An Interview with Poet, Teacher, and Activist Jimmy Santiago Baca

by Kirsten Ogden

This is the third interview in a series about the intersections of writing, teaching, and identity. Read Past Interviews in the series: Mike Rose, Virginia Pye.

Jimmy Santiago Baca was born in New Mexico of Indio-Mexican descent and spent his early years in an orphanage before he was sentenced to five years in a maximum security prison where he turned his life around through education and poetry. He is the winner of the Pushcart Prize, the American Book Award, the International Hispanic Heritage Award, and for his 2001 memoir A Place to Stand, he received the prestigious International Award. In 2006 he won the Cornelius P. Turner Award and has devoted his post-prison life to writing and teaching others who are overcoming hardship. He founded Cedar Tree Inc., a nonprofit foundation that works to give people from all walks of life the opportunity to become educated and to improve their lives. The film based on his memoir, A Place to Stand, is now available on iTunes. You can read Ronald A. Sharp's review of Baca's 2014 collection of poems Singing at the Gates, published by Grove Press, here at Kenyon Review Online.

Photo Courtesy of Jimmy Santiago Baca

Jimmy and Kirsten spoke in person, through email, and on the telephone in 2017 over a series of months.

Jimmy, I'm interested in your literacy narrative, which seems to be so much a part of who you are and how you became a writer—triumph through education and perseverance. Can you talk a little bit about your early years in prison and coming to a love of language there?

I was institutionalized from age five to thirty years, first in an orphanage and then in prison. I kept running away and escaping and escaping and escaping... I had tried to escape so many times. When I got to prison I refused to work; I wanted to learn—I wanted an education. I was ready to give my life for an education. A man named Jimmy Green taught me poetry. He walked into the library, and they killed him because he wanted to get a book.

Since you are talking about your early time in prison, you are in that mindset when you're writing too. Was it hard to go back to that place as part of the process? Did you have to re-experience the tragedy of being in prison?

Yes—it was kind of cool because at the time that I was living it, there was no outlet for it. In this case, ten years later when I attempted to write it, two things occurred: You can't keep going around and around and around something—I realized I couldn't go any further—I had to sit down and write it. And so I just wrote: this is what they did to me. I just wanted to tell the story.

A while back when we talked a few months ago, you shared this story about being in the orphanage with the nuns and how they took the white kids to the heated area of the orphanage and left the Latinos in the cold, and you said it was the system that we should be angry at, not the race. I thought that was really profound—this ability to be so aware of the context of the situation and to learn forgiveness.

Even at the age of six I knew it wasn't the white kids' faults. The nuns brought them out of the coldest rooms and took them to where the heaters are. The white kids are being conditioned to feel superior—so you can't attack the whites, you have to attack the system. But we have to attack with loving ourselves first. If we don't love more, we ain't revolutionizing nothin'. People who love themselves won't tolerate deception; they won't tolerate oppression.

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Have you seen what little children do when you walk up to them and you take away their candy? They start screaming! Those little kids are thinking, Hey! They're taking away our justice! Our happiness! This is why we need to address the system. Look around you! They're taking away our humanity! They're taking away our education! And we ain't crying. Why aren't we crying!

One of the things I tell inmates I work with is that you've got to sit and dream for them and tell your sons and daughters your dreams for them. Our kids have to know we have dreams for them and love for them, and sending our kids out into the world full of big dreams—that's going to revolutionize things.

It seems to me that your development as a writer and poet is deeply rooted in your desire to be heard—not just as a man, but as a prisoner, as a Chicano, and as a human being.

I've always said that poetry chose me, and I didn't have the power to refuse it. I was lifted out of my silence to become a real man. I use language to convey my dreams to the world and I tell my students to do the same. It's a beautiful vehicle to force people to pay attention.

You work in multiple genres—short story, poem, screenplay, memoir, and I'd even add letters and emails to that list as forms of literary product. How do you decide what material will take which genre? Is your process different when you work in different genres?
I guess I begin with some questions for myself. How do you frame an experience in a way that becomes literary? Instead of making it just a protest piece, how do I make it an experience that contributes to all human beings and reaches their hearts. My work is—well, I give it as a gift to people. I don't leave anything out. I write it as a human being to another human being. Then I go through a lot of revision. A lot of rewrites. On this last book I'm working on I did about forty-nine rewrites. I took it from 1000 pages down to 400. It's not the money—it's me. It's something in my body, in my gut, that I want to take the work down to that place. I want the work to be something that can stand in the sun.

Your collected poems begin with a series of poems rooted in love letters. What is the connection for you between poetry and dialogue? Or maybe, poetry and voice? Do you think that these early efforts of writing letters informed the way you write poems?

I couldn't put twenty years of compressed trauma, compressed pain, compressed joy—I couldn't put twenty years into a poem—I didn't know how to do that—letters offered me a way of writing about my environment and pouring my past into it. One of the greatest literacy techniques is to have someone write letters, so absolutely—they were crucial to the way I write today. I started writing letters to [Denise Levertov, Adrienne Rich, Norman Mailer, Joseph Bruchac]—the only way I knew how to express myself was to pour myself into a letter—and that's what first caught the eyes of my poetry human—my ability to write a letter blurred the lines of poetry and prose.

You tell a powerful anecdote about coming in contact with the warden of your prison many years later at an event that was honoring him.

Yeah. I was giving a speech at one point, and the warden of my prison was there getting a twenty-five-year award. It was so ironic that he and I in the universe would be coupled in this way, so many years later.

You know, I do practice Zen Buddhism, and I know what goodness is; I know what balance is; I know what's right and what's wrong. I'm not playing the victim or the innocent... and yet the criminal in me at that speech wanted to say Warden, do you know who I am?

And the good me was saying Don't do it. Don't shame him in public.

But I had to. I stared at him and I said, "Warden, do you know who I am?" And all I could hear inside of me was Do you know who I am? I had to flip that switch. You know, I wanted to say I am a human being, dude. I wanted a chance. You had no right to take away my right to an education. I couldn't even read and write! It was coming from this place of belief that we all have a right to be who we are. You have a right to a good life. You have a right to respect. You have a right to be educated, all just based on the goodness in your own heart.

At that speech I had to call out the warden. I said, "Dude, you tried to kill me. You tried to silence me. You oppressed me. You beat me. You broke my jaw. You broke my arm. You put me in isolation for a year and put me in darkness... in darkness. Do you know who I am? I am a human being."

That is an incredible story—that raw, inner voice claiming its place in the world and demanding respect as a human being.

Sometimes it sounds so foreign to me, that someone would rather threaten to kill me than give me an education. But you know, I'm trying to teach my own kids that this is the world we live in and let them know to claim their humanity because it's going to enhance their goodness. This is why we each have to learn ways to love ourselves more. A person who truly loves himself or herself won't let injustice and inhumane treatment like that happen in their presence. I don't care how much money I offer you... if I insult your spirit and you love yourself, you're not going to let that happen. When you love yourself and you get up in the morning, you move with love in the world. Just as the way you treat your little sister and your mom—cleaning your room—little acts of love are going to change the system. When I write I listen really hard until I hear God's voice or the voice of love.

Is your early experience fighting to become literate and to gain an education the reason you work so much with education and prison reform?

People of color and poor people, we have a self-hatred that is somehow like a virus, and the second you come out of your mother's womb, the virus comes to you—that if you're poor, and you're a person of color, you have self-hatred. But each of us who gets educated—we educate those around us. Education for itself is worthless, but making education yours is priceless. I tell all of my students to make it theirs. I try to teach them how to think for themselves—for their own benefit and for their own welfare. I tell my students who are getting educated thank you. I tell them, "You are there to protect my children with justice and respect. Thank you for protecting them from racism and from classism." Because when we learn about these things, it makes it more possible that we each will be treated as human beings and will treat others with love and respect.
All of the people you've worked with talk about you as an amazing mentor and teacher. How does teaching inform your writing?

I kind of approach teaching backwards. I went into a classroom thirty-five years ago, but I've turned down tenure track positions because of my commitment to the people in the barrios and the ghettos and the poor white trailer camps—because I felt a passion to go into those places and teach those people how to read and write because I was one of those people. The way I did it is I walked into those places thinking I wasn't a teacher, that I was just there to tell them there was something in them that is worth saving. I wanted them to know that there's more goodness in them instead of badness and that as a group, we have to work out the good parts of ourselves. We've been told for so long that we're worthless, that we haven't been able to work on the good parts because we're always getting the shit kicked out of us. Every single human being I've worked with has that in them, and they are able to access that if we, as teachers and writers, give them a safe space to allow them to access that. We get to see a new human being blossom in front of our eyes.

Do you hear from past students a lot?

Over the years I've gotten thousands of letters from teachers, from prisoners, from single mothers, from yoga instructors—how many people tell me I saved their life through teaching—it's incredible and pretty humbling. I can't stop teaching. I continue to teach, to mentor, as much as I can.

I'm trying to teach my own kids that this is the world we live in and we have to keep giving of ourselves and our art because it's going to enhance their goodness and change the world through love.

You're doing this live webinar series now, and it's really extraordinary. Can you talk about it and some of your reasons for doing the project?

I have this vision of reaching 20 million people every day. At my site we have a lot of great things for teachers and writers—we live stream, and each week we have guests, lesson plans, live podcasts, poetry collections, and I'll be reading a poem, looking right at the students and the teachers as I tell them about it. As a writer, this teaching identity and all of these manifestations of it are part of my writing and are just a part of me. I want students to see me at my office, at my writing desk, and I want to be able to talk to students about their writing.

Writing and teaching—it's who I am.