

### Poetry is Not a Luxury... And Neither Are Our Emotions

While we are just now beginning to understand the value of emotional intelligence, Audre Lorde (American poet 1933-1992) wrote in her groundbreaking essay “Poetry is Not a Luxury” about the power of emotion to catalyze change nearly half a century ago. Born in NYC during the sunset of the Harlem Renaissance, Lorde self-identified as a “Black, lesbian, mother, warrior, poet” (Parul). She inhabited these intersections and more in her life and voice: radicalism and restoration, poetry and politics, emotions and intelligence. Specifically, Lorde theorizes that patriarchy can only function via the suppression of emotional intelligence. To counteract these confines, she proposes, women must turn to poetry.

To clarify, Lorde does not mean the “sterile wordplay that, too often, the white fathers distorted the word *poetry* to mean - in order to cover a desperate wish for imagination without insight”: she means a force that can not be confined within European bounds of reason. Without attunement to emotions, she argues, we lose our most intelligent grounding. In this untethered state, the sounds of our suffering and joy and the suffering and joy of those around us are deadened by man’s prescription as we lose our primary antenna for justice.

This lack of emotional grounding benefits the institutionalized systems that uplift male power, for as Lorde theorizes, the subjugation of feelings is analogous to the subjugation of women: “Within living structures defined by profit, by linear power, by institutionalized dehumanization,” she argues, “our feelings were not meant to survive. Kept around as unavoidable adjuncts or pleasant pastimes, feelings were expected to kneel to thought as women were expected to kneel to men. But women have survived. As poets” (Lorde, 4).

Though we can never fully conceptualize what it is to be another human being, poetry brings us closest to that truth. It cannot merely exist as a pipe dream, but must withstand the pipeline of ostracization. As Lorde acutely correlates, “in the forefront of our move toward change, there is only poetry to hint at possibility made real.” Poetry spurs the belief in an attainable vision, imagination we require if we are to realize a future for us all. And while the path of art and activism’s convergence may

feel uncharted, unconventional, and undefined, the correlation between poetry and progress is proven. According to Lorde, “poetry is not only dream and vision: it is the skeleton architecture of our lives. It lays the foundations for a future of change, a bridge across our fears of what has never been before” (Lorde, 3). Poets require deep feeling of and for the world, so of course they’re activists. And activists require a medium to express their visions of progress that resonates with those deep feelings, so of course they’re poets.

For too long, feeling and spheres of decision-making have been divorced from each other. In political decision-making, this is particularly pertinent. The most human elements of us have been relegated to shame. The implication of feeling emotion, particularly psychosomatic expression, is that we do not possess the strength to banish it. As Audre Lorde recalls, “The white fathers told us: I think, therefore I am. The Black mother within each of us - the poet - whispers in our dreams: I feel, therefore I can be free” (3).

As Lorde unravels the patriarchal correlation between intellectual thought and being, she too instills resilience in the face of predictably timeless labels. These, according to Lorde, are “falsely benign accusations” (Lorde, 3), and often surface as claims of “childishness” - or in the case of this election cycle, childlessness - “of non-universality, of self-centeredness, of sensuality” (3). In the undertones of these assumptions is present the belief that just as emotion and intelligence cannot coexist, neither can women and politics. In direct opposition to these assumptions, Lorde conjectures that feelings are not beneficial to, but necessary for, change. “As they become known to and accepted by us, our feelings and the honest exploration of them become sanctuaries and spawning grounds for the most radical and daring of ideas. They become a safe-house for that difference so necessary to change and the conceptualization of any meaningful action” (Lorde, 3). If reason promotes homogeneity and conformity, then how might we endeavor innovation and exploration? These expansions and deepenings, Lorde argues, are spurred by our individual inspirations and intuitions. Ironically, many of the labels of nonuniversality, puerility, and narcissism used to justify the exclusion of women from leadership are the result of neglected emotions

and discarded empathy. For what is more universal than feeling? What lends itself to representing the people than empathizing with the people?

Look what conventional definitions of reason and logic have wrought: wars on the brink of global outbreak, political candidates who chase votes through the mechanics of dehumanization, violence against women treated as a misdemeanor by cultures around the globe, an industrial revolution revolted by our earthly roots. While this may seem apparent to us just as it did to Lorde fifty years ago, it will only become more so as the emotional intelligence that so distinctly marks our humanity distinguishes us from abiotic technology that accomplishes much of the non-emotional reasoning that has been historically prized in Western thought. What does it say of our society if we prioritize standardized intelligence? What will that mindframe accomplish for the future of our species as a new and superior reasoner continues to advance? There is no technological substitute for human emotion. The intuition of what we sense matters, of what we sense requires reformation and reconstruction, will always be the most reliable model. Governors who govern with empathy and representatives who represent the myriad trials and triumphs of their constituents will always be the most inspired leaders.

If we were to lead with empathy, from the banished, buried place Lorde describes, imagine what our world could be. For when emotions are perceived as a harbinger of weakness rather than change, not only ourselves as individuals, but the world suffers. When humanity is perceived as the antithesis of logic, rather than its ancestor and descendant, we all subscribe to an illogical claim. Lorde is not alone; even Shakespeare realized it. In the violent and tragic *Macbeth*, he offers a warning about the suppression of emotion, and a command to liberate it: "Give sorrow words. The grief that does not speak whispers the o'erfraught heart and bids it break" (Shakespeare, 155). What Lorde proposes is not a radicalization, but a returning. The revolution of what society perceives as intelligence is not a luxury: it is a necessity. For it is not lifeless logic that will save us: it is our humanity. It is the illumination of that darkened place. It is seeing the pain and power and possibility of the suppressed emotions within us, and choosing not to

evacuate, but to excavate. It is realizing, as Lorde embodied in her poetry and personhood, that change does not live in the binaries, but the intersections.

### Works Cited

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