

Faculty Work Comprehensive List

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A Powerful Medicine

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A Powerful Medicine

Abstract

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A Powerful Medicine

June 15, 2016

I think of it like fingerprinting—fingerprinting for someone’s being-in-the-world.

Anybody can do it. Perhaps the best place to start is with those closest to us. I have three sisters: one with laser intellect able to bless or zero you through her eyes; another with a Phoenix-like power, able to sacrifice her body and make it rise again; and a third with a charisma spoken right from the heart, which effects everyone it touches like pixie-dust.

Then again, it’s a practiced art. Think of the teachers who first name it for us, who watch hundreds of students parade through their classrooms, but who turn to us and name it, the thing in us that we grasp onto and say, “I am _____.”

The “thing in us” that I’m talking about is something akin to the Native American term “medicine,” though that concept is larger and more powerful still, a concept about which I’m not qualified to speak. Humbly, though, I’d still like to borrow this term “medicine,” a term that speaks to one’s powerful effect on the world, an outworking of an individual’s internal qualities.

To name someone else’s medicine takes intimate knowledge or just careful observation plus language, which is why it is so often the domain of teachers or writers. Language undoubtedly plays a role in understanding these things, in “unlocking” them, to tie into the language of self-help, which for my money flattens the concept. In naming a person’s medicine, we cause those qualities to be, we bring them forward from the chaos of personality and give them being that they might be wielded in the world.

In writing terms, to name someone’s medicine is creative nonfiction’s version of characterization, except it’s naming what’s already there. Actually, then, it’s more like simple exposition: naming the power that inheres in a person that is their driving force in the world. Naming someone’s medicine, and knitting various people with their various medicines together, surely transforms the world into a place of possibility.

It’s a skill we could stand to cultivate. Another easy place to start is with the famous. [Muhammad Ali](#)’s self-characterization, “float like a butterfly, sting like a bee,” only captures one aspect of his powerful medicine, one that both continues to ripple in the world and of which we now feel the loss. Currently, I’m spellbound by the wood elf mischief of the basketball player [Steph Curry](#): elusive, playful, masterful.

But mostly, I think, we should look at the people right around us, to name the medicine in the lady we otherwise might look past, in the fellow who has no beauty that we should desire him. There might even be prophetic insight or balm for the world in the act. How much medicine is lost on the world because there is no one to name it?