

Fighting Words

By Julian Aguon

A Commencement Address to the University of Guam Graduating Class of 2019

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President Krise, honored guests, faculty and staff, family and friends—good afternoon, and thank you all. I am honored to be here, to be a part of this joyous occasion, as we celebrate this year’s graduating class.

Graduates, when I first accepted the invitation to speak to you tonight, I knew only one thing for sure. I wanted to avoid the usual offerings that mark this occasion – the future is yours for the taking, don’t be afraid to fail, risk big, dream bigger. One can trot out those prized ponies only so many times before they get a little long in the tooth. So I did what any good writer would do: I went in. I drew open the drawers of my own interior life and scanned their disheveled contents with an exacting eye. Memories and milestones and music albums. Books read and bread broken and battles won and lost. All the well-meaning and mean-spirited roadhouses on the road to understanding. I combed through all of it searching for something real, something more than a slogan, to share. For some small piece of useful truth I’ve learned about the world from having lived in it, on my own terms, as fully as I can.

I should warn you that what I’m about to say might be hard to hear. It is also quite graphic in its recounting of certain traumatic events, which might be a little much for a younger audience. But you are adults and you are moments away from walking off this stage and into the world as it actually is, not only as you wish it to be, so I’m going to go there.

There is a language heist afoot in this country that is threatening our ability to show up for each other and for ourselves. We are losing our capacity to confront the injustice that is literally everywhere around us, and I think it has something to do with the kind of violence we are seeing today. In one sense, the violence raining down on the most vulnerable among us—immigrants, indigenous peoples, asylum seekers, refugees, women, children—is horrifying, but it is not startling. Acts of violence against these and other groups are occurring with such frequency, news of it is not in fact new. Stories of thousands of children being separated from their parents, caged, and tear gassed at the border. Stories of one unarmed black boy after another (after another) being shot dead by a murderous cop. These stories don’t just come in with the morning paper. They come in with the morning light. These are stories of brutality, and they have become as banal as breakfast. Bacon and eggs. A cup of coffee. It is this banality of brutality that is truly troubling. One would think this enough to send us careening into collective action. But it’s not, at least it hasn’t been. I think part of the problem is that something else is happening, too. The violence that is everywhere erupting—at the borders of this country, in Waffle Houses in Georgia, in parking lots in Guam—is of a different degree. A man choked to death for selling loose cigarettes. A woman shot to death for burning white rice. What we are seeing in our communities is increasingly barbaric behavior. And it’s immobilizing us, rendering us momentarily incapable of speaking—speaking back and speaking up.

One of my favorite writers, Alice Walker, wrote a book about this phenomenon. Some years ago, while working with a women’s antiwar group, she traveled to Rwanda, the eastern

Congo, and Palestine, meeting with survivors of every conceivable kind of violence and listening closely to their accounts. In Rwanda, she recalls the racist origins of the genocide that rocked that country, culminating in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Tutsis by the Hutu. She traces the story all the way back to the Belgians (and the Germans before that) who arrived on the scene after centuries of relatively peaceful coexistence between the two clans. So the Belgians decide that the Tutsi, because they had larger skulls, were more like Europeans and thus should be in charge of the Hutu (whose skulls, apparently, were not as large). They instigate this rule of one clan by the other, and it goes on like this for years. When they finally leave, the Belgians place the Tutsi in charge of the Hutu. Unsurprisingly, the hatred that had been building over such a long period erupted into the mass slaughter of 800,000 Tutsis. 800,000 Tutsis in 100 days.

On her way to Palestine, while waiting at a border crossing in Rafah, a traveling companion hands her an illustrated postcard depicting a UN partition plan. On the back of the card are the words of former Israeli President Ariel Sharon, known by many as the Butcher of Beirut, where he talks about making a pastrami sandwich of the Palestinian people, “riddling their lands with Jewish settlements until no one will be able to imagine a whole Palestine[,] [o]r know [it] ever existed.” Later, in the Gaza strip, she sits in the rubble of recently bulldozed Palestinian homes. She learns of a woman (alive but unconscious) whose husband was killed during a twenty-two-day bombardment of Gaza, as were all five of her daughters. She wonders who will tell this woman this—when, or if, she wakes up. She wonders what language could possibly be up for the job. How do you tell a woman that her whole world has died?

Finally, in the eastern Congo, she meets with women who had been victims of rape on so large a scale it could be considered a war crime. One woman, who had been a sex slave for over a year until she escaped, talks about being raped with every imaginable instrument, from the handle of a machete to the barrel of a gun. Others share similar stories. But one story shakes Alice Walker to her core. She writes:

The suffering had been unbearable as people were chased from their homes at all hours of the day or night; many of them choosing to sleep in the forest or hide themselves in their fields. She was home with her husband and two children because among other reasons, such as this was her home, her husband was sick. One evening, there was a fierce knock at the door, gunmen who also carried machetes entered, demanding food. There was little to offer them but the staple diet: a boiled vegetable . . . and a few balls of steamed millet. The men ate this, but were angry and not satisfied. They went and found the husband, still in bed, and hacked him to pieces on the spot. They came back to Generose and her children and took hold of her. Holding her down, they began to cut off her leg. They cut off her leg, cut it into six pieces, and began to fry it in a pan. When some part of it seemed nearly done, they tried to force her son to take a bite of it. Strongly, beautifully, and so much the son of our dreams, he said: No, I will never eat my mother's flesh. They shot him to death without more conversation. The daughter, seeing this, watching her mother bleeding to death, knowing her father had been hacked to pieces, was now offered the same opportunity. Terrorized, she bit into a piece of her mother's body. Her mother, having crawled away, does not know what

became of her . . . I have not forgotten this child who was forced to eat her mother's flesh for a moment. Yet it has been almost impossible to speak of it. Coming home I fell ill with the burden of this story[.]

The book is called “Overcoming Speechlessness.”

When asked why she titled it that, Alice responded by saying that there are times when things are so horrible we literally lose the ability to talk about them. That is to say, in the face of suffering such as this—unspeakable suffering—we come undone. We are left bereft of words to bear witness. Constitutionally incapable of coming to anyone’s rescue, including our own.

In the book, she is calling us to overcome that speechlessness. To push past it, to take a step beyond our trauma, and into the sun.

So here goes.

The first time I experienced this phenomenon was in the summer before fourth grade.

My family and I had been living in Portland, Oregon for two years, so that my mom could earn a Master’s degree in social work. Around the time she was finishing, my dad was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. At the same time, my grandmother, who was suffering from early-onset dementia, was sent to Guam ahead of the rest of us, temporarily entrusted to a relative’s care. One day, after my sister and I had returned home, we were taken to this same relative’s house. What I saw that day would sit for years like a stopper in my throat.

Once at the house, we asked over and over again to see our grandmother, wondering why she was being kept from us. Some time passed. Then some more. After what seemed like an eternity, we heard a banging coming from a bedroom in the back. My uncle scurried away to attend to the noise. Unbeknownst to him, I had snuck quietly behind. When he threw open the door, I saw her. My grandmother. Half-naked and tied to the bed. A brown rope. A silver bowl on the floor. Our eyes met. Hers were wild with fear. I froze. Then a slamming of a door. Then an uncle, with a smirk on his face, and a key (for a lock) in his hand. I must have passed out. The next thing I remember is my eight-year-old body hanging upside down by its ankles. Crying as two of my cousins passed me back and forth, laughing, knowing there was little I could do about it. Because *I* was little. And I had too little power. And I did not have the words with which to fight back, graft my rage onto the world, wage war. I had no command over the language I needed to set me, or her, free.

We would eventually get our grandmother out of that house, and she would spend several more years with us, into the evening of her life. Mine was the last face she would recognize, and the last name she would remember. My last act was singing to her, which incidentally was perfect form, as this was the same woman who played a mean harmonica and taught me to love music, the blues mostly, and bequeathed to me so many gifts (though of the spiritual and not the earthly kind) including an almost religious belief that if God had a voice, it would be Aretha Franklin’s.

I've never shared any of this before. But I'm sharing it with you because I'm trying to be brave. And because, as a writer, this is my work to do. As the supremely gifted Arundhati Roy would say, we are living in a time when our words have been butchered and bled of meaning. We writers, then, are called. To take pail to water in this leaky boat of ours. To run toward, not from, our burning house. If not to rescue everyone, then to help as many people as possible rescue themselves, by rescuing back language itself. Back from the butcher.

These days I take pail to water in my capacity as a human rights lawyer. Together with my team at Blue Ocean Law, we work both here at home and throughout the region, using the law to advance the rights and interests of island communities. We provide guidance to small island states trying to better protect their natural resources from outside exploitation. We help coastal communities challenge the multinational corporations aggressively seeking to mine the surrounding seabed, no matter the environmental or cultural cost. We go to court to defend the right of self-determination because the most categorically legitimate longing of human beings is the longing to be free.

I share this because this is what it looks like when we are able to overcome our speechlessness, find our fighting words, and step into the sun. We share the sunlight.

Graduates, if you look under your seats, you will find your own copy of *Overcoming Speechlessness*. I worked with the publisher (the good folks at Seven Stories Press in New York) and was able to buy each of you a copy. Lucky for me, they had exactly 273 copies left in their warehouse, which was just enough. Lucky for you, Alice Walker is among the most gifted of us. The kind of writer whose words are so powerful they are like ancestors—loved ones wishing to redeem us, to carry us closer to freedom, on their backs if need be.

Congratulations Class of 2018. May you find not only your fighting words but your fighting spirit, too. Our broken world is waiting.

Thank You.