

### **I Know the River Loves Me**

by maya christina gonzalez

When we see ourselves reflected in our environment, something happens within us. We are calmed, soothed, validated in a way that has no thoughts or words. An osmotic communication that *we are*, *we belong*. So fundamental that it goes without saying, it is about *being*, being here now.

In the classroom, I have had the privilege of working with what I call the “stressed out” kids. Many of whom not only don’t see themselves in the white faces in the books at school or in the library, but sometimes not even in the few brown faces that exist. Their experiences are complicated and layered. Beyond their childhood awareness, their lives are rooted in the basic power dynamics of our culture that relate to race and economics and how those dynamics often affect communities and families. They are children, so they are brave and resilient and have taught me a great deal. And they have reminded me of many of my own lessons as a child and much of what my father taught me.

When I was asked to write and not just illustrate children’s books I was immediately drawn to share what sustained me as a child. In my first book ***My Colors, My World/ Mis Colores, Mi Mundo*** I began the conversation of finding one’s self, one’s reflection in nature. My father didn’t have words for what he experienced in the United States as a child. When he was 5 years old he was placed in an all English speaking school when he spoke only Spanish. There were no bilingual books or teachers or parents. Only him. From his stories I sensed that although he didn’t find himself reflected in the dominant culture around him, it was through his relationships with the desert and with animals that he knew his true self and kept himself solid. When I was a child he shared his engagement with nature with me so that I saw it as part of him *and* a part of me. He taught me on a deep level that we belong to the natural world and it is our ally and friend.

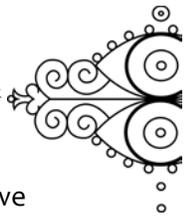
My relationship with nature has deepened into my adulthood and I consider the Yuba River one of my close friends. I don’t know why it surprised me when she began telling me a story one summer while visiting. Because when I returned home I was asked to write and illustrate another book. I laughed out loud when I realized the river had just told me a tale to tell and I thought of my father and all the kids I could tell, “this is what the river told me.”

In ***I Know the River Love Me/ Yo Sé Que el Río Me Ama*** I share that not only can we find ourselves in nature like in ***My Colors, My World/ Mis Colores, Mi Mundo***, but that we can have a relationship with her. We can love nature and she can love us back. I believe this is important because there are times when we will not easily fit into a new culture or the power dynamics that affect our lives, but through our awareness of and relationship with nature, we can know that we belong where we are and we are loved at all times. When we sense that we belong in the world we can learn and expand with greater ease and grace. Belonging and love always support our ability to learn, to be and to become empowered beings in a world we can trust is ours.

Nature travels with us. It is the greater reality of the world and is without language, a neutral place where we all live. Nature is beyond stress and beyond the dynamics of culture, community or family. Here in *the river, el río...* we are held and free to form new words, new understandings and connections that support our lives. My father did not teach me Spanish. He taught me nature. I dream that if we become aware that we are standing in the power and majesty of nature at all times, we can first see without words, without thoughts. Then we can open to the power of who we are and reach out for all that we can become. Like it did for my father, nature can hold us and reflect our truest sense of self when the world does not. From this strong place, we can learn with confidence all the languages our hearts and mouths can hold.

“a people should not long for their own image”





Even in urban settings nature is all around us. Like in ***My Colors, My World/ Mis Colores, Mi Mundo*** we must open our eyes extra wide to see the colors around us. If we have never met a river or like many kids do not have the means to visit one, we can still draw our attention to the animals and growing beings around us. Birds and bugs, trees and what we call weeds. There are flowers that grow small and weedy in the most urban of environments. When we see ourselves in nature, love her and notice the ways that she loves us back, it gives us a way to engage with the world around us. The unspoken story about the little girl in ***My Colors, My World/Mis Colores, Mi Mundo***, is that she does not see herself in school or library books, but she still needs to see herself. Her keen eye opens to the power and beauty of the brilliant sunset and there she is. Through this she is expanded and able to take flight. At the closing of ***I Know the River Love Me/ Yo Sé Que el Río Me Ama***, the little girl walks with joy and confidence knowing that her friend is always there waiting for her. The stable and constant love of the river transforms her so that she is part of it.

When we teach I believe we must always begin with ourselves. So in this moment I invite you to become aware of the sky. Are there clouds? Can you feel a breeze? Remember how your hair feels in a soft breeze, a strong wind? Is it raining? Foggy? Snowing? What color is the sky? What's your favorite time of sky? Do you know a river? An ocean? A mountain? A forest? A valley? A lake?

Can you see anything growing? How does it grow? Does it strike out tall or meander? How many colors of green can you see? What about brown or gold? Can you sense the roots below the dirt? How they reach and strive? What color is the earth? Is it moist and dark? Or dry and cracked? Do you have a favorite tree? Or flower? How do your feet feel when walking on the earth? What about the smell of wet dirt or the quality of air during a summer storm?

Do you hear birds? Can you see any? What must it feel like to fly or have feathers? Do you have an animal friend? Do you love deer? Are you excited when you see a snake? Have you watched a spider web in the breeze? Or ants hard at work?

There is so much to be aware of, to hold us, to love and be loved by. We are a part of all this. And it is a reflection of us. Are you a tree? A sunset? A fish?

Know that you belong exactly where you are. Notice all the ways that nature is loving you right now, even the air, holding you in the perfect place. This moment, this world is yours.

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