

The Conversation Piece Podcast: Rupi Kaur from The Walrus Talks Resilience



Advertisement: I'm Hannah Sung. I'm a journalist, but I'm also just a regular person with feelings. And I sometimes feel overwhelmed with the big topics: climate change, how to raise a family without messing it all up, and, oh yeah, this pandemic. But being overwhelmed is not going to help us, and getting perspective will. Subscribe to my newsletter, "At the End of the Day," for a people-first perspective on the news. Go to endoftheday.ca.

HOST: As we minimize touching and practice social isolation, it's starting to feel like at least part of this experience will have to become part of our forever experience. We're left with language and the more oral opportunities to express ourselves, we are left with resilience. Rupi Kaur is one of the people who does this so beautifully, that you almost forget that you're not across the table from her at your favourite cafe. Welcome to The Conversation Piece from The Walrus. Close your eyes and listen, because this is Rupi Kaur from The Walrus Talks Resilience in Montreal.

Rupi Kaur: So, I began performing spoken word in grade 12. It was the Christmas break of 2009. I had just broken up with a dude after three years and I thought my life completely sucked. So, I needed to try something different. So it was a basement of a community center that was holding an open mic. The story of how I got there though started years ago when I immigrated to Canada at the age of three and a half. And right away I was lost in a sea of English speaking human beings. There is nothing like being five years old in a room full of people speaking a language you don't understand. And you, sitting there frantically responding in your mother tongue because you don't really know any better, and nothing but blank stares looking back at you. So instead of talking, I practiced silence up until about middle school. Fast forward, 12 years to that community center basement microphone in front of me, kind of just like this.

And at first, it feels like I'm being transported back into those classrooms from my childhood again, out of place and scared that no matter what I say that no one is going to understand me. And then I begin to get all crazy eyes. And I'm just like, what if everybody in the room has tomatoes? And then everybody just starts to throw the tomatoes at me and that's not ridiculous enough. Then I was like, okay, well I'm very fast and I can probably dodge them pretty well. And then I'm looking around and I'm realizing damn, the guys in the room are super cute. And then I realized that this is definitely worse than being five years old. But anyway, I took a deep breath kind of like how I did up here. And I began to speak and perform and it was a rush. Being up there, loud, proud and heard and I was completely hurt.

But what was it that I was always writing about? I'd always written about difficult subject matter. It's just what came most naturally to me, the topics came bare raw and hungry. And that's when it got scary, because I was always talking about things like sexual abuse and trauma and rape. Peeling myself back for thousands of people on the internet. And this gave me an anxiety which never really left. So out of those experiences of sharing my work online, came *Milk and Honey*, which was my first collection of poetry and prose. So, when I began to post my work at first, this was around 2013. I was honestly just posting to document my experiences, but something about the work struck with those that read it. So that the readership kind of grew beyond my first hundred followers, which were just like close family and friends to hundreds and thousands of strangers basically.

And so, I published *Milk and Honey* at the end of 2014. Within nine months, it's sold an unheard of amount of copies for a poetry collection. With the success of the self-published edition came along, Andrews McNeil publishing from the United States who then published it under their name last October. The market told us and the market told me that there is no space for poetry. Hence, why agents don't

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represent it and the publishers don't publish it. Because if you're lucky, you'll sell about 500 copies, they told me. But Milk and Honey has gone on to sell well over 200,000 copies since 2015. Thank you.

We've entered the domain of popular and even successful books where poetry collection can compete with books and not just other poetry collections, which I think is pretty cool. Everyone like the publishers and the agents have been amazed at the little black book that came. However, their next question almost always is, what's next? And so I asked myself what's next? And then I think, am I just going to be a one hit wonder. What if I can't maintain my authentic voice and I somehow get lost amidst what other people want to read, rather than what I want to write? And what if everything I write after this doesn't add up? And this has been a thought kind of since last October. So while I'm asking myself these questions, everyone else is asking, "Where's your second book? Is there one? Are you writing it? And when is it going to be coming out?"

The answer is I have absolutely no idea. I'm not writing it, because I've been so empty of writing. I've been jilted from the entire process for months. I actively think that this might just be it. And then I stop and realize that I have a world of stories to tell. Each needs its proper nurturing and care. So all in due time. My body is definitely going to create again, but having a baby takes patience and respect and love. I refuse to trade in creativity for consistency. How could I write as naturally as I did for Milk and Honey, if the way or the environment I was writing in right now was so unnatural, it wasn't authentic. Authentic was recognizing that I'd written enough for now. Resilience, isn't always act of charging forward even though sometimes I wish it was. It's recognizing and coming to terms with oneself.

Who am I? I asked myself earlier this year in January. I'm the product of those tireless resilient warriors, like my mother and their chase for love and for devotion and for hard work. My work is rooted in those same journeys. The room of my youth in which solitude was once my only friend and those community centers in 2009, where I learned about what I could be. I am not a product of a casual culture dependent on consumption. So my work can't be either. Survival is a recognition of that honesty, it's assessment, taking a step back. My resilience, what I realized now is breathing. Thank you.

HOST: That was Rupi Kaur, speaking from Enbridge Presents The Walrus Talks Resilience in April, 2016. Wish you'd been there? Wish granted. Our YouTube channel is the place to find all of The Walrus talks. And we're coming to a city near you live and in person as soon as physically possible. Until then, sign up to our weekly newsletters to stay in touch. Find it at the walrus.ca/newsletters.