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As Much As Air: Integrating Spirit Into Our Work

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Abstract

As the field of interpreting has become more professionalized, there are those who feel a disconnect between the work and the spirit of the profession. Gina Gonzalez is a trilingual interpreter and grass roots activist who seeks a return to the roots of the profession: serving the Deaf community with spirit. She proposes a new integrative model of interpreting that challenges the current paradigm. Her activism and pursuit of authentic dialogue puts her at the forefront of change in her community.

Wanting God

A hermit was meditating by a river when a young man interrupted him. "Master, I wish to become your disciple," said the man. "Why?" replied the hermit. The young man thought for a moment. "Because I want to find God."

The master jumped up, grabbed him by the scruff of his neck, dragged him into the river, and plunged his head under water. After holding him there for a minute, with him kicking and struggling to free himself, the master finally pulled him up out of the river. The young man coughed up water and gasped to get his breath. When he eventually quieted down, the master spoke. "Tell me, what did you want most of all when you were under water."

"Air!" answered the man.

"Very well," said the master. "Go home and come back to me when you want God as much as you just wanted air." (Suler, n.d.)

The Spirit Of Interpreting

Interpreting as a profession was born when Deaf and hearing people sought to regulate an activity that had been occurring for generations. The desire to benefit Deaf people socially, emotionally, and financially was the original driving force, or spirit, of interpreting. As the interpreting profession grew and advanced, so did its ability to reflect upon itself and to seek standards of professionalization. However, there are those in the Deaf and interpreting communities who believe that as interpreters have moved towards professionalization, they have lost their connection to the spirit of interpreting. The end result is that interpreters and Deaf people have become isolated from one another, and the schism between the two groups is widening. There are individuals striving to restore that connection to spirit in the profession so that the work of interpreting is authentic and in service to the Deaf community. Gina Gonzalez is one such individual.

Gina works in Austin, Texas as a trilingual American Sign Language (ASL)/Spanish/English interpreter. Her professional interpreting experience spans decades, and she has interpreted in a variety of settings, including medical, mental health, community, education, and video relay. Gina was a member of the Trilingual Task Force that created the first certification exam in the nation for trilingual interpreters (BEI, 2011). She has led many professional development sessions and has been a trainer for intensive skill workshops for trilingual interpreters. Gina is currently one of only six interpreters in the country who holds a Trilingual Master certification.

Roots in Grass Roots Activism

Gina Gonzalez is not a professional speaker. She is not a polished talking head for the masses. She does not call herself a leader and in fact feels uncomfortable with that label. Yet, from the moment Gina begins to share her ideas, it is easy to see the light in her eyes, sense the energy behind her words, and feel inspired. Her passion for the ASL community is palpable, and she has the gift of drawing others into the realm of that passion through her words and stories. When asked what she calls herself, she said, “I see myself as a grassroots activist. Someone who puts her feelings and thoughts into action. Who takes risks, who is willing to stick her neck out there.

A courageous person. Do those things make a leader? I don't know (G. Gonzalez, personal communication, July 25, 2014).”

It is natural that Gina would see herself as a grassroots activist. She has strong roots in both the Deaf and Latino communities. She grew up in a housing project in Brownsville, Texas, on the U.S./Mexico border. Her neighborhood was a tight-knit one that valued interdependence and reciprocity. She and her four siblings were raised by a single mother who was the only Deaf person in her community. She witnessed her mother experience discrimination and prejudice time and again because she was Deaf. However, Gina's mother did not meekly accept her lot, but loudly challenged injustice and made her thoughts known. She was not afraid to cause a scene in order to right a wrong. That made an impression on Gina who learned from her mother that one should take a stand for what is right.

The value of social justice in Gina's family is multigenerational. Her aunt Maria Elena Lucas, a farm worker, served for many years as an organizer for the Farm Labor Organizing Committee and sought to improve the lives of her fellow crop pickers. Lucas is also an accomplished poet and author who chronicled her experiences as an activist in her book *Forged Under the Sun* (Ruiz and Sanchez Korrol, 2006). Gina's family was instrumental in helping her become cognizant early in her life of the importance of positive action.

The Profession's Current Paradigm

The focus of Gina's activism is reintegration of the original spirit of interpreting into work. She strives to inspire reflection and change in other interpreters. She describes the current model of professionalism of interpreting as one based on trait theory, which focuses on the attributes and characteristics of a professional. She believes that in interpreters' desire to professionalize the field, they have created an inward-looking profession instead of one that looks outward to the community it serves. Gina describes the current paradigm as fractured, as separated from the original goal to serve the social, emotional, and financial needs of the Deaf community. She explains, “We have separated the service from the spirit. I call it ‘spirit’, Deaf people call it

‘Deaf heart’ ... ‘love’; those are just words and labels symbolizing that which is undefinable (G. Gonzalez, personal communication, July 25, 2014).”

Gina believes that the current paradigm gives interpreters a false sense of satisfaction that they are serving Deaf people simply by following the path characterized by professional behaviors and attributes. She thinks that as the interpreting field grows and expands, it perpetuates the illusion that Deaf people are also enjoying similar growth and that interpreters are helping Deaf people. Instead, Gina submits that the profession has lost sight of its reason for existence. She used the metaphor in the story of the young man and the hermit to describe new generations of interpreters. She believes that many interpreters have entered the profession with the desire to serve and benefit Deaf people, but have not dedicated themselves to that goal with their whole heart. Gina feels that in order to affect real change and return to the roots of interpreting, interpreters must abandon the current paradigm.

An Integrative Model

The new paradigm that Gina proposes is an integrative model. If the current interpreting model is divorced from the original spirit of the profession, then interpreters should strive to make it whole again. She advocates retaining the positive advances that have been achieved under the current model, but re-centering the focus on serving the needs of the Deaf community first and foremost. In order to do this, Gina recommends that interpreters develop the competencies of empathy, awareness, and conscientiousness, and intentionally engage the Deaf community as a strategic partner in their work.

Because they use interpreters, Deaf people are more vulnerable in multiple facets of their daily lives. For this reason, interpreters have a responsibility to closely examine their work practices. Gina suggests that interpreters often do not put enough attention into the ways that their presence in an interaction is intrusive or can result in isolating a Deaf person further. In fact, she proposes that the true problem does not lie in the Deaf community, but in the system in which our society functions. The issue is not that Deaf people have difficulty accessing that system, but rather that the system itself cannot accommodate the participation of Deaf people. Gina believes that if

interpreters and Deaf people focus instead on changing the system, Deaf people can enjoy greater participation and autonomy, and less reliance on interpreters.

The Process of Change

In order to open a discussion of these ideas, Gina reaches out to local interpreters and Deaf people who are willing to talk with her. She knows that professional organizations can be intimidating for some people and wants to create alternative spaces to examine important issues. In an effort to reach out to more people, she also creates and shares vlogs on reintegration of spirit. Although opening oneself up to a wider audience entails a greater risk of pushback, Gina says, “That pushback is necessary. It is the friction that we need to grow (G. Gonzalez, personal communication, July 25, 2014).” She credits receiving criticism and authentic dialogue with others in allowing her to evolve and be a better servant to the community.

As any activist is aware, change does not happen overnight. It takes time to change habits of thinking and shift people’s practices. Although she sometimes feels like no one is listening, or that she is standing all alone, Gina knows that things happen in their own time and that she must be patient. In the times that she has felt discouraged, she received crucial encouragement from Deaf people or interpreters who told her that she made a difference for them. It is these moments, and her own inner passion, that do not let her give up. Gina continues to inspire change and to promote authentic dialogue in the profession. She hopes for the day that all interpreters will want to integrate spirit into their work, as much as they want air.

About the Author

Audrey W. Ulloa holds a Master Interpreter certification and Trilingual Advanced certification from the Texas Board for Evaluation of Interpreters. She has worked as a professional interpreter since 1997. She earned a Bachelor degree in Education of the Deaf from the University of Texas at Austin, and a Master degree in Interpreting Studies from Western Oregon University.

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