have an opportunity to engage with their parents in this way, and toy sets like the one mentioned may suggest to a girl that dreaming of being a doctor is for boys; she ought to instead try to be beautiful.

Concerns with the messages our culture sends to girls and women swirled in my head all day. My thoughts found fodder again in the evening at the Art Department's exhibition of senior capstone projects. At the exhibition, I gravitated to three presentations that reclaimed womanhood for the artists and subjects. Heather Brame showed her documentary, *These Days*, a

¹ Presented by Katherine West 2018, Tatiana Oliveira 2019, McKenna Smith 2020, and Amal Momani 2019

film that examines the intersection of womanhood and motherhood by interviewing four women--one young single woman, a mother pregnant by surprise with her first child, a mother of four children below the age of ten, and a middle-aged mother with two adult children who had both “left the nest.” Heather’s film delves into one of the greatest difficulties of modern motherhood--struggling to maintain one’s identity while pouring oneself into molding the identity of a child. In another room, Celia-Luck Leonard’s oil paint portraits of her friends grabbed my attention. Celia invited her subjects to present their bodies in whatever way they chose. What arose was a dynamic series of colorful portraits in various states of dress, a dignified reclamation of the beauty of the female form. Emory Conetta chose embroidery as her medium, sewing messages into several of her childhood dresses. On her childhood school uniform dress, Emory sewed the words that a former principal had spoken about her, “She’s not the smartest girl, but she’s cute and will marry well.”

The women I listened to at Furman Engaged have been bombarded with messages of limitation. They have been told that they could not be doctors and should focus on beautification instead, that they might lose themselves if they give fully to another, that they cannot choose what to do with their bodies, and that their appearance is a saving grace to cover their lack of intelligence. In response, with slowly building strength, they have erupted into expression, rejecting repression and untruth to reclaim their stories. This is the power of storytelling that I long to be a part of, and they gave me a chance to see my vision of success embodied, articulated, and artfully presented. That’s my Furman Advantage.