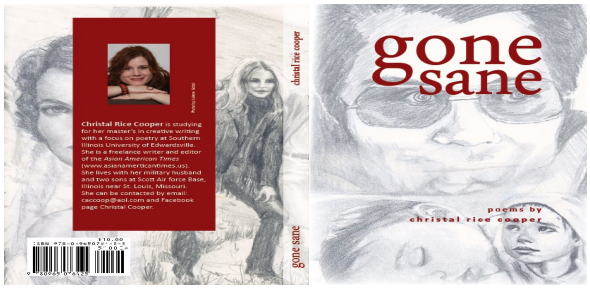
An Interview with Christal Rice Cooper



February, 2020 Featured Guest
at
Time with Tannia

(http://timewithtannia.com)

By:

Tannia E. Ortiz-Lopés

1. In your bio lines, you describe yourself as a multi-talented person who is proud of her mental illness. Many people will hide that trait as something shameful; however, you dealt with it in a very charismatic way.

Instead of saying I'm multi-talented, I should say I have a passion for many art forms. Yet writing and my faith have helped me the most to deal with my mental illness. However, above all, my personal relationship with Jesus Christ has been most influential in my healing process.

Explain the process of acknowledgment, acceptance, and finding "Chris"

For as far as I can remember, I was always sad, depressed and/or insecure while, at the same time, also depended on Jesus My Lord and Savior. At first, it was more like a Prince in a Fairy tale but as I've matured it has become a more complex vision. Now when I look in the mirror, the little girl inside of this woman sees Jesus standing in my Valentine shaped heart, smiling at me with God's hand cradling my form. My identity as a PERSON is all of this – including God's hands. And no matter how hard I try I cannot separate MYSELF into anything that is less than that visual image I have.

I remember always having this hatred toward myself. It wasn't just a feeling but a fact, like the sky is blue. You don't have to feel something to know that it is the truth. Despite all these negative feelings, there is another truth– God's truth (this requires faith). This holy Truth is what really matters regardless if my feelings are telling me, to hate myself. To prevent those feelings from arousing, the first thing I tell myself every day is: "TRUTH IS WHAT GOD SAYS REGLARDLESS WHAT I FEEL."

The first step to recovery was to acknowledge that I had this mental illness. I started to write about it. The process evolved to talks with Daddy God and Jesus Christ as I would walk on the railroad tracks, on the sidewalk, or the street. However, if I didn't see anyone around, I would talk out loud.

Daddy God and Jesus Christ are the cornerstone of all therapy. They are integrated in my thought processes as the first step to everything.

The next step was talking to someone else – a Sunday School teacher, a leader in the school, etc. At high school I would call off and on the Crisis Hotline until I attended college. At college, I started seeing an on-campus professional. Then in June 1994, I saw my first psychiatrist and started taking medication. Since then, I have always seen a psychiatrist. At one point I was taking 13 pills a day but now it went down to 7 pills a day. I am so proud of myself for not being ashamed for needing help and the meds. The best psychiatrist I've ever had is the one I see now.

Since my husband retired from the military in 2016 I've had quite a few therapists, but now I have one whom I see to this very day. This one had a different approach and made me look at the love Trinity God has for me in a different light. She said, that God does not love us equally but uniquely. In other words, if God loved us equally we could replace one another but since God loves us uniquely – none of us are replaceable in God's eyes. Having this new outlook makes me love my individual self more as God does. As I've aged, I had to accept myself on so many levels but God and Christ are in that image of whom I see myself no matter how old I happen to be.

When I talk to my individual and unique self, I tell myself how proud I am that I never tried to actually kill myself and/or exhibited violence to anyone. Although this may be disheartening to others, we have to examine ourselves individually and uniquely – who we are and be glad there are ways you can express yourself without discouraging others.

How did you find yourself back again?

"The back again" part happened in my adulthood after I met my future husband (in April of 1994) (been married to my husband this January for 24 years). I realized that my growing ups "truths" were false. It has taken me over 25 years to finally feel the truth despite believing these lies. Some of them were: "Your parents don't love you."; "They don't feel proud of you."; "They preferred other people over you." Now I can say my parents always loved me and are proud of me. When I go out in public and I see a Daddy holding his baby girl, I imagine it's my Dad holding me as a baby girl. Although now I know he loved me – may not feel it yet because I believed in the wrong things for so long – but I am still trying to "feel" what I know is the "truth". I especially feel this love when I look at my own two sons – and tell myself that my parents had to look at me the way I look at my sons and then I know that their love is truth, beyond any feeling I may have. This has required me to put limitations and setting boundaries on relationships that are toxic for me.

Even more painful is to realize that I've credited my parents, particularly my father with some things he wasn't responsible for so I've had to seek forgiveness, which is so hard to do. It is so painful to do – you can feel the pain in your physical body but your spirit too.

It is very painful, especially when I have to hold myself accountable and say, "Hey, yes this was screwed up but I am an adult now and I can't blame anybody else. I have to hold myself accountable now." God sees me as an individual and I have to hold myself accountable – not with what people have done to me – but with the way I respond to it and handle it in my life now. And that is so damn hard. It is so excruciatingly mentally exhausting and so much work.

2. Do you incorporate your BS Degree in Criminal Justice into your writing?

Yes. I want to make it clear that I've never had a job in the criminal justice field. I, however, did internships in the homicide unit of the Police Department, the District Attorney's Office, and the criminally insane; but that is all the experience I have.

I like to describe myself as a Victimology writer – what I liked to describe as creative writing that benefits the victim in some way.

3. You also completed all the required workshops for your Master's in Creative Writing with a focus on Poetry. As a poet and songwriter myself, I consider poetry the best way to express our deepest thoughts and moods. Do you agree?

I completely agree with you. Poetry is the way I express myself – it can be a thought, a breath, from the pages on my mind to the pages on the laptop. I've always written poetry as it affects all of us – rather it be the birds singing, a song on the radio, or even a religious book as the Bible – it is all poetry.

In fact, the way we passed things down from generation to generation before there was the printing press or even a method of writing it down – that was living poetry. I keep a journal and I write everything down – as it comes to my mind – and then I review my writing as I type it into my laptop. I like to compare it to music – but even then poetry is more powerful than music – you don't need a person to play an instrument for poetry to come into being. It has its own music within – it's hard to describe. It's more like a voice – and the voice symbolizes a person's humanity – a person's spirit. You can't really define that. It's more powerful than a song because a song depends on musical notes and people to play musical instruments to succeed. A poem on its own has every thing it needs. A poem can be so long or as short as two words. Here are my two favorites:

God breathed.

Jesus wept.

You can't define it. I don't know how to explain it. It's like trying to explain what love feels like because it is not a feeling – it is a place, an experience, an orientation, a spiritual being. It is undefinable, but when you hear it, when you read it, when you smell it, taste it, touch it, feel it, you know it is a poem.

4. Was your poetry collection "GONE SANE" (2011 River King Press) the final product of your Creative Writing course? Does the title reflect your inner peace?

Yes. "Gone Sane" is a poetry collection of violence but it is also a collection of persona poetry (A persona, from the Latin for mask, is a character taken on by a poet to speak in a first-person poem. Anthony Thwaite's 'Monologue in the Valley of the Kings' uses the word 'I' but it refers, not to the poet, but to the Pharaoh, Thwaite's persona in this poem. Sometimes a persona may persist across several poems, such as Wendy Cope's alter ego Jason Strugnell.)

I love writing poetry about real-life people through their voices.

I would not describe "gone sane" has autobiographical by any means. All the personal poetry I wrote in my workshops, I decided not to have published.

The title comes from one of Jim Jones many sermons that he gave and I included in one of my persona poems on Jim Jones that is in the poetry collection. My dear friend, poet, and publisher Donna Biffar came up with "gone sane" as the title and I thought it was fitting. These poems are very violent, what I would describe as victimology poetry – they are in the voices of Jim Jones, Hitler, and many victims of homicide and rape and molestation. There are poems about holocaust victims, genocide survivors, famous characters from famous literature books such as Scarlett from Gone With The Wind; and many poems about the Kennedy Family.

The most emotional and compelling poem and the only personal poem I wrote was "Mark" and it was while I was doing a story for The Altus Times on Child Abuse Awareness Month which involved me interviewing The Altus Police Department about a murder case of a two year old boy and the perpetrator was executed a few days later. It was in April and everything about that poem happened – everything is true. It is an elegy poem.

5. For 12 years you were the Featured Editor for an Asian American newspaper. Take us into a tour of your workplace and share with us the do's and don'ts of such job.

For as far as my workplace, I've written for Asian American Times while living in Illinois, then Florida, and then back to Illinois, and then to Alabama. So my work place has changed. I've always had a desk, laptop, printer, and my own office/room space thanks to my husband. Honestly even though I had the title of FEATURE EDITOR I was more the Feature Writer of the Asian American Times and even the Altus Times and other publications.

I am glad to share with your readers what I consider are the guidelines of an editor.

First: "Less is always more" as long as it doesn't change the meaning, the facts, or the "music" of the piece. And when I say this I am not referring to news stories but to Feature Stories.

Second: "Quotes" – I am a big quote person, however I don't believe in changing quotes. If the person didn't say it, don't quote it. I was always taught that if you have to add a word to make a quote make sense when it doesn't make sense, you put () around the word added: ex "I going to the store" should be "I (was) going to the store." If you are having to change a quote to make it fit what you believe the person is saying, don't quote it unless they actually said it. Instead state, "Chris Cooper belives that etc etc."

Third: "Never let the person being interviewed or being written about review the article." I've let others read the entire piece and it was a nightmare. They might request you to make some of the following: a) Change the quote to make them sound smarter when in reality it makes the story sound contrived; b) Change the article because they think there wasn't enough explanation and it only make it sound wordy- At the end, they get upset if you don't make the changes.

Remember, YOU are the editor, not them. That said, I want to stress the fact – NEVER send/give the subject of an article or a featured story a hard copy or online file of the article. If the subject of the article must review anything, read them ONLY his/her quotes in the article and factual information such as dates or addresses.

I've learned the hard way and it is a miserable way to be an editor. The person who taught me this valuable lesson, is my dear publisher, editor, and friend HOWARD INGLISH, who is no longer with us.

As an editor, be true to your writers. Even in Featured Stories, Facts Do Matter but there is a certain tone to a featured story that gives it its music, its readability, and gives the writer its own individual voice in telling the story about the subject. Try to maintain the writer's voice as you edit these pieces – and don't be afraid to ask the writer questions. I had an editor at a Native American Indian newspaper I wrote for, edit a feature I did on a western novelist. The novelist was telling me how he wrote a book about his grandfather. She transposed the sentence to make it shorter but when the reader read the piece it stated that it was the grandfather who wrote the book about himself.

- Better is to be correct, truthful, accurate, and late than it being on time.

- Urge your writers to use tape recorders but only if the person being interviewed gives his/her permission.

- Always remember as an editor it doesn't matter what you think – only what the person being interviewed thinks. That is why you are having your Featured Writer to do the interview in the first place.

- Your job is stand by your writers even if what they write does not agree with your own convictions. Your convictions don't matter. An example is if you are pro life and the person being interviewed is pro choice – it doesn't matter what you think. The feature story is not

about you.

What do you like best and dislike most?

I like writing about individuals who have overcome huge obstacles. I also love to interview spiritual leaders, especially those who do not believe the way I believe. One of my most beloved interviews was with a Buddhist monk at the temple in Wichita, Kansas. We talked for over three hours. I treasure that monk.

I hate writing news article such as board meetings because it is so boring and not creative at all.

Lessons learned?

Just a few sayings that I heard or read from some source I don't remember but I hold close to my heart:

*If everybody likes you, you are not being true to yourself.

*If everybody agrees with you, you are not being true to yourself.

We all have learning curves in our jobs. Care to share one or two with my readers?

To me writing is not a job but a passion. And majority of the time spent as a writer is not on a publicity tour, book signings, or even book readings but just you and the page and the pencil/ pen, or laptop. There are so many people who want to be writers but they don't write – or if they do they don't want to do better or find it difficult to accept constructive criticism. You have to have a passion for writing and my view is, if you get paid for it, the more the better but the passion is always there; even if you don't get paid a cent.

The one great thing I learned was from Howard Inglish, my Publisher/Editor: *"Get the most recent edition of THE ASSOCIATE PRESS STYLEBOOK AND LIBEL MANUEL and use it religiously."*

Admit your mistake and apologize to that person just once. Then let it go.

6. In 2013 you created your blog, https://chrisricecooper.blogspot.com From editor of a magazine to a blogger. Do you consider this transition was necessary to fit your new life situations?

"It didn't help matters that for the first time in 20 something years I didn't have someone to write for. I had been Feature Editor for an Asian American newspaper but my publisher died in a car crash in Los Angeles so I was like a leaf in the wind."

I was so frustrated because since the death of Shw-uing Fu, the Asian American Time publisher, the newspaper had a different goal in mind – they wanted me to just interview Asians who were in the artistic field. Plus we were stationed in Montgomery, Alabama and I was going through bouts of depression and suffering from side effects while my psychiatrist was trying to adjust my meds.

So out of desperation I got the "Dummies Book on Blogging" and the rest is history. I knew right away that this blog would NOT be about me but a magazine or newspaper of featured stories, guest blog posts, excerpts from fiction writers, nonfiction writers, poets etc.

First off all, I don't think I have a real blog – a real blog is when the person talks about his or herself on a variety of topics. I like to call my blog more THE NEWSPAPER OF FEATURED STORIES or a NEWSMAGAZINE. The blog is not about me but a collection of featured stories, guest blog posts, excerpts, etc.

What are some of the challenges of writing a successful blog?

The one challenge I will never get used to is when there are computer failures or blog failures.

Other challenges are:

a) Photo Journalism – I am a big fan of it as it incorporates illustrations/photographs/images with one's writing piece. I refer to it as "Photo Featured Story." My greatest challenge has been to accept the word "No" from people who don't agree with this format or refuse to allow me to utilize photos or images. I try to be respectful of copyright and only use images that are applicable for Fair Domain/Public Domain requirements. There have been quite a few images I wanted to use but I did not have the copyright for and I will not use them. I will ask the copyright holder rather it be of a painting, a image of an art work, or a photo. There have been quite a few artists that have been so gracious and let me use their work but there have also been quite a few that say no or demand a price, which is their right to do so. Also, I have some story subjects that might want me to use images that they will post on Facebook but I will not use on the blog due to copyright.

b) Communication - It is important to make all your communications personal and send only one person Facebook message or email at one time. I refuse to send "group" emails or "group" personal Facebook messages. This is where my very fast typing skill comes in handy. I also make it a rule not to send a personal Facebook message to the same person more than once every six months; so only one message per every six months.

I also try to respond to all of my blog comments. One year did a thank you letter with a Starbucks card to each person that in someway has helped me with this blog.; because once again this blog is NOT about me – but features other voices and it is those voices that make it fruitful (I hate the word successful).

c) Balancing Different Points of View – some people (usually far right Christians) will get upset that I have featured on other voices that don't agree with their own. I REFUSE to apologize for this. I've also had pro-choice individuals who get upset with me for having a guest blogger who is pro-life. I refuse to apologize for this. All voices and all religious and all philosophies matter (except KKK and Neo Nazi and Terrorist etc.)

d) Identity Issues – People tend to confuse me with the blog and they are two separate entities. If I post on article on someone who is Muslim, they think I am Muslim; if I post an article on someone who is democrat, they accuse me of being a socialist. If I post an article of someone who is Christian, I'm accused of being a far right raving republican. It is SOOOO frustrating. But I am using this as an opportunity to water down any angry flames and respond with firmness but kindness and set the record straight.

Would you recommend blogging to others?

I would recommend blogging for anyone. A real blog is short and you post every month or so. I think all individuals can benefit from having a blog and reading a blog. In fact we already do. Blogging to me is another way of expression like talking on the phone or writing an email. We as human beings need that way of expressing and I think a blog is a fantastic way, especially for those individuals who are busy and don't like to write, at least long pieces.

7. In addition to writing you also enjoy sketching, painting, and photographing. Three widely creative venues to allow your creativity to keep growing. What type of artist are you?

I love to paint, take photography and sketch. I like to use acrylic paints, watercolor paints, pencils, charcoal, graphite. My subjects are women and the Blessed Trinity. However, my subject matter seems to focus on women faces.

I am being into faces because you can see the soul in the face – all of the face – – plus most of our

sense are centered in the face – the ears to hear, the tongue to taste, the lips to touch, the nose to smell, the eyes to see.

I also like to do Styrofoam heads – my favorite are of two heads – each female – the first one is who I am when experiencing all of the affects of mental illness. The second one is who I am when I am getting the help spiritually, emotionally and physically. I have them in my library and I love to look at them every day. My friend Mitzi who is also an artist helped me paint the facial components (eyes, nose, and lips) of the heads. My husband helped me cut into the heads to place the prescription bottles in the heads. Sometimes the best artwork is a group effort. I did the rest.

I use some of my artwork to go with my features or to post on Facebook but I've never really earned a penny from them. The artwork speaks to me and if it speaks to the people I share it with I am grateful.

Right now I am into sketching more with pencils because it is so much more easy to do on the go and isn't as high maintenance or as messy as acrylic paints.

Have you ever done a collage composition combining all of them?

I use Photoshop to do collages of my photography, paintings, and sketches. I love layering a – photograph with a painting or a sketch which I can do with Photoshop. I especially love to do this with my poetry because I can layer the poem on top.

9. A word of advice to those dealing with mental illness?

I tell people who have mental illness that having a relationship with God and/or Christ or a Higher Power will in someway make your mental illness journey not as desperate.

It is so important/vital/necessary to have some kind of passion, hobby that consumes your time and gives you pleasure/happiness.

I would also tell people to watch movies about individuals with mental illness. It gives me hope.

It is so important to recognize that mental illness is a disease and not something to be ashamed of.

10. What do you consider your biggest accomplishment in life?

My greatest accomplishment is not an accomplishment but a gift – I am so grateful for the Gospel and that I rely and abide by that Gospel.

11. Some encouraging words for new authors?

I would say your voice matters, and that you are a writer by writing on the pages of your brain, your heart, and your spirit. The trick is to transcribe those pages from your brain onto paper, laptop, or even tape recorder. And don't' worry about editing it – just write it all down.

The next piece of advice is to read creatively and actively and consistently.

Tannia E. Ortiz-Lopés, author of *El Espejo de mi Alma* (BoD 2015) .
Author's website: timewithtannia.com **Stock photography website:**
https://www.bigstockphoto.com/search/?contributor=Boricua63&safesearch=n
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