

## To be a black mother is to manage the rage of others while growing joyous black children. This is no easy task

*In an essay for Melbourne writers' festival, Australian author **Sisonke Msimang** reflects on paying attention in a painful world*



'If you want to write stories, first you must live': the author of *Always Another Country: A Memoir of Exile and Home* and *The Resurrection of Winnie Mandela*.

### **Sisonke Msimang**

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I have always paid attention to words. When I was in primary school my favourite words were “zenith” and “apogee”. I liked them because no one else knew what they meant – even adults – and because even though they looked so different, their meanings were similar.

My uncle would look at me with delight when I used one of my precious words. My aunties would proudly crow about my “good” English. At school, I wrote essays filled with these words – they littered my paragraphs like semi-precious stones. My teachers commended me. I was precocious. I assumed – like all children – that writing was a matter of paying attention to words.

I was only half right. A writer pays attention to the world.

It is good to grow up and grow into the desire to be a writer.

Before I was a writer, I was someone else.

South Africa had just become free and I was too busy becoming a South African. There was a new constitution and it was the words in that document that mattered to me. I was interested in the words of grief and pain and triumph I was hearing at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

I was paying attention to the tears running down Desmond Tutu's face and the kindness etched in his eyes. I was watching Winnie Mandela with her beautiful face full of rage and her pinched nose – so proud. I couldn't bear to watch or listen to so many of the TRC hearings. I turned off the TV when the white policeman who eventually went to jail (there was only one who was ever imprisoned) talked about how he had burned black activists' bodies.

I read about him later. It was too painful. I was paying far too much attention.

South Africa was breaking from the past even as history threatened to swallow it whole, and so I focused on living without being eaten alive.

I did not think about writing then. Instead, I got up every morning and went to work. I was busy living in the breach between where the country had been and where it was going. I was too busy paying attention to what was happening and had no time to write down words. South Africa was breaking from the past even as history threatened to swallow it whole, and so I focused on living without being eaten alive.

Within a few years of me returning to South Africa, Nelson Mandela was gone and our new democracy was a battleground. Men were killing women they said they loved. Our society – traumatised for so long – was tearing itself apart and trying to love itself at the same time. Women were dying of Aids but their men were dying faster. I paid attention to this new epidemic borne of blood and semen. All we had – black people – were our bodies, and now they were betraying us. I paid attention to how we were living and tuned out how we were dying.

My words became missiles. It could not be that we had fought and won freedom, only to be felled by a tiny virus that came into our bodies when we loved one another. I paid attention to the chanting of my generation, to the way the streets felt under my feet when we protested. Words became our tools. When we were angry, we turned our words into rocks. My generation had no time for precious stones.

I grew up some more and soon I was a mother and words were a balm. I sung my words into the fuzzy heads of my newly born children. My words to my children are a lifeline. They have become more gentle. We belong to one another.

Soon these small people will be teenagers and they will grunt and turn away when I wake them but now – on the cusp – they still smile. They are tender with me. They ask me sometimes if I am well.

I pay attention to my children. I pay attention to children.

At the Black Lives Matter protest in June, my daughter is shy. At home, as we prepared for the march, she bossed us around and told us what to put on the posters. Here on the streets, her mouth firmly inside a mask, she is quiet. She is observing. She is scared by what she hears, and she is confused.



*'When you pay attention, people respond when you call.'*

An Auntie gets up on the stage and talks about her pain. She talks about the cops and makes jokes about the Queen of England as the symbol of empire. When she does this, I yell in support, "Shame!"

My daughter – at 12 – is embarrassed. I am too loud. She wants to make trouble while staying in the lines. She tugs at my sleeve. "Too loud mama," she whispers. I laugh. Loudly. "No justice!" I yell. Around me voices respond. "No peace."

When you pay attention, people respond when you call.

I know she is recording the moment. She, too, will one day be loud.

A few weeks later, my son is playing video games with his friends. This obsession with playing video games began in lockdown and it has continued too long. It was a lifeline when he was unable to see his mates and now it is just a habit – like so much else right now as we teeter on the edge of normalcy. We have fallen into lazy routines. I am unhappy but unprepared yet to deal with it.

I go into the study where he is sprawled out and I find him crying. I tell him to get off the iPad. I tell him to look at me. He does. His eyes are wet with tears but also out of focus. Drugged on digital. I am scared. I have been too busy. His face is perfect. We hug and I pay attention to the moment, from how he smells to how he feels in my arms. I pay attention.

Sometimes when I am with my children in an ordinary everyday moment like this, I have to force myself not to grieve the passing of time. I am old enough now to appreciate the scale of the present, and how quickly it disappears. I am old enough to have a dead mother and to remember how she smelled, how she held me just close enough and then let me go when I was ready.

I say to my son with his teary eyes, “let’s go for a walk,” and he doesn’t want to but only because he is still in that other world of blue light and pixels – the digital space. I pull him in from the other side of that portal, back into the land of the living. I say, “OK, then let’s ride our bikes then.”

I say it firmly enough for him to understand that this is not a suggestion.

We step outside and blink in the sunlight. His afro is getting big and he is so proud of it and I am prouder of him for loving himself so. I watch him as he pedals ahead of me. At nine he’s still little-ish but will soon be big. The other day he walked ahead of me with his friend and I watched them as they hooked arms and ate ice cream – two black boys in Australia.

It broke my heart and I smiled.

When he is 13, we will have to have The Talk. This is not America so I am not worried about him getting shot, but we need to have the talk so that I can explain to him how careful he has to be in public. I will tell him how well-behaved and mindful he must be of other people’s hate. And this will break his heart as much as it will mine. I am his mother and if I don’t tell him first, he will find out anyway, and someone else will do the breaking. This is my job – his heart is mine to keep from harm.

Last year he and I were sitting on a step where a public piece of art is displayed. It’s a statue of a man, who is seated on the step too. Kids play there all the time. An old white man drove up and parked his car across the road. He sat watching us for a while. There we were – mother and son, chatting and laughing and slurping our milkshakes – but I sensed his presence and looked up.

I tried to make sure my son did not notice him but I did. He was angry and I could feel his rage rising. It was energetic. This game is hard. To be a black mother is to manage the rage of others while growing joyous black children. This is no easy task.

The old man eventually got out of his car and yelled at us to move away from the statue.

I yelled back. I had been ready and waiting for him to escalate the situation. Mama bear that I am, I had been paying close attention.

“You move!” I shouted back.

“What are you doing here? Go back where you came from.” He said this so uninventively. White men’s anger is so boring.

“*You* get out of here. *You* go back,” I yelled back.

I put my body between him and my son so that I could absorb his hate; so that none of it landed on my boy.

Here, in Perth where I live, as recently as 40 years ago, Noongar people were not allowed in this neighbourhood after dark. I am not Noongar, I am African but sometimes – albeit very briefly – the distinction is neither here nor there. In these moments – as we stand face-to-face with white intransigence – what matters is that the arc of history has defined us as black.

So there we stood – me and this old whitefella – in full glare of that past. Black and white staring one another down because someone invented the idea of race and foisted it upon us. Amazing what hate can conjure.

This is what it means to know your history – it means refusing to surrender to its logic. Knowing this, as I have always known it, there has never been a choice for me but to stand my ground.

The old guy realised he had run out of time. He saw that his time was up. He understood that I would not move on; I would not move one inch.

He gave in. He got in his car and drove away. Defeated.

My son and turned too, and we walked away. We headed home side-by-side and he asked, “What was wrong with that old man. Why was he so angry?”

“He’s just old,” I told him.

I wish that was the end of the story but it is only the beginning.

If you want to write stories, first you must live. If you want to live you must pay attention.

• *Sisonke Msimang is the author of Always Another Country: A Memoir of Exile and Home (2018) and The Resurrection of Winnie Mandela (2019).*