

*So Many Africas:*  
*Six Years in a Zambian Village:*  
An Interview with Jill Kandel,  
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I've been thinking lately about the power of story—that magical something which emerges between the teller and the tale and creates a space where words can be transcendent, even healing, that place where story becomes a type of prayer. Many of the great spiritual texts are, at their heart, stories. The narratives of the Old Testament, the parables of the New, the dialogues of the Bhagavad Gita, the *kōans* of Zen Buddhism—ancient stories of benediction and incantation, of mingling with the divine, of finding the right words to help us heal ourselves. But healing also happens today, not only in revisiting scripture but in the telling of modern tales. In her first book, *So Many Africas: Six Years in a Zambian Village* (2014), Jill Kandel proves that speaking the right words in the right season can be healing for both writer and reader alike.

Winner of the 2014 Autumn House Press Nonfiction Prize, Kandel's memoir centers on the six years she spent in Kalabo, a remote Zambian village, where she and her newlywed husband, Johan, relocated in 1981. Because Johan worked with the Dutch government teaching agriculture in surrounding regions, his work often took him far away from their modest home in Kalabo. The memoir

recounts how Kandel faced the challenges of her new life and the ways in which many of her assumptions and beliefs about God, humanity, marriage, and womanhood were challenged.

Earlier this year I spoke with Kandel about her book, her development as a writer, and her philosophy on spiritual writing. Like Kandel, I have always enjoyed writing but did not take myself seriously as a writer until around the age of forty. I, too, am driven partly by my belief that writing can be a catalyst for healing, so I took a particular interest in her memoir. A native of North Dakota, Kandel now lives with her family in Minnesota, where she writes, teaches creative writing, and even teaches journal writing to female inmates.

MH: A lot of time passed between the Zambia season of your life and your choice to actually write about it. What changed? What made writing this book possible?

JK: I wasn't ready to write about Zambia until a decade had passed. I needed that time, both to act as a buffer and to give me perspective. The stories were simmering and building up inside of me. The impetus to begin writing was a trip to the Kalahari Waterpark in Wisconsin. Going there brought back a lot of memories and was a place to begin. Once I started writing, it was like a dam. I poked a hole in it to let out a trickle, but it swelled into a flood of memories and emotions. I wrote because it was time.

All this talk of water and rivers (and also of dams—perhaps a nod to the Dutch?) made me smile. As I read about her life in Kalabo, where water was never guaranteed and usually had to be boiled, I found myself beginning to obsess about water, not just in my first-world gratitude for the clean water I enjoy every day. I was in awe of water, the element, for its dual power to both sustain life and snuff it out in an instant. While the Zambezi River that carried Kandel's family in and out of the village teemed with life, it was also known, from time to time, to take a life or limb. It was a river full of stories in a way that rivers have never been for me. It was no wonder she had to write them down.

MH: Had you done much writing before *So Many Africas*?

JK: One of my sons had a reading disability. Since he was a little older, he was embarrassed and frustrated to be slogging through *The Cat in the Hat* (1957). I began writing in order to give him reading materials that were more age-appropriate. I joined a writers' club and began attending writing workshops, retreats, and conferences. I started writing essays and fell in love with that form. My first publications were all essay. I didn't set out to write a book; it shaped itself originally as a series of essays.

MH: You write about how your experience of loneliness and isolation eventually began to wear you down. You were a young mother raising babies in a place where you would only rarely encounter your own language, faith, countrymen, or familiar foods. This is one of the most compelling aspects of the memoir: your fearless honesty and the willing forfeiture of the bright, brave face that women in general (and maybe American Christian women in particular) feel socially mandated to produce. Was that honesty difficult to arrive at?

JK: The factual honesty was easy. The emotional honesty took more time. I wrote because I had questions. I suppose that is what makes the book feel honest. I really didn't know what answers I would find. I am taking you on the journey with me. Finding and telling the truth are intrinsic to the narrative. The chapter titled "Letters Home from Sunshine Mountain" is about trying to keep up the front of a smiling face, especially to show to my parents, while we were in Zambia. Rereading the letters was part of my original research. I'd forgotten so much. Reading those letters was like reading someone else's history. It felt unreal. Who was that young woman? Was it worth it all? Why did we go? It was that curiosity that drove the book. I wanted to figure her out. You can't know your journey until you know yourself; and you can't do that without your own narrative.

A story doesn't go away just because you hide it. It makes a hole in the middle of your life, a hole you have to ignore and awkwardly

navigate around. It's a broken place. Zora Neale Hurston says, "There is no agony like bearing an untold story inside you" (176). Having a story gives words to a person's suffering. Healing begins when you look at your own story and say, "It happened."

Kandel's words remind me of the work of Brené Brown, a research professor at the University of Houston Graduate College of Social Work. Like Kandel, Brown believes we heal when we tell our own stories with our whole hearts: "When we deny our stories, they define us. When we own our stories, we get to write a brave new ending."

MH: Even though very few women will ever repeat your particular experience in Zambia, the struggle you describe with losing your own voice feels somehow universal. I thought of the women inmates in the United States to whom you teach journal writing. What role does "self-finding" play in any woman's healing, particularly self-finding through writing our stories out?

JK: We are all human. Women in jail are still women. They are mothers and sisters and daughters and wives. They love their families and they miss their children. Pain is universal, and so is masking it. When I teach journal writing, and the women begin to tell their own stories, writing allows them to connect the disparate parts of their lives into a continuous whole. Narrative builds links and bridges, resulting in a life that is connected, instead of fractured. As women who have faced a tremendous amount of suffering, they tend to look away from and avoid their pain. It isn't until we embrace who and what we are and what our life is that we can start to make sense of it. Words bring this all together. Words give the women power to understand their own lives. Words give them a voice.

Voice is a peculiar thing. Kandel is a white American woman writing about an African experience or, more accurately, a unique Zambian

experience (as her title suggests, Africa is a big continent, with many different nations, faces, and cultures), and it is no small task to find an authentic voice to share that experience, one that is true to Kandel's memories without appropriating or exoticizing Zambia itself.

MH: You were an outsider in Kalabo. How does a writer manage the obvious challenge of writing respectfully as a guest in someone else's land?

JK: I thought about this question a lot while I was writing the book. I am not Zambian, and I cannot pretend to know what it is to be Zambian. But at the same time, I lived in Zambia for six years. It was my home, too. I think that the story works for that reason: it is my story. I tried to treat the Zambian culture and people with respect. But I also needed to focus on the part of the story that was mine. What was it like being one of ten white people in a district of 100,000 people? What was it like being a North Dakotan in a subtropical country? I give an outsider's perspective. I know my limitations. This is the story of one person living in one country during one time period. It's not a story of Africa.

Kandel's memoir includes several tender, candid moments that reveal the emotional gaps that challenged the connection between a young husband and wife. One of the most wrenching passages in Kandel's memoir is the account of an automobile accident that took the life of a twelve-year-old Zambian girl. This hardship was felt just as deeply by her husband; Johan was driving the vehicle that struck the child, and he transported the girl and her grandfather to the nearest hospital. The injured girl lingered for hours before she finally passed away.

MH: You write very honestly about your husband, and you thank him for his blessing in doing so. What sort of challenges did this

present for you personally? Were there stories you couldn't tell? How much was he involved in the choices you made as you wrote?

JK: Johan is respectful of my work and proud of it, but it was a process to get there. When I first started writing a chapter, I didn't show it to anyone. Once I felt like it was fairly complete, I would ask Johan to read it. English is his second language, so sometimes there were language questions, just on the basic level. He didn't always get the nuances of what I was trying to say. I checked with him on anything agricultural or Dutch-related and asked if basic details needed adjustment.

I wrote about many difficult experiences in our young marriage and life. Johan is my husband, and I like him. It was important to me to honor our trust. I didn't want to be spiteful. Writing creative nonfiction about your partner is a challenge. It's a high-wire act. I spent a lot of time trying to balance honesty with sympathy. I have found that there are kind ways to say difficult things.

There was so much from that time that we'd never talked about. I was busy just surviving—boiling water, managing my own health, caring for the children, keeping us all alive. I didn't have the time or energy to process. Zambia became like a locked room in our marriage, and writing unlocked that door. I'd give him essays to read and he was surprised. "You didn't like Africa? This is what it was really like for you?" It opened the way for us to go back and talk about those years. We needed to go back. It helped both of us immensely. Now that the book is published, Johan is very proud of it. In the end the writing strengthened our marriage.

Many of Kandel's readers are both surprised and encouraged to learn that *So Many Africas* is her first published book. She began writing in her forties—but she believes she was a "writer in the making" for many years before that.

MH: I'm curious about the layered experience of seeking publication for the first time ever after you'd raised a family. Did the late

start feel like an obstacle to you? Did others try to tell you it was too late to expect any kind of success?

JK: Thankfully, precocity isn't a prerequisite for the writing life. A lot of great books have been written by authors over the age of forty. Mary Ann Evans (George Eliot) published her first novel when she was forty. Annie Proulx got her first novel, *Postcards*, published when she was fifty-seven. Frank McCourt was in his mid-sixties when *Angela's Ashes* (1996) was published. Laura Ingalls Wilder was sixty-four when the first book of her "Little House" series was published. I am in fine company. And I've always been crazy about reading. I fell in love with the classics at an early age. I didn't realize it at the time, but all the reading I did over all those years was really prewriting. I like what Steven King says in his book *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft*. "Can I be blunt on this subject? If you don't have the time to read, you don't have the time (or the tools) to write. Simple as that" (n.p.). I was always a reader. But before I could write, I had to live my story. It wasn't until years after I returned from Africa that the words began to build inside of me, and I needed to learn how to write them out.

Living as an American Christian in a remote village without a social order she understood, or the presence of faith she'd always known, had its challenges. While in Zambia, Kandel struggled to feel connected to God and later, she had to decide how to write about that.

MH: It was fascinating to read about the socially and culturally enacted beliefs and superstitions in Zambia and even legal rulings based on evidence that would never be recognized in an American court. How did interacting with others' social and religious beliefs influence your own? How did it influence you as a writer?

JK: Well, my world is big now. I've lived on four continents. I'm married to a man from the Netherlands. My in-laws are European. It

wasn't just Zambia that changed me. I grew up in a stable, kind, common-sense American small town. It was a great place to grow up, but it was also limited. My world was contained. When I moved to Zambia, I'd been married for six weeks. I came thinking I had all the answers, that I could do anything. But I didn't, not by a long shot. To get to Kalabo Village, it took a ten-hour bus ride and then another ten-hour canoe ride. That kind of isolation is disorienting in itself. For six years I was immersed in a village life that baffled me. Living that way teaches you to accept more mystery into your life. Mystery complicates, but it also enriches and broadens. As a storyteller, exposure to rich diversity and even tremendous hardship was a gift. God used writing to take some of the hard things in my life and create beauty. The whole journey of life is really about being open. I enjoy being curious. I think that if you stop being curious, you should stop being a writer.

MH: Your faith is certainly present in the book but not as an overt theme. What guided your choices in writing about faith? What do you tell your students about writing about belief?

JK: First of all, don't speak "Christianese." We're so used to the language of faith that we forget that we often use our own insider vocabulary. It can be alienating. Choose words outside the tradition. I love what Emily Dickinson said: "Tell all the Truth, but tell it slant / Success in Circuit lies. . . . The Truth must dazzle gradually / Or every man be blind" (1129). So you circle the truth; you write a path around it. Truth is a whisper; there is no need to hammer with it. A writer has to remember that he or she is writing to people of different faiths or to skeptics or to those with no faith. We all have armor; we all defend our positions. Stories well told have their own power. Jesus taught in stories and parables. Story enters us in a way that doctrine and theory and outline do not. George Orwell said that "good prose is like a windowpane" (442). You don't have to bang on a windowpane; you just have to clean it and give your audience something clear to see. People will see through the writing to the truth.

MH: I love the section about the Book of Job where you wonder if Job was ever able to “join his first and second lives” (Kandel 168). This seems to be a place where many of us get stuck. We see the seams and breaks in our own life story that would be better to mend, but we don’t know how to join the parts, or we have no desire to keep the parts we wish had never happened. We don’t know how Job did it, but this passage reveals that writing helped you to join your own “first and second” lives. How, exactly, does this happen? How can writing one’s own story be so powerful?

JK: Writing in the broken places allows us to lament. Grieving is necessary. Allowing time for thought and processing is a richer and more meaningful thing than just coping. I lost a lot in Africa. I lost my voice, I lost my childhood innocence that I could do anything, I lost my idea that the world was simple. I left behind my family, my friends, my prairie home, my language. They say you have to go backward in order to go forward. I did this, and it allowed many bitter things in my life to become sweet. Writing allowed me to go back and grieve so that I could move forward in a healthy way.

MH: A final question about writing as a catalyst. You mentioned that you could not write your own story in chronological order because the stories didn’t return to you in chronological order. How did they return?

JK: Some of the stories were more immediately accessible; they were already floating on the top of my consciousness. Mostly, these were the hard stories, the ones I had nightmares about, the ones that haunted me. I started writing there. Most of my first stories were dark and sad. Writing about the past is a little like digging in a garden. You dig one thing up and it exposes what is beneath it. Memory uncovered memory. As I continued to write, stories came back to me that I’d completely forgotten. I’d remember a sound or a taste or a smell, and that would trigger another memory.

As far as organizational process went, in the beginning all of my writing was in the voice of innocence, just the single voice of “me

then” talking, like a child telling the story of what happened to him. It was plain narrative, just “this is what happened and how I responded to it.” It was pretty boring! When I began revising, a good friend suggested that I add a voice of experience to my writing. This allowed a more mature voice. When I found that voice, it gave me a way to reflect and go back and find meaning. The two voices working together are, I think, what make the book work on different levels—the young innocent bride and the questioning woman searching back to understand who she used to be.

MH: Any last words of wisdom you can share with other writers or memoirists?

JK: One thing I discovered in the process of writing this book is that memories can’t be stuffed away selectively. If you hide the difficult stories, you are also hiding the happy ones. As a memoirist, don’t be afraid of the dark places. I had to embrace writing the difficult stuff. Then after I’d written a lot of the sadness and pain away, some really joyous and happy memories came back to me. One of my favorite parts of the book is about the flying ants and the clouds of birds. This was one of the last things I wrote even though it shows up fairly early in the book itself. Writing Zambia gave Zambia back to me in a new way.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>For more information about *So Many Africas: Six Years in a Zambian Village*, to view the book trailer, or to learn more about Jill Kandel and her upcoming projects, visit [JillKandel.com](http://JillKandel.com).

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