



Beyond the Book – Canada “Books of Inspiration” Oriaiah Only

KENNEALLY: And finally I want to turn to Oriaiah and welcome her. She is the author of course the inspiration prose poem and international best-selling books, *The Invitation*, which is now in over 15 languages, *The Dance and the Call: Discovering Why You Are Here*, and her latest book, *What We Ache For: Creativity and the Unfolding of Your Soul*, which offers reflections and guidelines for finding and cultivating creative work that is not separated from spirituality. And that’s, I think, a good way to wrap up this discussion here.

But I want to start by telling an uplifting story about the power of the Web. Denyse was just telling us about the Web being a way for people to communicate their anger at her, but *The Invitation* has been quite the opposite sort of thing. And if you can, tell people how it began for you personally, but then how it went out into the world via the Web and how that’s changed your life and others.

ORIAH: Sure. In the spring of 1994, I went to a party. I’m not much of a partier. And it was on the anniversary – this is significant because of the writing that happened afterwards – it on the anniversary of a date when a friend of mine a year before had had a brain aneurysm burst while she was in my home. And when that kind of thing happens very close to you, it has a sense of – reminding us of our mortality and a feeling of not wanting to waste time. So I went to this party, a perfectly nice party. I’m happy to say this hostess has never figured out it was her party. And I came home disgruntled really by the kinds of questions we all ask each other at parties. What do you do for living? Where do you live? Who do you know who’s here? What’s your connection to the host?

And I sat down and wrote a prose poem really based on a writing exercise from poet David White, where you just keep repeating and completing the lines, “It doesn’t interest me. What I really want to know...” And I started with “It doesn’t interest me what you do for a living,” since all night there had been this conversation about what do you do. I want to know what you ache for. And if you dare to dream, meaning your heart’s longing. And so I just keep going through all the questions we ask each other, and saying, that doesn’t interest me, I want something deeper.

It happened that the next day I was sending out a newsletter by snail mail, not by e-mail, to about 600 students who over the years had come to study meditation and ceremony and things with me. And I put the poem in, I didn't edit it, I just put it in and I sent it out to them. It was on a very old computer, and so I wasn't on the Internet. And so it took me two years to get on the Internet and really see that by that time there were literally hundreds of thousands of sites with this poem on it. Those 600 people had taken it and just shared it with other people. They read it at events, but mostly they had sent it to people via e-mail or they had posted it on Websites and other people had picked it up. Sometimes changed it a little, added a little completely false biographical information about myself.

So because of that, eventually Drew Durapeau (sp?) who was an agent in Chicago got a hold of me. He was Jean Houston's agent, and she was writing a book called *Passion for the Possible* and wanted to include this poem. And he said to me, have you thought about writing a book based on this poem? He said, it's everywhere. And I said I wrote a book in 1990 called *Confessions of a Spiritual Thrill-Seeker*, and I have a lot of writing since then, but I haven't found the structure for it. And as soon as he asked me about the poem, I thought, ah, this is the structure. So I wrote the book, *The Invitation*, and continued then once I was online to begin to hear from people all over the world – Iceland, Romania, it was read at a U.N. gathering Africa – and just people from all over the world, and of course predominantly Canada and the U.S., who had read the poem and then consequently read the book.

KENNEALLY: Well, what's interesting and I think worth exploring is what people find in this. And clearly it's even more wonderful they don't know who you were at first. They were, I think, just coming to it for themselves, right? What has been the majority of responses? People are in one situation or another. It's a leading question of sorts, but I want you to tell us who they are that are most intrigued or responsive to the work.

ORIAH: The stories that I get from people – there are two kinds really. One – because the books are really based on stories in my own life and my own struggle with how do you live a life that's centered in your spirituality with they day-to-day aggravations, just the normal stuff. And then with the not so normal stuff, the things like somebody having a brain aneurysm in your home, and one moment everything is fine and then next moment it's not. And so I hear from people who are often given the book during times of crisis, horrible times of crisis.

I was telling Marlene, before, that I hear from a woman whose daughter was in car accident, goes into a coma for five weeks, and she reads the books out loud to her, and her daughter dies. And she feels that she would not have survived if it hadn't been for the book. And initially when I would hear these stories, I was very uncomfortable because surely I would not know what to write to someone about how to survive the death of their child. As a mother, I don't even want to go there.

But the nature of the books, I think, are really about how to be here, how to be present.

At the end of workshops I used to teach, I always used to say on the last day, stay here until you go, because most of us are always moving to the next thing. And in crisis, in struggle, in real suffering to learn to stay very present with your heart open and feel connected and held by something larger than yourself that's also what you're made of I think is what has appealed to people as a way to get up tomorrow and do it all again.

KENNEALLY: Well, you told me a story about a response from an unusual group of people. We would expect, sadly, that someone who was in crisis of the kind you described to need some kind of sustenance in the words, but a group of engineers from NASA, the American space agency, asked you to come to speak to them. What was it that they were responding to?

ORIAH: Well, at first I thought it was a hoax. I actually said to my assistant, do you think somebody took the letterhead and sent this letter to me? The books first came out under the name – I worked with an intertribal council of Native American elders, and so the books first came out under the name Oriah Mountain Dreamer, because that was my medicine name. And my son said to me, what are you going to say to these scientists? He said, do they know who you are? And I said, oh no, they must have me confused with the other Oriah Mountain Dreamer, the nuclear physicist.

And as it turned out, one person who was the assistant to the director of the Goddard Space Flight Center, had read the books and somehow managed to get the director to sign having me come as a guest speaker. So here I was in a room full of about 1000 scientists and pilots, astronauts, doing what I do, which is to talk about my own journey, but also to talk about a lot of poetry. And people were incredibly enthused. This is only to say that people of course are people and everybody is struggling with their own thing, but when I had lunch with the department heads there, I talked to them a little bit about my husband, who is a scientist, an astronomer, and I said when I first met him, he was 17 and I was 15, and he had just built his first telescope, and he said to me, I want to know the night sky because when I look at the night sky I know where I am. And I knew when he said it that he didn't just mean it physically, he meant that he got a sense of his place in the universe, in reality, and also his smallness and the largeness and the awe of the universe.

And I told this story to these scientists, and they all nod – these were the people of his tribe. This is how they touched the mystery. How they touch the sacred and the divine is in this very concrete work, and a lot of it actually very imaginative work, with the universe, the physical universe.

KENNEALLY: Well, you talked about your experience in exploring a variety of faiths, particularly Native American, and the attraction you find in the ceremonies that they practice. What is it about the ceremonial that is important to you?

ORIAH: The ceremonial offers a container, a way to be still whether we feel like it or not, a way to listen very deeply. Most of the Native American ceremonies entail – are pretty basic, fasting and prayer in a natural setting. I grew up in New Liskeard so I was – in northern Ontario, so I was very comfortable and in fact felt more connected to a sense of spirit in a natural setting, and the wilderness – in this country I can say the bush and nobody looks at me like I'm crazy – sitting in the bush and really having that sense of being part of something larger. And those ceremonies gave me the opportunity to do that, and not to leave behind a connection to the physical. One of the things that appealed to me a great deal about the earth-based spirituality of Native Americans and Native Canadians is that there is not a separation between spirit and matter. And I am at heart a monist – I think it's all one thing, two ways of looking at the same thing. So the earth and all of us and everything that is is sacred.

KENNEALLY: You were talking about the need to find quiet, and in fact you told me you're in actually a moment in your life where you're looking for quiet. How hard is it to do that during this sabbatical? Have you found it harder than you thought it might be?

ORIAH: In some ways, yes. We live in a culture that doesn't particularly value stillness and quiet. I have a dear friend who said once to me, you have a very monastic personality, and that's probably true. I spend a lot of time alone, a lot of time doing my practices of prayer, contemplative meditation, contemplative writing, and I need a great deal of that. But I think we assume that because the culture really values a kind of doing and productivity and movement and action – busy, busy cell phone business – that we assume that's what makes it hard for us. And to some degree that's true, when you're driving on the 401 you move at the speed of the traffic so that you don't get mowed over. So we tend to entrain ourselves to the speed around us. But the truth is, and this is what people in my experience who have come to do ceremony with me find, the resistance to being still, to really sitting still is much more internal than external. When you sit still in a contemplative way, whatever your inner demons, your inner fears are really catch up with you, and so it takes a great deal of courage to say that you're just going to stay there with an open heart and embrace what comes and be with what comes.

KENNEALLY: And be with yourself?

ORIAH: Yes.

KENNEALLY: And so there's an implied acceptance of the individual's faults and everything that goes with being Oriah or Chris or anything like that –

ORIAH: Absolutely.

KENNEALLY: – and that that is something separate, you have found, from a lot of what the culture is trying to say.

ORIAH: Yes, whether you're talking about some religious traditions or the way they're presented or the whole kind of New Age, self-help stuff. The message there a lot of the time is, OK, this is what you have to do to change, to be who you want to be, to be somebody else. And I, myself have been aware, I've gone out to do vision quests, secretly hoping I would come back a totally different person with a different personality to work with. That's like wanting to wake up three inches taller tomorrow morning. It's just not going to happen.

So gradually I really shifted in my own experience to knowing that the task was not so much to become someone else as to unfold and become in some essential way who and what I really am. And that's a very different task. Now I'm not so much getting out the whip and looking for the discipline to do these eight things today as I am looking to find the lights of encouragement – that's a line from a Hafeezah Suki (sp?) poem that says, "How did the rose ever open its heart and give to this world all of its beauty? It felt the encouragement of light against its being. Otherwise, we're all too frightened." So there's a sense of – you begin to look for what helps you open and open and open, which is very different than these are the things I have to do to change.

KENNEALLY: Does your writing help you to do that? Or is the pressure of being an international best-seller getting in the way of that work these days?

ORIAH: No, I would say when I sit down to write the whole will-this-sell stuff honestly doesn't cross my mind or the writing stops. For me the writing is one of the ways that I enter the place of being still, of contemplation, of meditation, and I find out what's going on with me and with my relationship to the world and my relationship to the great mystery.

KENNEALLY: Thank you very much, Oriah. Thank you all. And I want to take an opportunity to ask you if you would like to ask questions of our panel, and see if we have anybody that would like to do that. Any questions at all? Well, I want to ask a question. Oriah, when Denyse was talking about faith in science and you were perhaps, as I was, thinking about that moment with the NASA scientists, there's an assumption that NASA scientists would have to be – I don't know – well, I'll say it, atheist, right? But that wouldn't be the case at all, would it?

ORIAH: Not at all.

KENNEALLY: And so dispel us of that. Were you surprised by how many people of faith of whatever kind were scientists as well?

ORIAH: My own experience with – I did some physics courses at University of Toronto. One of them was taught by a Buddhist, another was taught by a man who had participated in ceremony with the Bloods in Alberta, so my own experience has been in fact that people who do a great deal of science are often people – the more science you do, the more awe you have about the nature of the universe.

There was a man in the audience who was a – this is at NASA – who was a pilot, an astronaut, who wrote me a wonderful letter afterwards about hearing these poems by some of the Suki (sp?) masters and whatnot, and clearly it spoke to him as much as – and there was a woman who was from the U.S. Defense Department who bought books for everyone in her department. I thought that was sort of interesting.