

Leaving the Identity Issues to Other Folks

By Phyllis Allen

Standing in the rain waiting to go up the steps to the balcony of the Grand Theater I gripped Mama's hand and watched the little blond kids enter the lobby downstairs. It was the '50s, I was "colored" and this is what I believed: My place was in the balcony of the downtown theater, the back of the bus, and the back steps of the White Dove Barbecue Emporium. When I asked Mama why this was so, she smiled and said, "Baby, people do what they do. What you got to do is be the best that you can be."

We got our first television in the '60s and it brought into my living room the German shepherds, snapping at a young girl's heels. It showed children just like me going to school passing through throngs of screaming, angry folks, chanting words I wasn't allowed to say. I could no longer be "colored." We were Negroes now, marching in the streets for our freedom — at least, that's what the preacher said. I believed that, even though I was scared, I had to be brave and stand up for my rights.

In the '70s: beat-up jeans, hair like a nappy halo, and my clenched fist raised, I stood on the downtown street shouting. Angry young black men in sleek black leather jackets and berets had sent out a call from the distant shores of Oakland, California. No more non-violence or standing on the front lines quietly while we were being beaten. Simple courtesies like "please" and "thank you" were over. It was official: Huey, H. Rap, and Eldridge said so. I believed in being black and angry.

By the '80s, fertility gods lined the walls and crammed the display cases of all my friends' houses. People who'd never been closer to Africa than a Tarzan movie were speaking broken Swahili. The '80s made us hyphenated: African-American. Swaddled in elaborately woven costumes of flowing design, bright colors, and rich gold I was a pseudo-African, who'd never seen Africa. "It's your heritage," is what everybody said. Now, I believed in the elusive promise of the Motherland.

In the '90s, I was a woman whose skin happened to be brown, chasing the American dream. Everybody said that the dream culminated in stuff. I believed in spending days shopping. Debt? I didn't care about no stinkin' debt. It was the '90s. My 401(k) was in the mid-six figures and I believed in American Express. Then came the crash, and American Express didn't believe in me nearly as much as I believed in it.

Now, it's a brand new millennium and the bling-bling, video generation ain't about me. Everything changed when I turned 50. Along with the wrinkles, softened muscles, and weak eyesight came the confidence that allows me to stick to a very small list of beliefs. I'll leave those identity issues to other folks. I believe that I'm free to be whoever I choose to be. I believe in being a good friend, lover, and parent so that I can have good friends, lovers, and children. I believe in being a woman — the best that I can be, like my Mama said.

I Will Take My Voice Back

By Quique Aviles

I believe that addiction can kill me, but that writing and performing will save me.

I am a poet and an actor. I am also a crack addict and an alcoholic, and that's how a lot of people see me: a pipe head, a drunk, a problem, an epidemic, a disaster area.

I came to Washington, D.C., from El Salvador in 1980 at the age of 15. When I told my mom I wanted to be an actor, she said, "You mean a clown." But I make a living — although meager — through my poetry and performances.

In the early '80s, crack came to D.C. I saw my city change and me with it. Crack is a killer. Crack turns a ladybug in your house into a hungry rat. Crack transports you into paranoid obsession. You don't sleep. You don't eat. Your high lasts 10 to 15 seconds so you need to keep pumping your brain with this poison over and over again.

Mine has been a life of duality. I can function on drug street corners and at wine-sipping theater receptions. In 1995 I was part of a show at the Kennedy Center, but I was sneaking beers into my dressing room before the show and getting high after. I often feel a sense of pride when I put my book and loose poems in my bag before going to do a reading. And yet, I am also this other person — this shadow, this vampire.

I've just turned 41 and have finally realized that crack will kill me if I keep on shoving it up my brain. The alternative is death and I don't want it. I want to get old.

About a year ago, I completed my third rehab. I decided that I would use writing and performing as a catapult for rebound. I decided to stand on stage and share stories from my notebooks that have born witness to my nightmare.

1992

I want to keep playing with verbs

Write letters to old friends

And ask them to keep writing

I want to hold on to the lives of consonants and vowels

In a world of zero tolerance, talking like this about my addiction — even saying it out loud on the radio — may mean artistic suicide. But by telling my story here and on stage, I will take my voice back. People will bear witness to my life. I believe that crack can kill me, but that in the end, that communication and direct human contact will save me.

Remembering All the Boys

By Elvia Bautista

I believe that everyone deserves flowers on their grave.

When I go to the cemetery to visit my brother, it makes me sad to see graves — just the cold stones — and no flowers on them.

They look lonely, like nobody loves them. I believe this is the worst thing in the world — that loneliness. No one to visit you and brush off the dust from your name and cover you with color. A grave without any flowers looks like the person has been forgotten. And then what was the point of even living — to be forgotten?

Almost every day my brother's grave has something new on it: Flowers from me, or candles from the Dollar Store or an image of the Virgin Maria or shot glasses. There's even some little Homies, these little toys that look like gangsters.

Once my brother's homies even put a bunch of marijuana on there for him — I think my mother took it away. I think she also took away the blue rag someone put there for him one day.

Sometimes, when I bring flowers, I fix the flowers on the graves around my brother's grave. Some of the headstones have birthdates near my brother's; they are young, too. But many of them, if they have any little toys or things on them, those are red.

All around my brother are boys who grew up to like red, making them the enemies of my brother. My brother was 16 when he was shot by someone who liked red, who killed him because he liked blue. And when I go to the cemetery I put flowers on the graves of the boys who liked red, too.

Sometimes I go to the cemetery with one of my best friends, who had a crush on a boy who liked red, who was killed at 18 by someone who liked blue. And we will go together and bring a big bunch of flowers, enough for both of these boys whose families are actually even from the same state in Mexico.

There is no one but me and a few of my friends who go to both graves. Some people think it's a bad idea. Some people think it's heroic.

I think they're both being silly. I don't go to try and disrespect some special rules or stop any kind of war. I go because I believe that no matter where you came from or what you believed in, when you die, you want flowers on your grave and people who visit you and remember you that way.

I'm not any kind of traitor or any kind of hero. I am the sister of Rogelio Bautista, and I say his name so you will hear it and be one more person that remembers him. I want everyone to remember all the boys, red and blue, in my cemetery. When we remember, we put flowers on their graves.

Disrupting My Comfort Zone

By Brian Grazer

I was 45 years old when I decided to learn how to surf.

Picture this: The north shore of Oahu—the toughest, most competitive surfing spot on the planet. Fourteen-foot swells. Twenty tattooed locals. And me, 5-foot-8-inches of abject terror. What will get me first, I wondered, the next big wave or the guy to my right with the tattoo on his chest that reads “RIP”?

They say that life is tough enough. But I guess I like to make things difficult on myself, because I do that all the time. Every day and on purpose. That’s because I believe in disrupting my comfort zone.

When I started out in the entertainment business, I made a list of people I thought it would be good to meet. Not people who could give me a job or a deal, but people who could shake me up, teach me something, challenge my ideas about myself and the world. So I started calling up experts in all kinds of fields: trial lawyers, neurosurgeons, CIA agents, embryologists, firewalkers, police chiefs, hypnotists, forensic anthropologists, and even presidents.

Some of them—like Carlos Castaneda, Jonas Salk, and Fidel Castro—were world-famous. Of course, I didn’t know any of these people and none of them knew me. So when I called these people up to ask for a meeting, the response wasn’t always friendly. And even when they agreed to give me some of their time, the results weren’t always what one might describe as pleasant.

Take, for example, Edward Teller, the father of the hydrogen bomb. You’ve heard of him? However, he’d never heard of me. It took me a year of begging, cajoling, and more begging to get to him to agree to meet with me. And then what happened? He ridiculed me and insulted me. But that was okay. I was hoping to learn something from him—and I did, even if it was only that I’m not that interesting to a physicist with no taste for our pop culture.

Over the last 30 years, I’ve produced more than 50 movies and 20 television series. I’m successful and, in my business, pretty well known. I’m a guy who could retire to the golf course tomorrow where the worst that could happen is that my Bloody Mary is watered-down.

So why do I continue to subject myself to this sort of thing? The answer is simple: Disrupting my comfort zone, bombarding myself with challenging people and situations—this is the best way I know to keep growing. And to paraphrase a biologist I once met, if you’re not growing, you’re dying.

So maybe I’m not the best surfer on the north shore, but that’s okay. The discomfort, the uncertainty, the physical and mental challenge that I get from this—all the things that too many of us spend our time and energy trying to avoid—they are precisely the things that keep me in the game.

A Grown Up Barbie

By Jane Hamill

I consider myself a feminist and I feel like a moron admitting it, but it's true: I believe in Barbie.

For me, as a kid, Barbie was about cool clothes, a cool job, cool friends and cool accessories: the airplane, the apartment building and the camper. I learned to sew so I could make outfits for Barbie and her friends, who took turns being the airplane pilot, the doctor, the fashion designer. Barbie was never about Ken. He was always a little dusty and in the corner. My Barbie didn't enter beauty contests, get married or have children. She went to Paris and New York for fancy dinners and meetings.

Years later, I became a fashion designer. I lived in Paris and New York and went to fashion shows and fancy dinners. It was all about the outfits and I began to wonder: am I just a grown-up Barbie? I am a strong, intelligent woman. My idols are supposed to be Georgia O'Keeffe or Gloria Steinem or Madeleine Albright. Am I in danger of becoming a puff piece like Barbie?

When I achieved my Barbie-style life, I wasn't so sure I wanted it. My husband is a prosecutor. He can change a person's life forever in just one day. I come home from work and say, I sold a great green dress today and you should have seen the shoes!

Today, I'm sort of the anti-fashion designer fashion designer. I don't particularly like shopping and if someone says fashion is silly, I'm the first to agree. It's just clothes. But if the sleeve is cut just right, it makes a difference. It makes a difference in how you present yourself. So many people have body issues. I hope I can help people like themselves more.

Clothes are personal. And they're part of your identity. A few weeks ago, I got a call from a customer. She told me now that she has my clothes to put on in the morning, she's never felt so confident in her life. They may just be clothes, but they help her to be who she wants to be and to believe in herself.

The blonde-haired, blue-eyed Malibu Barbie I loved looked nothing like my red-haired, freckled self. But that didn't stop me from thinking I was just like Barbie — cool and independent and smart. It's only as an adult that I realize that my belief in Barbie is really a belief in my own imagination, in whoever I imagined I could be, and whatever I imagined I could do. I believe in imagining a life, and then trying to live it.

Do What You Love

By Tony Hawk

I believe that people should take pride in what they do, even if it is scorned or misunderstood by the public at large.

I have been a professional skateboarder for 24 years. For much of that time, the activity that paid my rent and gave me my greatest joy was tagged with many labels, most of which were ugly. It was a kids' fad, a waste of time, a dangerous pursuit, a crime.

When I was about 17, three years after I turned pro, my high school "careers" teacher scolded me in front of the entire class about jumping ahead in my workbook. He told me that I would never make it in the workplace if I didn't follow directions explicitly. He said I'd never make a living as a skateboarder, so it seemed to him that my future was bleak.

Even during those dark years, I never stopped riding my skateboard and never stopped progressing as a skater. There have been many, many times when I've been frustrated because I can't land a maneuver. I've come to realize that the only way to master something is to keep it at — despite the bloody knees, despite the twisted ankles, despite the mocking crowds.

Skateboarding has gained mainstream recognition in recent years, but it still has negative stereotypes. The pro skaters I know are responsible members of society. Many of them are fathers, homeowners, world travelers and successful entrepreneurs. Their hairdos and tattoos are simply part of our culture, even when they raise eyebrows during PTA meetings.

So here I am, 38 years old, a husband and father of three, with a lengthy list of responsibilities and obligations. And although I have many job titles — CEO, Executive Producer, Senior Consultant, Foundation Chairman, Bad Actor — the one I am most proud of is "Professional Skateboarder." It's the one I write on surveys and customs forms, even though I often end up in a secondary security checkpoint.

My youngest son's pre-school class was recently asked what their dads do for work. The responses were things like, "My dad sells money" and "My dad figures stuff out." My son said, "I've never seen my dad do work."

It's true. Skateboarding doesn't seem like real work, but I'm proud of what I do. My parents never once questioned the practicality behind my passion, even when I had to scrape together gas money and regarded dinner at Taco Bell as a big night out.

I hope to pass on the same lesson to my children someday. Find the thing you love. My oldest son is an avid skater and he's really gifted for a 13-year-old, but there's a lot of pressure on him. He used to skate for endorsements, but now he brushes all that stuff aside. He just skates for fun and that's good enough for me.

You might not make it to the top, but if you are doing what you love, there is much more happiness there than being rich or famous.

Sally's Monday

By Patricia James

I believe in showing up. My mother avoided visiting her best friend, my godmother, as she died of lung cancer because she didn't know what to do or say. Even when Berdelle's family called to say it wouldn't be long, Mom couldn't go. She never said good-bye.

A few years later Mom died of Lou Gehrig's disease. In the days surrounding her death, our small Minnesota town transformed itself into an ark that kept our family afloat. For weeks, people did the simplest things: vacuumed, brought food, drank coffee with my father, and mowed the lawn. It all mattered.

In 2003, my dear friend, Sally, was diagnosed with lung cancer. Like Berdelle, she was a nonsmoker. Like my mom, I didn't know what to do or say. I did a flurry of research to learn all there was to know about non-small-cell carcinoma and considered training to become a hospice volunteer. Then my life partner reminded me to do what I already knew how to do: show up.

A group of Sally's friends—she called us The Divas—made sure that someone was with her every day of the week. I was Sally's Monday. Our days at the cancer center were filled with talking, knitting, and hilarity that often involved medical staff and other patients.

Back home, Sally had a list of projects. We sorted through scary accumulations of photographs, craft projects, cosmetics, old purses, wallpaper, stationery, scarves, flowerpots, books, mismatched linens, and schmaltzy knickknacks stashed in closets and cabinets. We went to the gym and cheered when Sally sustained one mile an hour on the treadmill for ten minutes. One day we traded in her car for a smaller model that everyone else drove after the cancer was in her brain. We went to the mall to buy pajamas for her husband's Christmas present. We browsed through her favorite dollar store, dropped off the latest pictures of her granddaughter Emerson to be developed, took drives in the country so she could take pictures on her new camera phone, promising we'd figure out how to download them someday. Sometimes we sat in her living room and folded laundry.

Each visit ended with a game of freestyle Scrabble for which we made new rules as needed. I knew the end was near when Sally couldn't organize her letters to be right side up and didn't remember we could make a rule allowing upside-down words.

Sally died on December 27, 2005. We hadn't had any deep conversations about dying and death—those were reserved for her beloved husband and children. With her friends, she was as much herself as she could be, and that's what she wanted. She needed her friends to show up and do the simplest things. And we did.

Always Go to the Funeral

By Deidre Sullivan

I believe in always going to the funeral. My father taught me that.

The first time he said it directly to me, I was 16 and trying to get out of going to calling hours for Miss Emerson, my old fifth grade math teacher. I did not want to go. My father was unequivocal. "Dee," he said, "you're going. Always go to the funeral. Do it for the family."

So my dad waited outside while I went in. It was worse than I thought it would be: I was the only kid there. When the condolence line deposited me in front of Miss Emerson's shell-shocked parents, I stammered out, "Sorry about all this," and stalked away. But, for that deeply weird expression of sympathy delivered 20 years ago, Miss Emerson's mother still remembers my name and always says hello with tearing eyes.

That was the first time I went un-chaperoned, but my parents had been taking us kids to funerals and calling hours as a matter of course for years. By the time I was 16, I had been to five or six funerals. I remember two things from the funeral circuit: bottomless dishes of free mints and my father saying on the ride home, "You can't come in without going out, kids. Always go to the funeral."

Sounds simple — when someone dies, get in your car and go to calling hours or the funeral. That, I can do. But I think a personal philosophy of going to funerals means more than that.

"Always go to the funeral" means that I have to do the right thing when I really, really don't feel like it. I have to remind myself of it when I could make some small gesture, but I don't really have to and I definitely don't want to. I'm talking about those things that represent only inconvenience to me, but the world to the other guy. You know, the painfully under-attended birthday party. The hospital visit during happy hour. The Shiva call for one of my ex's uncles. In my humdrum life, the daily battle hasn't been good versus evil. It's hardly so epic. Most days, my real battle is doing good versus doing nothing.

In going to funerals, I've come to believe that while I wait to make a grand heroic gesture, I should just stick to the small inconveniences that let me share in life's inevitable, occasional calamity.

On a cold April night three years ago, my father died a quiet death from cancer. His funeral was on a Wednesday, middle of the workweek. I had been numb for days when, for some reason, during the funeral, I turned and looked back at the folks in the church. The memory of it still takes my breath away. The most human, powerful and humbling thing I've ever seen was a church at 3:00 on a Wednesday full of inconvenienced people who believe in going to the funeral.

I Believe in Philadelphia

By Sozi Pedro Tulante

December 15, 1983, is a date indelibly etched in my memory. I was eight years old, it was my first day in America, and I was crossing the Delaware River into Philadelphia. On that chilly, cloudless evening, I caught my first glimpse of downtown Philadelphia, impressed by the cavalcade of lights radiating

from its imposing skyscrapers jutting high into the sky. We were a motley crew—me, my two younger siblings, my father, and my mother, who was nine months pregnant with my sister, born a week later.

My family was on the final leg of a seven-thousand-mile trek that began two days before in our home in Kinshasa, Zaire, when we were rushed to the airport in the middle of the night to avoid any detection by the secret police. Our trip was only possible because, after my father's release from his brief but brutal detention as a political prisoner, the United States had mercifully ended our nervous wait for a safe haven by granting us asylum.

I vividly recall the indescribable blend of wonder, trepidation, and anticipation I felt about what lay ahead: forging new friendships, settling in a new home, learning a new language, all a world apart from virtually everyone and everything I had ever known.

At first, things couldn't have been worse. We lived in parts of North Philadelphia that had suffered the twin scourges of a raging crack-cocaine epidemic and senseless gangbanging. I often went to bed overwhelmed by hunger, even though my parents had swallowed their pride and reluctantly accepted welfare.

While our climb was steep, we eventually crafted a place for ourselves in Philadelphia, thanks to my parents' steely determination and unrelenting faith in the promise of this city. After all, its public schools instilled in my siblings and me a thirst for knowledge that lifted each of us to college, and me to Harvard and Harvard Law School. Its hospitals supplied a new liver for my father; and, of course, from that sullen, wintry night until today, this city has been our sanctuary.

So, I believe in Philadelphia. Not just its people, thoroughfares, or parks, nor its sports teams, with their knack to frustrate and uplift their devoted fans in equal measure. I mean the spirit of a city that, beginning with the Quakers, has offered to heal the shattered lives of those escaping persecution. This belief is deeply rooted in the improbable arc of my family's story and those of countless others like us.

Today, as I admire the mischievous smiles and wonderful babbles of my seven-month-old son Kiese, I know that this belief is real. And years from now, perhaps he, too, will embrace it and proudly and loudly proclaim, this, I believe.