

The TEDtalk Cure: Cancer and the transformative performance of storytelling

By Vinia Dakari

One of the key features for a captivating TED talk is the mastery of storytelling, Carmine Gallo, communication expert, writes (Gallo, *Talk like TED* 41)—“the act of framing an idea as a narrative to inform, illuminate and inspire” (*The Storyteller’s Secret* xvi). Telling a good story, though, is not enough; it has to be transformative. Transformative stories, according to Gallo, have sprung out of adversity; storytellers who inspire with their stories have been through hardship and have lived to tell the tale and share the lessons they have learned. But how do you turn a cancer story into a short yet memorable talk? A talk that not only thrills the physically present spectators but also stirs fervent discussions in cyberspace long afterwards? And, finally, how can such a talk heal, educate, and please the senses?

Telling stories of illness is the attempt, instigated by the body’s disease, “to give voice to an experience that medicine cannot describe” (Frank, *Wounded Storyteller* 18). From archetypal figures, like Tiresias—the blind seer in *Oedipus Rex*—and the biblical patriarch Job, to the modern ill subject, wounded storytellers corroborate the validity of their story by means of their wounds and suffering, to recover their voice and heal others (Frank xi, xii). In this respect, the performativity of suffering lies precisely in that “the disease that sets the body apart from others becomes, in the story, the common bond of suffering that joins bodies in their shared vulnerability.” The wounded storyteller is the person who has gone through suffering and illness, whose body has been marked by this torment, and who has managed to return to life, fully healed or not, carrying the wisdom of passage. It is their wounds that give them their narrative powers (Frank, xi).

Anthropologist Dwight Conquergood detects the same healing effects of psychoanalytic practices in shamanic rituals (41). In non-western or primeval cultures, shamans are healer-figures in possession of spiritual powers that can affect humans, non-humans, and the entire cosmos alike. Unlike the healers of western medicine, though, shamans enter a dialogic relationship with their patients. They re-enact their initial sickness, becoming vulnerable like their patients, who also partake in the ritual. The dynamics of healing is thus directed both ways, affecting both shaman and patient and re-mystifying the medicalized body.

Drew Leder elaborates on the split between our ecstatic body, which extends beyond its outer surface and engages us with the world, and our recessive body, the depths of which reach deep down our viscera, and which recedes in the background of our daily existence. While in a state of health, the visceral density of our bodies easily recedes in the background disappearance so that we, as immaterial minds, can fully engage with our world (Leder 11). Only in cases of pain and illness is our materiality recalled. As a result, the dysfunctional body emerges—“dys-appears”—while the self is detached by means of a mind-body split: from “I” as a body to “I” versus the body (Leder 69).

Leder further elaborates on the philosophical extensions of the body's dys-appearance. In fact, "[that] the body is remembered particularly at times of error and limitation helps to explain the Cartesian epistemological distrust of the body" (86). In this sense, if the mind is traditionally associated with the Self, the Male, the spiritual, the civilized and civilizing, the recalcitrant body becomes the Other, the Female, the material, the non-human, the primitive. As such, the Cartesian hierarchy has yielded a certain kind of metaphorical thinking that sanctions subordination and stigmatization of various Others: female, non-white, underprivileged, or non-human. The metaphorical extensions of this split, eventually, render the experience of illness all the more unbearable.

Providing ample evidence that shared narratives of suffering can hold healing powers, TED culture has gathered global attention around its marketing slogan "ideas worth spreading" and the promise of transformation it carries. Initially designated as a conference on technology, entertainment, and design in 1984, TED would later be established as both a cultural event and a hybrid genre. In 2006, TED.com website developed around the main conference event, now being a massive archive of talks, each with a transcription, translation into several languages, interviews, and comment areas. Held at various venues worldwide, TED brings together people and stories from a multitude of disciplines and cultures. As such, TED events often acquire the character of support groups, the contemporary equivalent of modern one-to-one psychoanalysis (Morris, *Illness and Culture* 201).

Pressing on the raw nerve of articulating cancer, the TED talks discussed here can be deeply transformative both for the one who talks and for those who listen. In these cases of performed storytelling, the West meets the East, humor meets shock, and inspirational narration meets the aesthetic bliss of music and dance. Not only do the storytellers tackle the unrepresentability of illness and suffering, but they also emphasize the dynamics of presence through their staged narration. Their aim is to remember, educate, heal and be healed. Finally, by abandoning the restrictions of traditional aesthetic and narrative patterns, they reach out to a diverse, both live and virtual, global audience.

Playwright/performer/activist Eve Ensler, performer/author/activist Tania Katan, and performer/choreographer/scholar Ananda Shankar Jayant are women who have been through cancer. They are three wounded storytellers who mold metaphors, which will accommodate their experience of suffering and their transformed identity. This is what sustains them in their ongoing being-in-the-word, and what enfranchises them as "healers," in the sense that the connection these storytellers have established with their own bodies aids them in perceiving the pain of others. Narrative shows that "silence is not simply an experience of the solitary individual but a social consequence almost built into the interpersonal structure within which suffering occurs" (Morris, *Illness and Culture* 197).

"Suddenly, My Body"

In "Suddenly, My Body," American author of *The Vagina Monologues* and activist Eve Ensler gives an account of her journey from being separated from her body, to finally *being a body*, as seen in her published work, *In the Body of the World: A Memoir of Cancer and Connection* (2013). Ensler attributes her pre-cancer denial of her body to "her violent past," the trauma of being sexually abused at an early age, which she has repeatedly negotiated in her writing.

Acknowledging the problematic existence of her body beside herself, Ensler recalls the various ways she abused it, suggesting in retrospect that she may have unwittingly contributed to her unexpressed trauma. Ensler reports that her body became a new kind of commodity,

“something I was selling;” and that, while aging, she started hating it because it was a reminder of her many failures: of not being fit, of not bearing children, of not being in peace with nature. It was about this time when cancer appeared to explode her “wall of disconnection.” It was also her exposure to other stories of violence against women that she heard during her journey to the Democratic Republic of Congo, some of which she actually presents in raw details.

The previously held illusion of immortality is shattered once the visceral depths of the body *dys-appear*, Leder writes. It is the moment Ensler withdrew from her ecstatic being-in-the-world and was forced into the “foreignness of this inner body” (Leder 48). Inhabiting this alien space, she reports realizing that

suddenly, I had a body, a body that was pricked and poked and punctured, a body that was cut wide open, a body that had organs removed and transported and rearranged and reconstructed, a body that was scanned and had tubes shoved down it, a body that was burning from chemicals . . . Suddenly I understood that the crisis in my body was the crisis in the world . . . happening now. (“Suddenly”)

In this impressive strand of monologue, which she delivers in a single breath, Ensler shatters not only the wall of her disconnection but also the entire organism of the systematic disenfranchisement of the Other, starting with the alien within.

As all stories would bleed into one another, Ensler recounts how hers would reflect the story of the crimes against women, the poor, animals, the Earth itself that is polluted by the “cancer of our carelessness.” “Suddenly,” she says, “my cancer was a cancer that was everywhere, the cancer of cruelty, the cancer of greed, the cancer inside the coal miner’s lungs, the cancer of [pollution] . . . the cancer of buried trauma.” Cancer, therefore, becomes a metaphor for the catastrophic dichotomy between a disciplining mind and a disciplined body. By drawing parallels between cancer and a polluted ecosphere as the downside of centuries of industrial development, Ensler also reminds us that it is a partly culture-related disease, therefore opposing modern beliefs of cancer as a personal failure—a view that has been sustained by western religious and cultural discourse and has long burdened those who must face it.

Her journey to reembodiment culminates in the account of a healing ritual a community of women prepared for her. Gathered around a bowl of water, a symbol of the elements of nature in unison with the human, these women bathed her bald head while praying for her life. This ritualization of life becomes performative as it effects change: the cleansing of mind, body, and spirit from plaguing ailments, and the transformation of the patient into a shaman/storyteller in possession of the healing powers of narrative.

The healing effects of at once re-inhabiting her body and the cosmos are what rendered her fully aware of her moral responsibility as a shaman and storyteller: “you don’t have to get cancer to come back into your own body,” she says. “I got it so you don’t have to.” Her story thus ends with the viable promise of regeneration: her own, once she decided to reconnect to her body; of the Earth, once humans decide to respect and protect it; of women in Congo and the underprivileged around the world, once they decide to rise and unite into a single body of revolution.

Her presence on the TED stage, therefore, acquires new meaning: she is there in order to *enact* the healing capacity of her narrative. The act of listening, indeed of agreeing to partake in this assembly of bodies, makes change possible.

“Survivability, Sustainability, and Nudity”

The next story takes us from the inner trauma of cancer to its explicit scars. As comedian and activist Tania Katan reveals in her talk “The Power of Voice: Survivability, Sustainability, and Nudity,” she has survived breast cancer twice; this came with the price of a double mastectomy. Her experience with illness inspired her to write a memoir, *My One Night Stand with Cancer* (2005). Katan later adapted it for the stage as a one-woman show, *Saving Tania’s Privates*, which made its New York premiere at Frigid New York Festival in 2011 and won the Audience Choice Award for Best Show and the Sold Out Run Award.

Katan’s account, specially created for the TED event, is humorous, upbeat and oddly refreshing. She admits, however, that “I didn’t know I was a survivor until I put my story out into the world, and then people just started telling me that I was a survivor; but this word ‘survivor’ . . . felt really odd.” Although she is sceptical as to whether “survivor” should be considered a political identity to begin with, she does locate herself in a community of breast cancer activists when she quotes a few lines from “A Litany for Survival”—a poem by Audre Lorde, African American lesbian poet and breast cancer activist: “When we speak we are afraid/ our words will not be heard/ nor welcomed/ but when we are quiet/ we are still afraid/ So it is better to speak” (32). Katan’s decision to speak, however, brings about the debate on where the limits of the politically correct are to be drawn.

Running topless taught her that explicit mastectomy scars, which are indicative of the complete absence of the censored spectacle of breasts, cannot be easily handled in everyday situations, thus revealing the system of perverse analogies that apply here. Katan remembers being the odd one out at the Survivors’ Café after the race: surrounded by women dressed in pink, she is admonished by one of the organizers to “put [her] shirt back on, there are children here.” Who are really these children? And why pink for breast cancer? As Barbara Ehrenreich suggests, pink is used as a euphemistic cover-up for the ugliness of the disease, while it reduces women to infantile status (“Welcome to Cancerland”); they are victims of cancer, in need of care by an adult, preferably male and doctor.

This “pink sticky sentiment” (Ehrenreich) is what opposes the instructive potential of Katan’s deviance. A breastless woman is indeed a spectacle that violates the culture of voyeurism: the voyeur is caught in the act, while the obscene spectacle returns their gaze empty of expectations. Rather than dangerous for children, this sight is offensive and confusing for the eyes of patriarchy, violating normative discourses of gender performance. And it should be mentioned that Katan’s presence was then perceived twice as offensive, as she has always been vocal both about her lesbianism and her mastectomies.

What Katan wittily criticizes is that fund-raising is often restricted to a feel-good act, without the willingness to see behind the pink blinds into the “ugly” facts of living with cancer. Unlike grassroots actions, industry-funded initiatives often turn awareness-raising efforts into a corporate market plan. Will donating suffice to bring an emotional catharsis and to cancer-proof supporters? And why was Tania shown the exit from this, to all intents and purposes, supportive community?

Reiterating the Kantian aesthetic of the beautiful as that, which generates comfort through its finiteness, breast cancer market culture turns direct and uncomfortable discussion around the disease into a pink metonymy, trying to beautify and keep it in check. In this sense, cancer becomes beautiful only as far as it is a profitable commodity. This however reflects not a society’s schooling in accepting the unrepresentable within presentation, but the tendency to mask uncomfortable topics under the one-size-fits-all awareness-raising enterprise. In this

perspective, the facile politicization of art renders the work easily consumable, without however endorsing further discussion on its aesthetic qualities.

Katan's embodiment finally occurs when a group of teenage girls approach her outside the café—the place supposedly to celebrate survivorship. As she recalls, it was in this odd company, who gasped at her scars and wanted to know if “this is what breast cancer looks like,” that survival *happened*. This is the moment one arrives into a full understanding of the power of voice when heard. Katan thus ends her story in the same upbeat tone giving a piece of advice: “on every occasion that you have to deal with something that makes you feel, small, odd, or uncomfortable, take your shirt off, metaphorically—or literally, and show your community who you are; our survival depends on it.” Adding abundant self-sarcasm to the account of this awkward moment, Katan reinstates its creative possibilities: “Humor,” she says, “springs from a place of fear, discomfort, vulnerability, and otherness.” Laughing at cancer, therefore, breaks the taboo of silence, pity, and pretentious political correctness, and turns out to be both transforming and liberating.

“Fighting Cancer with Dance”

The last story restores the rich expressive qualities of the cancer-as-battle metaphor. Classical Indian dancer Ananda Shankar Jayant's “Fighting Cancer with Dance” weaves together the authority of contemporary medical discourse and the dynamics of Hindu spirituality and art. Rather than gravitating towards the supernatural, the metaphor she employs draws on the Jungian concept of a collective unconscious; Durga, the eighteen-armed warrior goddess of Hindu pantheon, who rides a lion and battles Evil, becomes her muse and role model.

Shankar Jayant's storytelling is a purely “rasic” performance in the way it combines narration, music, and dance. She draws from the nine rasas of Indian theatre, where each rasa corresponds to a basic emotion common to all human beings. The emotion she focuses on is fear. She describes how cancer taught her anew what fear is but also how to overcome it. Shankar Jayant gives an account of how dance set her on a journey inwards, where she could mine the strength to subsequently rise above the constraining borders of her diseased body and become connected with the cosmos.

The spirituality of her dance, which in Hindu philosophy holds the healing powers of prayer, is also aesthetically rendered as a pictorial metaphor. Shankar Jayant sees Durga as a symbol that encompasses all human experience, therefore choosing to attribute human rather than divine proportions to the goddess: “I think that we human beings created the gods we believe in, so those stories really reflect our own,” she says (“Q&A”). She, therefore, imagines herself as the goddess in possession of a powerful arsenal to battle cancer.

Through this tapestry of metaphors, Shankar Jayant rediscovers the inborn predisposition of human beings to storytelling, which we have unlearned to possess through centuries of positivist education and scientific abstraction. Hers is a call to reconnect with the Jungian collective unconscious that runs through all human beings regardless of cultural and historical specificities. Stories are not just stories, but the path towards the re-mystification of our existence and the re-enchantment of the world. In fact, by speaking in English during her presentation at an internationally-accessed platform further substantiates her argument on universal connectedness.

Shifting from narration to performance, this skilled storyteller impresses a multi-sensorial experience to the audience. This becomes particularly felt once she starts performing a traditional Indian dance. The expressiveness of her face concurs with the symbolic gestures

of her arms and hands, and the ritualistic labor of her feet. Each part of the body delivers its own performance and rhymes with the rest, weaving a layered kinaesthesia. As she dances, her feet, painted in vermilion, sketch the outline of a lion on a white piece of cloth spread on the ground, which is raised high to become fully visible to the audience. This is the visualization of the battle metaphor that has sustained her journey through illness and has informed her dance aesthetics.

Shankar Jayant's intersemiotic performance is a radically altered perception of the diseased subject: the reconstruction of the diseased female subject as a cancer Amazon. Even though Susan Sontag consistently criticized the militaristic metaphor of cancer as warfare in her seminal work *Illness as Metaphor* (65), Shankar Jayant mobilizes it to strengthen her inner resources and affirm agency over her body. She, in fact, entirely rejects the role of victim and creatively explores the aesthetic possibilities of battle metaphors. Transforming her inner strength into narration, dance, and painting, Shankar Jayant wants to be known not as a cancer survivor, but as a cancer conqueror. To conquer is not only to win in battle; it also means to possess, to make one's own, and expand around it. This is perhaps the most radically expressed embodiment, which reconciles the warring states of the self and attempts to tame the errant part to obedience.

Conclusion

By means of the TED global platform, Ensler, Katan, and Shankar Jayant commemorate their losses, even as they educate audiences. They talk about survival even as they make it happen. The three storytellers thus disengage themselves from the modern politics of victimhood and the market aesthetics of survivorship to embrace the role of witness. Becoming a witness, as seen in Frank's and Lorde's writings, means being responsible for telling what happened, and giving pain a voice so that the pain will not be wasted.

These TED stories are successful not only in sharing the pain but also in making art out of it. Cancer aesthetics has long been barbed behind stereotypes that considered cancer to be too blatantly associated with death to be aesthetically pleasing as an artifact. In the times of a thriving pink-ribboned industry and black-comic TV culture, when words like "Hollywood" and "mastectomy" appear in a single headline, it is understood that, regardless of whether cancer stories can be made into art, they have certainly been made into a best-selling product. And even if breaking the silence on cancer is indeed a victory in its own terms, popularization is no better to demonization. As Katan's case illustrates, the best-selling and the obscene are only two scars apart.

Cancer aesthetics, as seen in these TED talks, is now acquiring a solid disciplinary character. As such, it has also been observed to transform performance aesthetics the way it fuses the performative, the informative, and the transformative. These cultural events expand beyond the conference venue and the hear-and-now of the stage to the infinite web space towards a diverse audience. Rather than compromising the robustness of live theatre, however, they breathe new air to the Arts and the Humanities, where TED hybridity and cancer-related performance can be accommodated and implemented.

Works cited

Conquergood, Dwight. "Performance Theory, Hmong Shamans, and Cultural Politics." *Critical Theory and Performance*. Ed. Janelle G. Reinelt and Joseph R. Roach. Michigan: U of Michigan P, 1992. 41-64. Print.

- Ehrenreich, Barbara. "Welcome to Cancerland." *Harper's Magazine* 1 Nov. 2001. Web. 10 Oct. 2014.
- Ensler, Eve. "Suddenly, My Body." TEDWomen. Dec. 2010. *TED.com*. Web. 02 Dec. 2015.
- Frank, Arthur. *The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness, and Ethics*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1995. Print.
- Gallo, Carmine. *The Storyteller's Secret: From TED Speakers to Business Legends, Why Some Ideas Catch on and Others Don't*. New York: St. Martin's, 2016. Print.
- . *Talk like TED: The 9 Public Speaking Secrets of the World's Top Minds*. New York: St. Martin's, 2014. Print.
- Katan, Tania. "The Power of Voice: Survivability, Sustainability and Nudity." TedxScottsdale. 13 May 2011. *TED.com*. Web. 02 Jan. 2015.
- Leder, Drew. *The Absent Body*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1990. Print.
- Lorde, Audre. "A Litany for Survival." *The Black Unicorn: Poems*. New York: Norton, 1995. 31-32. Print.
- Morris, David. *Illness and Culture in the Postmodern Age*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1998. Print.
- Shankar Jayant, Ananda. "Fighting Cancer with Dance." TEDIndia. Nov. 2009. *TED.com*. Web. 15 Dec. 2015.
- . "Q&A with Ananda Shankar Jayant: The Power of Myth and Metaphor." *TED Blog*. 22 Jan. 2011. Web. 15 Dec. 2015.
- Sontag, Susan. *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors*. 1978, 1989. London: Penguin, 2002. Print.

Vinia Dakari lives in Thessaloniki and Athens, Greece. She holds a PhD from the Department of American Literature and Culture, School of English, Aristotle University (Thessaloniki). Her doctoral dissertation, "Performing Cancer: Toward an Aesthetic of the Unpresentable" (2016) seeks to construct a philosophical/theoretical/analytical framework to accommodate the distinctive aesthetics of illness-related performance—namely, the unpresentability of cancer—and its impact on audiences. She is the editor of the June 2018 issue #17: "Medicine and/in Theatre" of *Critical Stages/Scènes Critiques*, the webjournal of the International Association of Theatre Critics (IATC). Her scholarly works appear in international academic journals, edited volumes, and presentations. Her postdoctoral research focuses on introducing the Medical Humanities to Greek academic, medical, and art institutions.
