

Using the Power of Imagination to Heal a Violent World:

Eve Ensler Shares Stories of Freedom

These have been very disturbing weeks and months since the war on Iraq began. At night, I watch news shows and listen to pundits and politicians and policy makers. Sometimes I feel this unbearable sorrow, sometimes this helplessness, this complete helplessness, that in minutes becomes rage. I want to reach in while I'm watching these people talking and pull the minds, the words, the men, the thoughts, out of the contained, limited world they live in. I want them to hear the words that they are using, words like occupy, invade, conquer, greatest nation, evil doers, enemy.

Freedom. Freedom. How can they speak of freedom when they are locked in this box, in this power struggle that is so unfree its only end can really be the death of our species?

Bombs do not make people free. Bombs do not engage people's trust. Bombs do not invite people to connect. There is no freedom without imagination, and imagination requires a leap. Imagination actually demands time, patience, daydreaming, lingering. It means getting lost, not having answers when you don't have answers. It is much more difficult in the end than knowing things, or making fast decisions, or manipulating, or lying, or being right, or dropping bombs.

EDITOR'S NOTE: On May 6, 2004, Eve Ensler attended a ceremony at Cardozo to accept the International Advocate for Peace Award from the Cardozo Journal of Conflict Resolution and the International Law Students Association. This is an edited version of the speech she gave on that occasion.

I am not naïve or some kind of blind peace activist. I know the excitement of violence. I have found my aliveness and meaning through it. It no longer interests me. It is ultimately a deadly, empty box. What I long for is freedom. What interests me is freedom, the great leap that we take as individuals and then as a species into this new waiting paradigm. We could actually use weapons to make peace the way we used imagined weapons to start a war.

There is a new story, a new myth, a new paradigm emerging all over this planet. I have been incredibly privileged over the last six years to witness it. I want to tell a few stories today that represent this kind of imagination and women I've met around the world, who through their imagining, have not only been peace-makers but what we call now 'vagina warriors.' I'm using the word warrior in a whole new way because I think that the energy required to bring about peace requires a fierceness, and devotion, and commitment, and intensity, but when you put warrior with vagina, it becomes life warrior—person dedicated to making sure life exists on this planet and peace exists on the planet.

I want to begin telling a little story about a woman named Agnes Pareyio, whom I met four years ago in Kenya. Agnes was mutilated when she was a little girl. She was mutilated against her will. No one asked her, and when she was finally asked, she said she didn't want to be mutilated, but no one cared. They took her and they cut her and it obviously had an enormous impact on Agnes. Rather than going out and getting an AK47, or a piece of glass, or a shard, or a razor, she went inside herself and actually experienced the depths of the mourning, and grieving, and loss she felt having had her clitoris removed, and she made a commitment to go and devote her life to stopping it from happening to other girls. This to me is a vagina warrior.

Agnes would walk through the Rift valley, and she had a little box she took with her. She would show people what a beautiful, healthy vagina looked like and what a mutilated vagina looked like. Over the course of her walking, she saved 1,500 girls from being cut in eight years. When we met I said to Agnes, "What could V-Day

do for you?" and she said, "Well, Eve, if you got me a jeep, I could get around a lot faster." So we bought her a jeep and that year she saved 4,500 girls from being cut. Then we asked, "Well, what else could you use?" and she said, "Well, with money we could build a house."

Two years ago Agnes opened the first safe house in Narok, Kenya, and now girls have a place to run to when they want to save their clitoris, save their freedom, and save their futures. They stay long enough so their families sometimes actually understand that mutilation is a terrible practice and they may get invited home. The house has become the centerpiece of the community,

and Agnes, who was initially exiled and slandered, was designated deputy mayor in Narok.

All these other issues have begun to bubble up as well: Women are now talking about being abused in their marriages; they're talking about the fact that they want to be educated; they're building a school so that girls can continue their education—all because Agnes made a decision to have imagination,

to get a little box that was personal and specific, and to walk through the Rift valley. Rather than judging, or hurting, or violating people, she just showed them what a healthy vagina looked like and what a mutilated vagina looked like. It was very simple.

In Juarez, there is another example of imagination. For those of you who don't know, over the last 10 years, more than 300 women have been mutilated, murdered, raped, or have disappeared in Juarez. There has been absolutely not one conviction for any of these crimes, and it continues. When I was there I met this woman named Esther; her daughter had been taken from her. Esther had this domestic job and it wasn't enough money to feed her family, so her 15-year-old daughter said, "I'll go and I'll take your job and you'll get another job and we'll be able to support the family." On the first day her daughter went to work, she didn't return home. Esther was very concerned and found out from the family that her daughter had never arrived at work. When they found the body of her daughter, it was clear that she had been killed by a knifing in her stomach. Esther stood by her daughter's body, knew it was her daughter, but the authorities said there wasn't enough DNA to



Masai girls from Narok, Kenya dance with Eve Ensler in a scene from the documentary *Until the Violence Stops*.

confirm that she was right. So for five years they took her on this wild goose chase, and at the end of the five years it turned out that, of course, it had been her daughter all along.

When we met I asked Esther, "Have you ever been to your daughter's grave?" and she said no, because it's far away and there are no buses that go there and we have no car. So we decided that we would take Esther to her daughter's grave. We drove out to this graveyard in the middle of the desert, and there were hundreds of graves. The markings on the graves were primitive, but through the miracle of miracles we found her daughter's grave. I witnessed something that day that was so powerful and intense. When Esther saw the grave, she ran to it and threw herself on the grave and started digging as if she were covering her daughter up and protecting her. She got stones and put flowers on the grave as if she were dressing her daughter for her coming out party. I soon realized that she was in fact clothing her daughter, feeling her, protecting her, dressing her, and honoring her daughter. This incredible healing was going on in the graveyard, because this woman had the capacity to love her daughter so much, to feel the presence of her daughter so deeply that she was actually there for her. She was with her daughter.

I want to talk about Afghanistan, where for years an active imagination has been the only thing that has kept the women of Afghanistan alive. I first went to Afghanistan in 1999, with a group called RAWA—the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan—and they're unbelievably brave, courageous, and visionary women. When their leader was assassinated by the Soviet KGB, they were forced to go underground. I was

blown away by this community of women who are spread out throughout Pakistan and Afghanistan and are doing the most amazing work. They are running clandestine schools. They are running orphanages and shelters. They have a complete network with no telephones and can literally pass signals from Pakistan to Afghanistan.

When I first went to Afghanistan, women were going into stadiums with video cameras underneath their burkas and were documenting the executions of women by the Taliban. If they had been caught, these women would have been killed instantly. One of the women

who had been doing the documentation suffered an epileptic fit during an execution; she told me after that she never had epilepsy before she started documenting the trauma. She said if she had to do it all over again, she would because by documenting it there was a possibility that one day the women of Afghanistan would be saved.

When I came back to the United States, I brought the footage to several news out-

lets in America. Not one put it on television because they weren't interested in the women of Afghanistan. It wasn't until 9/11 that people briefly had an interest in the women of Afghanistan, and they put it on television. What I will say is the RAWA women had the vision and the imagination. They didn't go around with AK47s. They didn't burn people. They didn't kill people. They documented them. These forms women throughout the world have developed—of carving a way through violence—are, to me, the genius of imagination.

I met this woman recently in Palestine who told me how Palestinians negotiated the checkpoints. She said they tell jokes. I asked, "What do you mean?" and she



Eve Ensler at Cardozo.

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said, “Well, when we get to the checkpoints and the soldiers are searching us, we tell jokes and they laugh and then they put their guns down.” I started thinking that women do this kind of thing all the time. We have a way of disarming violence by finding humor, by finding another way that doesn’t escalate the violence.

I find what’s going on in Afghanistan and Iraq right now very, very disturbing. I think many women in the United States got behind this war because we thought women would be liberated. We encouraged women to have imaginations. We held a summit and brought women from all over Afghanistan to envision and imagine what their futures could be, and then to create actions, plans, and programs that we then funded. But it was not a safe or secure place, and in a way, it is potentially more devastating than it was before because the Northern Alliance and the Taliban are still at large and women are actually at higher risk in many ways than they were before.

We must really examine how it is we are living in a country that has promised freedom to certain women and has based a war not only, I believe, on our desire to end terrorism, but to free women. But this freedom has not occurred, and yet none of us seems to notice or seems to be speaking out about it. In Iraq, where we went to liberate the people, over the last four or five months, 70 women a month have been abducted, raped, and sold into sex slavery, which is something that was not going on under the incredible tyranny of Saddam Hussein. In fact, under Saddam Hussein women were doctors and lawyers, and were free to walk in the street. In the months since the U.S. bombing, women are staying in their homes because the lawlessness has made Iraq an absolutely perilous place for women, particularly in Baghdad.

I feel like I’m living in this world of vagina warriors. I see them everywhere and they are men as well as women. They are people who’ve made a conscious decision that violence is not the path. I think many knew there was a good chance that war in Iraq would create more violence and that without a plan or a relationship with the people, chaos might result.

I’ve learned that V-Day works for one reason—women in individual communities around the world bring it there, and they know what they need to do. They don’t need Americans to tell them. Part of the work of making peace is not imposing your agenda, but asking people what they need. It means you serve other people. You don’t control them. You don’t dictate. You provide people with the resources you luckily have because you are in a country with enormous resources and luxury. I think what the US government has not done is ask the Iraqi people what they want.

If we really are serious about peace, and about stopping crimes, we need to go, and listen, and serve. I mean that in the deepest, spiritual, humblest sense. When you go with a preconceived and set idea of how people should be or behave, you are not serving them. You are manipulating and controlling them, and the end result will not be peace.

Imagination is equal to compassion. When you imagine someone else’s life and struggle and feelings, you enter them. When you are inside someone, it makes it almost impossible to kill them. This war, this invasion, has brought the death of 19-year-olds. It’s burned children. It’s raped women. It’s dragged bodies into the streets. It has created unspeakable cruelty, humiliation, division, corruption, distrust, and many more enemies.

There is another way. It involves thinking, patience, planning, and the wisdom of many. In the case of Iraq, it would have meant saying that war was not an option. Then we as a world would have been compelled to work in our collective imagination. It would have meant that through the process of evolving a vision we would have come to actually know each other, know our partners in the Arab world, and know our partners in the European world. We would have learned about each other; more ideas would have come and eventually the right idea would have come. This writing, all of this, is an act of imagining. You can try to fit it into a box. You can try to contain it, but that can’t be done. I say we all should begin by saying, we don’t understand. We begin here and that’s where the real freedom starts. ■