

PRACTITIONER PAPER

## Your True Freedom

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**Abstract:** *Your True Freedom is about my journey teaching inmates the fundamental truths of self worth, self acceptance and self love--through writing, mindfulness meditation and emotional healing. It is a journey that continues to enlighten me and to heal and free the inmates with whom I work.*

**Keywords:** *Prison education; recidivism; meditation; creative writing*

The bars and barbed-wire fences no longer alarm me. I am used to the routines of prisons, waiting at every entrance for an invisible sentinel to unlock it and let me through, the sound of heavy doors clanging behind me, being frisked by guards after setting off a metal detector. I have been teaching creative writing in jails and prisons for about nine years. This year I also began teaching a class based on a program called Houses of Healing, a mindfulness/emotional healing/self awareness course designed specifically for the incarcerated.

I became involved with former prisoners through my volunteer work at a men's homeless shelter in Alexandria, Virginia. I mentored the men in employment related matters: writing a resume, interview skills, and how to search for open positions. Besides being homeless and unemployed, many of the men had the added stigma of being convicted felons. I would visit the shelter each week and inevitably the conversations with the men would turn to more personal matters: their hopes, their fears and their regrets. I saw them ultimately wanting the same things every human craves: the desire to be seen, heard, accepted, and loved. I also saw them struggling with what I have since discovered most prisoners lack: a sense of belonging, of self-awareness, of self-worth and of self-love.

That same year I helped facilitate a four-day retreat in a Virginia prison. The prisoners, as with the homeless men, were eager for recognition and acceptance. I came away from that experience wanting to work with the incarcerated. When one of the women on the retreat team told me about the volunteer work she was doing at our county jail and suggested I teach a class there, I readily agreed.

Not being a teacher by training, or even prepared with a curriculum, I entered the jail on my first day of class to a room full of men in blue jumpsuits staring back at me. Fortunately for me, that first class was talkative and engaging. I was surprised by the prisoners' love of poetry, and was impressed by their insightfulness and eagerness to write and share their work.

Why did I decide to teach writing to prisoners? Writing is scary because it makes you vulnerable. In correctional facilities, where prisoners struggle daily to survive--mentally, emotionally and physically-- being vulnerable is taboo. Writing class makes it acceptable. Writing is also cathartic. It is like baring your soul, intimidating but very liberating. The way you phrase your words, what you decide to include and to omit, all reveal a piece of who you are. I felt this would be therapeutic for the prisoners.

"There's a lot in me," one prisoner said in a recent class, "but I've only shown my real self to one person in my life." Prisoners find, through writing and sharing their work, that they can reveal parts of themselves they were too afraid to show others, or even themselves.

I enjoy taking prisoners through the writing process and encouraging them to go beyond their comfortable limits, to show them the healing power of writing. I prompt prisoners to examine their lives critically, and to write, to get all of that "stuff" out of their heads. Talking about it, thinking about it (endlessly...) is not the same, does not have the same impact as putting it down on paper for all to read, to scrutinize and to appreciate. Once something is on paper, once it is in print,



it lessens its ability to hurt you and its power to control you. That is liberating for any individual, especially so for the institutionalized. We are all looking for our voice to be heard, our selves to be seen, even for an instant—just hear me!

In past years, my creative writing classes focused on a combination of poetry, essays and short stories. I saw that the prisoners consistently wrote about their own lives, so last year I centered the classes on memoir. I also worked with women for the first time. Once again, I wasn't prepared.

The men, I knew, would cautiously write around the edges of their true selves, revealing careful pieces, bit by bit, shrouded in machismo, but revealing nonetheless. After so many years of teaching incarcerated men, I was used to their behavior.

The women were eager to get it all out at once, in all its detail, to have someone know, listen, hear, and remember. All of them had stories of rape and abuse, which they shared on my first day with them, but their stories were not *about* rape and abuse; sadly, that was almost a given. Sometimes, they would cry; the men never cried.

The women's memoirs revolved around many things you would hear from any young woman: boys, pregnancy tests, cheerleading tryouts. And, they revolved around many things you would only hear from young women in prison: trying to hang yourself in your cell with your bra, the struggles of dealing with breast cancer while incarcerated, being restrained to a bed while giving birth.

I give all of my students a composition book on the first day of class. I tell them they need to write three pages every day. I let them know I will not be collecting their journals; they are free to write about anything they want. The only stipulation I have is that they include ten affirmations every day. They think this is silly. I explain that the exercise is designed to stop the endless loop of negative messages with which we constantly bombard ourselves, and replace it with kinder, more compassionate thoughts.

They wonder what this is about, what this has to do with writing. I started to wonder too. I have heard a lot of stories, seen a lot of pain during my years of teaching in correctional facilities. I have never asked a prisoner what they did to land themselves in prison or jail.

I do not want to know. I may be the only one in that person's life who does not see him as a murderer, a rapist, a drug dealer, or a thief. I look at my classrooms and see only other human beings. I realized that what I was really doing was trying to get the prisoners to feel good about themselves, to see their self worth. That is what prompted me to start teaching a course based on the Houses of Healing program.<sup>1</sup>

The basic premise of the course is that each of us, whether clothed in a tuxedo or a prison jump suit, or born into wealth or poverty, harbors an inner core that is intrinsically good and worthy of love and belonging, respect and acceptance.

Every *body* has a soul.

The course focuses on a number of personal growth issues:

--Practicing mindfulness meditation, self-regulation and stress management

--Learning cognitive reframing and attitudinal healing

--Acknowledging, working with, and healing childhood trauma

--Understanding the roots of anger

--Transforming anger, resentment and unhealthy guilt and shame into positive emotional health

--Working with forgiveness, of others and of self

--Acknowledging and working with grief, the silenced emotion

--Emotional health and control

--Knowing the true self, and believing its worth

"What do you hope to get out of this course?" I asked my first class of about 40 men. "Freedom," one said. "Peace," said another. "I want to know myself better;" and, "I just want something different."

Once again, I was standing in front of a room full of prisoners in blue jump suits, feeling unprepared to teach a new class. Some of the men looked at me eager-

<sup>1</sup> Houses of Healing is a book/curriculum/program created by Robin Casarjian, M.A. designed to foster emotional literacy. For more information, visit <http://lionheart.org>.

ly, hoping I would be able to deliver on what the program description promised, that I would be able to give them what they felt was missing in themselves. Others were disinterested, acting the part of a macho prisoner who needs nothing and no one. By the end of the 13-week course, I had more of the former than the latter.

But initially, I had to get over my apprehension and to put the prisoners at ease. Writing, I knew, but who was I to counsel prisoners on emotional health and healing? I found that, just as I could draw on my experience as a writer to teach writing, I could draw on my own journey of emotional awareness and healing to help guide the prisoners. The more open I was, the more I exposed of myself, the more the prisoners engaged and wanted to share. Creating an environment where the prisoners felt safe to be vulnerable was the key to making this class successful.

“Who we believe we are affects every aspect of our life,” I tell the prisoners on the first day of class. “It dictates how we feel about ourselves, how we treat others, who we gravitate towards as friends, how we use our time, what kind of goals we reach for, and what kind of choices we make.” They nod.

We work on the concept of seeing good in ourselves, which is more acceptable to them than the idea I introduce next: seeing good in others.

“What would it feel like if you treated everyone you met with honor and respect?” I ask, “regardless of their position in life or personal history.”

“Everyone doesn’t deserve respect,” one prisoner offers. “Yeah,” a chorus of agreements follows. “Some people just aren’t good,” another prisoner says.

“People say that to me all of the time,” I say, “about prisoners.” They get quiet. “As long as there are ‘those people,’” I tell them, “you aren’t getting this.”

There is a lot of work to do. Jim Liske, CEO of Prison

Fellowship,<sup>2</sup> recently wrote: “At the core of senseless violence is a soul that doubts its worth and is willing to walk on others.”

This is not a class about religion—it is about the intrinsic potential, dignity and value of all human beings. The course encourages responsibility and accountability in oneself and towards others. Prisoners learn to have more control over their thoughts, emotions and actions, to know that no one can *make* them feel disrespected or angry or useless: it is a choice.

Ninety-five percent of prisoners will be released at some point in their life. Recidivism rates show that prisoners are returning to society as emotionally scarred as when they entered the system, and are reoffending. Most prisoners go into prison as angry, hurt, damaged individuals who have little sense of self worth. This program has been highly successful in giving prisoners the opportunity to participate in the healing process that is fundamental to any significant rehabilitation and lasting change.

I have witnessed that change with numerous individuals in just the one year I have been teaching this new course. I am hoping to be able to continue teaching in even more jails and prisons. I believe in the power of this program and ones like it to transform prisoners so there is less violence inside correctional facilities and in the communities where prisoners are released. Those looking at criminal justice reform should look to funding and proliferating more programs such as this.

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<sup>2</sup> Prison Fellowship is America’s largest Christian ministry to prisoners, ex-prisoners, and their families. For more information, visit <http://www.prisonfellowship.org>.