

Interview with Hank Lazer



Sara Wilson

Brush Mind: at Hand questions asked by Sara Wilson

1. I assume you have worked with Kaz before?

Only in the sense that I have sat *sesshin* with him & heard his dharma talks when I was at the Upaya Zen Center several years ago. I have since studied or learned about Kaz's work via books (one called *Brush Mind*), his superb translations (including the complete *Shobo Genzo* by Dogen – a book that is crucial to my ongoing Notebooks project, beginning with Notebook 31), and a number of video talks and demonstrations. I have not studied calligraphy with Kaz (nor with anyone else). I have had the opportunity to visit his studio in Berkeley.

2. Some of your poetry is delightful in its basic colloquial tone/content. Why the colloquialisms?

As your question implies, I too take delight in the colloquial (though I also take delight in more esoteric or conceptual or philosophical vocabularies too). I admire the fusion of colloquial and philosophical

thinking. I suppose that in some sense, what I'm doing in the Brush Mind works bears some kinship to the colloquial/philosophical thinking found in David Antin's talk-poems. (I admired David and his work a great deal.) I suppose that the colloquial is also a way to honor my father's thinking. (He was in no way academically or philosophically inclined, except in a lived and colloquial manner.) I particularly like it when the colloquial phrase has multiple resonances, multiple possibilities to it, as in a phrase/page such as "what's/ it/ to/ you" or "who/ would/ be/ any/ the wiser." I also spend some part of each week on a farm in a remote part of west central Alabama, and once again I am in contact with (and admire) a very down to earth mode of thinking and expression. I like – not only in Brush Mind, but in my other 25 books of poetry – the collision of the colloquial with more specialized poetic or philosophical vocabularies.

3. Was this project something you worked into an everyday schedule; did you treat it like a journal?

Not at all. Gradually, over many months, I began to develop a feel for the Brush Mind kind of writing as distinct from the shape-writing of the Notebooks. I would write however many pages/statements occurred to me certain mornings (that's my usual writing time, though Brush Mind statements can occur almost anytime of day), and once I feel like I have enough for a book, I put them in a folder, and return to them much later. For *Brush Mind: At Hand*, I looked at many of the initial year's-worth of pages, and I made a selection of a book-length group of pages. Actually, more than a book-length selection, and thus the final process involved eliminating pages that felt less effective or essential or less interesting.

4. I love your writing, and it strikes me as a very idiosyncratic calligraphic style. What were/are your feelings about your calligraphy? In the poetry reading at OU, you poked a bit of fun at it, calling it "childish writing"—but you must be a tad proud of this as well?

Sure: proud or pleased, yes. While at the same time acknowledging that there is a roughness to the writing as well. I think of my writing as calligraphy in the sense that it embraces the moment and

spontaneity. I know that from certain classical perspectives my printing is not “beautiful,” and that there is a certain primitive or childish awkwardness to it. But I like those qualities. Not only in my own handwritten work, but especially in Southern folk (or outsider) art, and in plenty of other places where the handwritten pops up (Cy Twombly, for example from the fine art world; JB Murry from the folk-art world).

5. *Brush Mind: At Hand* seems to announce itself as a meditative practice, both in its writing and its reading. Is that what it felt like while you were writing?

Yes, though a bit more overtly joyous and amused/amusing...

6. You move back and forth between spiritual traditions so easily in *Brush Mind: At Hand*. Was that your experience in writing it—that is, while you were writing, were these spiritual traditions as porous for you as you’ve made them in the book?

Yes. It’s just who I am and where I live... My own spiritual life is based on Jewish and Buddhist and poetic/word practices. And where I live – Alabama – has a rather decidedly Christian emphasis as well, which is something I also find in much of the visionary folk art I admire here too. So, yes, that kind of movement or poly-spirituality comes quite naturally and is not something I have to strive to achieve nor do I work at it as if it were an intention.

7. Were you imagining a reader or audience while writing?

No. As usual, I didn’t know what I was doing when I began writing the first series for *Brush Mind*. Norman (Fischer – longtime friend, poet, Zen priest) gave me a soft brush pen and said he’d be curious to see what I did with it. (Norman has written about my shape-writing, and he is very familiar with the Notebooks project.) *Brush Mind* gradually became my use of this pen. It’s only just recently – after 2-3 years of *Brush Mind* pages of writing – that I begin to understand what sort of form or experience I’ve come to make in this mode of composing. (More on that in subsequent questions/

answers.)

8. Was there ever a point where as a Westerner, you were intimidated by the long history and tradition of Buddhist practice?

Yes. Always, and never. I know there is so much that I don't know. So, I keep practicing, reading, sitting, learning, listening. I also know that it's fine to proceed as is. So, I do.

9. Collaborating on projects is not new for you, but what does collaboration teach you? Did it teach you anything fresh this time, working with Jane Cassidy, Michael Harp, Aaron Dues, Andrew Raffo Dewar, and Holland Hopson?

Of course. I always learn something new from each collaboration. Sometimes, the learning is rather mundane, as in how long it took to get finished 9:30 compositions/completed tracks from each musician. Or, once we had the music, how quickly we – through Jane Cassidy's video and installation sense – got to have an installation. And how much difference a simple color reversal can make – shifting from the white background and black ink to the video installation version with black background and white writing. With each musician, the work went differently. Michael Harp's piece (which was a collaboration with his friend Aaron Dues, whom I had not met previously) came out of a final project in my undergraduate seminar, Zen Buddhism and Radical Approaches to the Arts. I liked the composition so much that I asked Michael if he could produce a 9:30 version. With Andrew (with whom I have worked before, and have performed jazz-poetry concerts in Athens, Georgia and Havana, Cuba) we met periodically to find an appealing electronic/synthesizer palette of sounds, and Andrew then proceeded with the piece. We would get together every few weeks and go over what music was emerging from our interaction. Holland (with whom I have collaborated previously on a set of multi-voice pieces from my Notebooks - <http://www.drunkenboat.com/db22/poetry/hank-lazer>) the process was similar – identifying a range of sounds that would become part of the composition. Holland and I also met periodically to listen, react to, and fine tune the emerging composition. These

latter two compositions took approximately 6 months to complete. It's also important to know that in no way – with any of the musicians – did we attempt to coordinate the music with each frame of *Brush Mind: At Hand*. The music came out of an overall sense of the book, and once we synchronized the two, there were some pleasant surprises.

10. You mentioned you are recently finishing up sequels to *Brush Mind: At Hand*. Can you give us a sense of what these sequels might look like and read like?

As I answer your questions (late January, early February 2018), I was just finishing up *Brush Mind 4: This Moment*. *Brush Mind 2* is subtitled *Second Hand*, and *Brush Mind 3* is called *Hold It*. There is a gentle, peaceful tone – a sense of gratitude – that is essential to *Brush Mind 2*. Many of its pages come out of my recent *sesshin* (7-day meditation retreat) at Mar de Jade, a meditation center in a small fishing village (Chacala, Nayarit) in Mexico, hence the periodic Spanish phrases. (The services at Mar de Jade were conducted mostly in Spanish, with some phonetic reading/chanting in Japanese, with dharma talks being bilingual, English and Spanish). I have only recently begun working with Holland Hopson on the music for *Brush Mind 2*. In keeping with my experience at Mar de Jade, the musical composition will consist (I think) of ocean sounds, of waves breaking. *Brush Mind 3* is a bit darker, more jangly, more a response to these particularly dark and challenging times, and I think that the music for that one will be electric guitar. (I hope to work with guitarist Davey Williams on this one.) And *Brush Mind 4*, which has some of the serenity of *Brush Mind 2*, I hear as having a music consisting of natural sounds – mainly crickets, cicadas, insects, frogs, and similarly textured electronic and percussion sounds, and I plan to work with percussionist Timothy Feeney on that one. I have very recently been in touch the Russell Helms, the publisher of *Brush Mind: At Hand*, and he's eager to embark on the sequels (for which we have some fun design ideas).

11. What motivated you to extend the reach of *Brush Mind: At Hand* with a sequel?

I've been gathering and putting in folders many, many Brush Mind pages. Periodically, I gather them together and see what happens. I find the Brush Mind composing to be an interesting complement to my ongoing shape-writing in the Notebooks. And I am very pleased with the production that publisher Russell Helms accomplished with *Brush Mind: At Hand*. The Brush Mind pages that I write at home are on 8 ½ x 11 white (bright thick) paper, and Russell created a perfect match with the book format, with some smart details: writing on only one side of the page; a simple cover, but with a waxy quality so that it isn't easily damaged; and most important of all: CHEAP. (Unit cost under \$5.) I am really having great fun now imagining a run of many more Brush Mind compositions, though of course this is being done apart from any demand (for, as best I can tell, the demand for these books is virtually nonexistent).

12. What insights have you developed on the nature of these compositions—what has your own work taught you?

It takes (or has taken me) many years to write with (resonant) simplicity. Only recently, after two or three years of writing these pages, I had an intense and fully formed insight into what the Brush Mind composition is. There is the book itself – roughly 64 pages of text. From the installation experience, I now see, hear, and think of each iteration of Brush Mind as being a 10:00 production: 9:30 of music, with 15 seconds of fade at the beginning and ending. Each Brush Mind I now think of as one poem – 64 pages or 10 minutes in duration – and as such as constituting a particular tone (though with counterpoints and interruptions, so as not to be boring or overly didactic). Sort of an extended tone poem, or interval of consciousness. Typically, I begin working initially with more pages – approximately 65-90 pages – than the final composition requires. The pages I use are all from a common time period of writing (sometimes a span of several weeks or months, sometimes as brief as a week or two). I prune the grouping back toward that 64 page goal, and also modify the chronology of the pages. But the resulting form that I'm describing (as the endpoint of the process) begins to be as specific as a sonnet or any other form. There will be one page that has the flash of rays exploding on the page. There will be a page that evokes the Duncan Farm life and language – a 200 acre

farm in remote west Alabama, and where we see only a few people, mainly a couple of my wife's cousins, and where the language of the place is wonderfully rich and simple. There will be plenty of colloquial phrases (with multiple resonance). There will be some direct reaching out to the reader/listener, playing with the immediacy of reading and attention. And a few other recurring elements that I am only now beginning to realize.

What has the work taught me? Plenty! A joy in simplicity that I had not expected – a simplicity that I hope still allows for a certain good-humored depth of thinking. An alternate mode of writing while I continue writing the shape-writing Notebooks, and I've learned (slowly) that the mode of writing in Brush Mind also brings with it important continuities with my other writing practices: another (but decidedly different) exploration of the hand-written work; a link to possibilities for collaboration with other media (video, music, installation); and continued investigation of invented (rather than received) forms of composition. At the heart of this writing experience, I've learned, once again, to trust a compelling impulse even though the immediate practice exceeds any kind of conscious intention. To write without knowing what I'm writing, or why.