



The Woman Who Made a Home for her Sister: A Re-membering Witnessing Transcript

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This paper is an invitation to the reader to step into the midst of my practice and my own considerations regarding my practice. It represents a transcript of my conversation with Harpreet, a 19-year-old woman of Indian descent, living in a small rural community in Alberta. It is my hope that in contributing this study of my work, a reader might vicariously experience an expansion of possibilities, questions, and imagination that might benefit their own practice.

In this conversation excerpt, Harpreet and I are meeting for the first time. Prior to (the printed) THIS exchange, I was working towards a degree of understanding of what had been so important to her at this time in her life so as to take the time to come to speak to me. Harpreet struck me as a deeply loving person, “love is so healing,” she said, “it’s a powerful thing...I love loving people.” She spoke tenderly and full of feeling about her family, especially her mother, her brother, and her cousin Alia. She spoke softly about her hesitation to share parts of her experiences with her mother “who wouldn’t understand” or might feel disappointed in Harpreet’s experiments with weed and her intimate relationships. She was tearful in reflecting her struggles with what she called “moods”—experiences of anxiety, irritation, and a listlessness that took her to bed to sleep for 15 hour stretches at a time. Harpreet spoke quickly, as if she had waited a long time to reflect these confusing “happenings” to a listening ear. When I asked her about some of the hardest moments, she went on to tell me about a period of time for three months last year that she didn’t want to be alive. When I gently puzzled alongside her what had kept her going a year ago and what is currently keeping her here in this life, she readily knew the answer. Harpreet reflected the dramatic turning point to her struggles last fall when her 15-year-old cousin, Alia, died suddenly. Harpreet referred to her young cousin as more like a “sister” in their closeness. She described how she stopped wanting to die after her cousin’s passing saying, with emphasis, “I have to live for myself and for her” and “I can’t kill myself because I saw the effects of a young person’s death on other people.”

At this point in the conversation, I asked Harpreet whether it was more important to her to talk about the “mood problems” or “her cousin Alia.” Harpreet replied, “I would say like, Alia, because I haven’t gotten a big opportunity to talk about her much, since she passed away ...after she passed away my dad said there’s no reason... my dad’s my dad, I guess, but he doesn’t take emotions really well. So when I cry about Alia, he’d just be like, ‘there’s no point to crying’ and ‘you can’t do anything about it now.’ So, like I guess I’ve held a lot of my emotions in for a really long time, but...”

In this spontaneous, first-session remembering conversation about Harpreet’s cousin Alia, I decided to cast Alia as someone who had known Harpreet as a “loving sister” and be introduced to Harpreet through Alia’s eyes on her life. To do so, I invoked Alia as an insider witness to





Harpreet's ways of living and loving, which is a practice I have learned in my time here at the Calgary Narrative Collective. Besides my deliberations about this decision, and my observation of the effects of the decision on Alia, I am also working to imbue my questions with more imagination and dramatic edges. In parts of the transcript, I am inserting my thoughts or proposing better questions to myself from the safer distance of hindsight and time, which I hope will serve the reader in their thoughtfulness as much as it served me.

Larissa: This might sound like a bit of a strange idea, and you can refuse any of the questions I ask or proposals I make. But would it be alright with you if I were to ask you some questions as if you were Alia, and you just try your best to answer how you think she might in your best knowing of her what you think she might say. Would that be okay?

Harpreet: Ya.

Larissa: Okay, so I'm going to refer to you as Alia, and then you can speak from her perspective, like "I remember this..." or "I did that" you know (looking to her if she's following, she is nodding) ... So, welcome Alia, hello.

Note: So what is my intention here? I want to flesh out Harpreet's previously stated values for "family" and "loving people in a particular way." Harpreet told me she wants to "live up to Alia's way of loving", but I don't really know the stories of what she means by these words, so my hope is to elicit stories from her cousin's perspective so that I get a degree of understanding of what matters to Harpreet.

Harpreet: (Very quietly) Hi.

Larissa: Umm, I've been talking to your cousin, Harpreet, and would you know that Harpreet tells me that she really admires the way that you love people. Does that surprise you to hear?

Harpreet: Ya (nodding).

Larissa: Does it really (she's nodding)? Do you think, like, do you have any guesses about what Harpreet means by admiring the way that you love people, Alia?

Note: I'm starting by focusing on what Harpreet admires about her cousin because this might be easier for Harpreet to access and feel her way into. I'm hoping to start with a really easy questions so that we can both ease into the insider witnessing account, as it is a bit of a strange way of speaking. Wonderfully, Harpreet does not struggle at all to keep up – which is perhaps a clue about the depth of her relational orientation to life.





Harpreet: I'd just say (tearful), just always being there for her, and like (sniffs and wipes tear from her face), just accepting her for who she is ... and just being so free spirited, just happy, and like giggly (giggles), and just like, joking around.

Larissa: I know Alia that you're younger by a few years and I know, well not always, but often younger people look up to the older people in their lives, so I wonder were there things about Harpreet that you looked up to?

Note: Again, I'm trying to make the answer less of a reach for her. It seems reasonable to assume that Alia looked up to her in some ways because they were like sisters and Harpreet is older.

Harpreet: I would say how hard she works when it comes to school, and just, like I guess always being there for the people around her.

Larissa: Did you experience this Always Being Ther Spirit of Harpreet's for the people around her, Alia?

Harpreet: Yeah! I was there and saw many of her friendships and how she is with people around her.

Larissa: You know, Alia, Harpreet said to me that "she loves loving people." She exclaimed this strongly and spontaneously and I've never heard anyone say that. What do you think she means by this? Is there a time that stands out in your memory that was most impactful to you that highlights Harpreet's ways of loving?

Harpreet: I'd just say the times I'd go sleep over at her house when things were rough at home (tearful), and we'd go get breakfast in the morning, and like go shopping and just have a good day.

Note: So here I am. I would like to understand more about this, but not just in little sentences. I would love to be able to see a "young woman's way of loving" or her "ethic of loving" or her decision "to love" in a story, such that Harpreet could see it more clearly as well. I want to let Harpreet know that a story of love is what I'm looking for. She mentioned a "sleepover" spontaneously, so that's my starting point for co-constructing a story together.

Larissa: Sleep overs when things were rough for you. Okay. Can you tell me a bit about, if you think about one time in particular when such a sleepover happened? Alia, did you call her, or did she call you? How would the sleepover get initiated?

Note: I am thinking about whether Harpreet knew to shelter Alia during rough times, and whether she did so intentionally.





Harpreet: My mom would call her mom and be like, “I’m dropping my daughter off” (laughs).

Larissa: Oh really, so you would arrive there, and Harpreet's there, and like, how would she greet you?

Note: I am of course noticing the mothers and Alia’s rough times at home – but I am deciding to go with the relationship of these two cousin-sisters and their ways of loving each other. I am purposefully asking about that in detail on the ground of the actual day of their sleepover, so that this ordinary sounding moment not be lost to Harpreet.

Harpreet: She'd come downstairs and be like, “let's go in my room” and then we would go up and just hang out in her room, maybe make dinner, and like, just listen to some music, clean her room maybe (laughs), just do random things until we'd go to sleep, talk about school... you know, things would be rough at home, but I'd always have her home to go to when I'd feel like a second home.

Larissa: Harpreet would make it feel like a second home? Like, how does somebody do that? Like how does somebody like Harpreet make her home feel like a second home to someone like you?

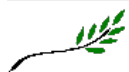
Harpreet: Just, everything that was hers was mine. If I wanted to borrow some clothes, she'd give me her clothes. We would sleep in the same bed. Just like, this space is also my space (tearful). Just her family was so welcoming as well, her mom, her dad. It always felt like, like I could, like this was also my home. It's not just the one place I live in. This family is my family; they joked about adopting me. Just bringing me into her home.

Larissa: And what do you think Alia, since Harpreet was older than you she could have easily been like, “Yeah! I have some grown up things to do” or whatever, but instead she came downstairs and was like, “my home is your home. My clothes are your clothes. My bed is your bed.” What do you think that says about what Harpreet values in life or thinks is important?

Harpreet: I know that she values her family a lot, her cousins especially ... and that I'm, I was always a priority in her life, over things that she didn't care much about. You know, if she'd go hang out with her friends, she'd bring me along. So I was a priority in her life.

Larissa: (softly) What difference did that make in your world, being a priority in someone's life like that?

Note: I wish I could convey the tenderness between Harpreet and me in this moment. My question belies the felt effect of what was transpiring. Harpreet was remembering the moments





between her sister- cousin and herself with the help of the undeniable details of the story of sleep overs. It is one thing to say, “my cousin Alia and I were close, like sisters” and another to say “everything that was hers was mine. If I wanted to borrow some clothes, she'd give me her clothes; if I needed a bed, we would share it. If I needed a second home away from roughness, I found it in her room.” I think my question lacks dramatic edge and I could have used the opportunity to witness this back to her...

Alternative QUESTION: *Okay, so let me see if I got this right: Things for you were pretty rough at home at times, and so your mom would drop you off at Harpreet's house, and instead of being like, “I've got some grow up things to do, or whatever, Harpreet says, “Hey come to my room” and everything that's hers is yours and she'd invite you along into her world, her friends, her life. What did it mean for you Alia to meet someone like Harpreet who loved you like this?*

Harpreet: It meant a lot (tearful)...

Larissa: Isn't it strange Alia, that both you and Harpreet talk about your admiration for each others' ways of loving. Is this another way that you were sisters to each other, sisters in this ethic of love? (Harpreet nods, tearful) And when Harpreet talks about your way of loving, Alia does she by any chance have something to do with that? How you got to be that way?

Harpreet: (tearful) Yeah.

Larissa: I see the two of you were creating a home away from home for you Alia and being sisters in this ethic of love. What do you think, what kind of world does that create, if more people were this way?

Harpreet: I just feel like everyone would be so much more accepting, just loving, being able to see things from other people's perspectives. When I first met Harpreet I had a pretty small family, like Harpreet's parents were one of the few people my parents trusted so much as to leave me at their house, or call and be like, “I'm going to drop my daughter off.” So, it just made me realize the power of like, love and how positive of an impact it can have on people's lives to be accepting and loving. How it can better other people's lives while also bettering yours, like eventually getting closer to my other cousins that we were estranged with, just like how happy you can be and how loved you can feel, just the more people you have in your life. It helps you stay positive a little longer; it helps you love other people just as openly a little bit better than just being able to love just a few people. It just opens you up a bit and opens your world up a bit and gives you more understanding of people because you have so many different types of people in your life, like you have a cousin who's 5 years older than you telling you about his girl problems, right, or like, your other cousin, like you meet so many different types of people when you open yourself up to the world, so you just become more loving and caring and more compassionate rather than when you're closed off and





you don't get to meet this people you don't get to be as open and as loving when you have such a small circle.

Note: I was attending to Harpreet's shift in speaking. In hindsight it feels as though this young woman is feeling empowered to claim a philosophy of relating in this moment. I might have asked more about this, but in the moment of the conversation, I wished for Alia to lend her voice for a moment longer to speak to Harpreet's revolutionary turning point to put aside thinking of her OWN? death in favour of living or any other ways in wish cousin-sister relationship had changed Harpreet's life beyond Alia's death.

Larissa: Wow. It sounds like Harpreet has made quite an impact on your life. Do you think that, ya, that the way in which you and Harpreet touched each other, that it stayed with her even after you passed on?

Harpreet: Ya.

Larissa: In what ways do you think you're still connected today?

Note: At first I thought maybe this question is a little cliché, but it elicits a considerable emotional response from her.

Harpreet: (tearfully) The way that she's always gonna keep me in her heart and that she's going to try her best to live the life that we had planned to live together, even though I'm not there. She's gonna continue to do the things we were going to do together.

Larissa: Why is that important that she would go on to do the things you planned to do together?

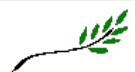
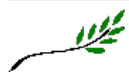
Harpreet: Because I'd want her to be happy and like because I'm not there doesn't mean that she can't do the things that we were meant to do.

Larissa: What kind of things did you set out to do?

Harpreet: We were gonna go sky diving, backpacking in Spain, raise our kids together, just like basically grow up together and grow old together, and kind of live through our lives together. Just because I'm not there doesn't mean that she can't do what we planned to do.

Larissa: I'll ask you questions now as yourself, Harpreet. What was it like thinking from Alia's perspective and answering questions in that way?

Harpreet: It helped a lot.





Larissa: In what way was it helpful?

Harpreet: It helped me see, like how big of an impact I had on her life, and how much, how big of a part I was in her life. It helped me see how much she changed as well, from when we first started talking to when she passed away in September, like, like she grew up so much as a person, but we grew together a lot as well. And it just it helped me to see that I was a constant part of her life. I was always there for her just as much as she was there for me (wiping tears from her face).

Larissa: Does that do anything to the “Asshole Committee” we talked about before to see things from Alia's perspective and talk in this way?

Note: The Asshole Committee was a metaphor for the critical voices of doubt that Harpreet has been struggling with.

Harpreet: (Nodding)

Larissa: It does? What does it do?

Harpreet: It just makes me feel like Alia would be like, you just beat that Asshole Committee up. Stop listening to a bunch of assholes. You are my sister at the end of the day. You did love me. You gave me your best. She didn't pass away thinking that I didn't love her or I didn't do enough for her. That is not what she thought.

Poem for Harpreet

As is my custom, I wrote a poem for Harpreet from the above conversation. I named it Sistercousin in honour of Alia and Harpreet:

“Sistercousin”

*I still hear you giggling, even after death,
even now that I am free among the spirits.
I can hear you say, “let’s go to my room,”
the way you used to
when things got rough
at my house.
You, my Sistercousin,
my second home.*

*Space to cook dinner,
listen to music,
and talk*





*about crushes and the random things
my parents would never understand.*

*Remember how we would joke
about your family adopting me?
Your bed was my bed,
your clothes were my clothes,
you made everything that was yours, mine.
You did everything to help, I know
you would have helped if you could.*

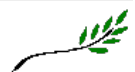
*You were always offering guidance,
without expecting me to take it.
You treated me like I was my own person
Accepting me and loving me,
no matter what.*

*My back was had,
I knew you had time for me, always
you showed me your way
of making the people you love
a Priority.
You showed me the way
you love Love.*

*All this tells me
just how loved I was.*

*You chose me,
younger Sistercousin,
over nightclubs in Cuba.
You introduced me to your friends
You expanded my family
across borders –
bonds formed,
cousins I didn't even know about.*

*A world opened up
where I could be more willing
to Trust
I could realize how my parents
worked hard for me.
It gave me permission
to lean more*





on family.

*A window was opened
into other people's perspectives
and a world that is more accepting,
loving, and compassionate.*

*Don't close that window
Let it breathe Love
into there future memories
where I can live alongside you,
free-spirited, falling from the sky,
backpacking through Spain
raising kids,
living for yourself and a legacy
that belongs to us.*

