“Genius Child” by Langston Hughes

This is a song for the genius child.
Sing it softly, for the song is wild.
Sing it softly as ever you can—
Lest the song get out of hand.

Nobody loves a genius child.

Can you love an eagle,
Tame or wild?

Wild or tame,
Can you love a monster
Of frightening name?

Nobody loves a genius child.

Kill him—
and let his soul run wild.

This poem was read at Jean-Michel Basquiat’s memorial service by his friend Freddy Brathwaite, also known as Fab 5 Freddy, host of Yo! MTV Raps. It sums up the love-hate relationship many of us have with bringers of change. Our connections with revolutionaries are often uncomfortable and hard to deal with, and often filled with abuse and struggles for power in an attempt to maintain the status quo. But when their job is done, we celebrate their lives as if we were behind them all the way.

Imagine what would happen if we really were behind them all the way.

Twelve years ago I decided to write a book about Jean-Michel Basquiat. I was at the Brooklyn Museum in 2005 at the Basquiat exhibit, standing in front of a piece called Jawbone of an Ass. The title references the act of biblical hero Samson chopping down one thousand Philistines, a perennial enemy of the Jewish people, with the jawbone of a donkey. The painting itself has an untraditional frame made of four slats of wood tied at the corners with string. The canvas is draped over the frame and its surface is separated into three sections (reminiscent of the Holy Trinity) by a large yellow rectangular area in the middle. This...
yellow area is filled with names that allude to historic struggles for power and agency. Names of those considered heroes are given crowns by Basquiat. In the upper left is a drawing of a black man from the waist up, above him written the word “thinker,” beneath him painted a blue crown. All the way to the right, a jumble of cartoon line drawings depicts conflict: a policeman wielding a jawbone, snakes and bombs, and two boxers—one white, one black—slugging it out. My description does not do justice to the actual artwork, but what struck me about it was Basquiat’s use of history, how he tied the past and the present together with clarity. It was immediately straightforward yet complex.

That would be my first time standing in front of a work of his, really studying it, really seeing Basquiat. The experience as well as the excitement surrounding the exhibit of his work led to a fleeting thought: “It would be really cool if I could make a children’s book about him.” The idea lay dormant for another five years until 2010, when Radiant Child—a documentary by filmmaker Tamra Davis—brought it back to the front of my mind. Reinvigorated, I began researching his life and was able to find what I call “the meat of a story,” the juicy, mouthwatering piece that you can’t do without. It’s what your mind sinks its teeth into, what holds the story together. (Sorry, vegetarians.) For me, the meat was this quote: “I’d say my mother gave me all the primary things. The art came from her.” These words let me know that I was going to create a story about love between a mother and her son.

As I began to learn about Basquiat’s life, I found that our lives had many parallels: Brooklyn, the Village, art, and a parent with a mental illness. I learned that his life was rich with experiences and subject matter relevant to today’s youth and families, such as drug addiction, immigration, poetry, arts activism—or what we call “artavism”—racism, hip-hop culture, and graffiti. I also found that while there was great love for his work, people were often conflicted about giving him credit for his genius.

The truth is that Basquiat was raised in a two-parent home, which they owned until his mother became sick. He spoke three languages and went to private and public schools. His father owned several businesses before becoming an accountant at Penguin Publishing and frequently played tennis on the weekend. The development of Basquiat’s style began as a child and continued to develop into adulthood. There are no firsthand accounts showing that his art was a product of drug use or mental illness. (As a side note, no one ever mentions that there was a highly prevalent drug culture all across America during the eighties, one that was enabled by government policy.)

The truth is that you cannot discuss modern art without Basquiat. Art was his breath; it was his act of love, and he touched people deeply. This is not to say that he had no problems or angst, but there has been a double standard in the telling of his story. It saddens and angers me to think of how many young artists of color have discovered Jean-Michel Basquiat,
have been moved by his work, only to be told he was a lucky drug addict in the right place at the right time. This type of character lynching is not something of the past. I have personally experienced the rewriting of my history by a journalist’s article—filled with blatant lies—focused more on himself and his comfort level with what I could be rather than who I am.

We have come a long way, but black and brown bodies are still facing the repercussions of full frontal and systematic racism, sometimes with their lives. We still have far to go.

So why write a book about such a controversial figure? Because we live in a complicated world, and children’s books can open spaces for young people to learn lessons that help prepare them for it. Children’s books are safe containers to discuss any number of difficult topics with their caretakers or loved ones. They create opportunities for children seeking understanding and solutions for real-life issues to know they are not alone and to speak their truth. They open spaces for children to develop empathy and understanding and to feel pride in their cultural heritage and experiences. Jean-Michel Basquiat’s story teaches children—and all of us—that life has struggles, many that we can do nothing about. But we also have power in how we face them. And most important, it teaches us that we all have value.

The job of a child is to learn as much as possible about the world through new eyes that cast no judgment. It is not that they cannot handle inconvenient truths; it is we, as adults, who shy away from controversial topics and feel uncomfortable—even ashamed. When we tell lies or omit truths about life to children, they are filled with unrealistic expectations of the world. We create angry adults that do terrible things to themselves, or to others. The truth creates peace.

My father wrote as a way to heal himself and to value others, and now I do the same. “Sloppy, ugly, and sometimes weird” is a metaphor for our lives—our struggles and the value we hold. While a life may be of no interest upon first glance, on closer inspection there is always more to learn, more lessons to take note of. When we pay attention to others, we pay attention to ourselves. When we find beauty in others, we find beauty in ourselves. By being a witness to the sloppy, ugly, but somehow still beautiful beings around us, we learn who we really are. We are not the sum of our faults or our strengths—those are transitory things. We are each doing the best we can with the tools we have been given against the challenges we face. We all desire love and happiness, and we all are deserving. How we treat one another is what distinguishes us.

So, let us speak the truth all the time, even when it is difficult or painful, so that we do not fill our children’s bags with the weight of what we carry. Fighting racism, sexism, classism, poverty, and any of the other woes of humanity is like fighting hunger. It is not satisfied with one meal. It is everyday work that we must teach people how to do. We cannot be satisfied with one victory and think that the battle is over. Until this struggle becomes indistinguishable from the way we live our lives, these pestilences will always be plagues. Committee members, publishing companies, everyone listening to or reading this speech, I ask that we all keep fighting, and that we take this attitude with us in our day-to-day business.
Please don’t feel overwhelmed—we can all pick an individual focus, and in this way everything will get accomplished. You will become better. We will become better.

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