

EMPOWERING WOMEN THROUGH LITERACY: VIEWS FROM EXPERIENCE

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PORTRAITS AND POSSIBILITIES: EMPOWERMENT THROUGH LITERACY

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*I want a language that I can lean on and that can lean on me,
that asks me to bear witness and that I can ask to bear witness,
to what power there is in us to overcome this cosmic isolation.*

Mahmoud Darwish

Hope House is a recovery home for women; a safe space that provides the residents with their physical needs, allowing them to work on recovery through outside programs, meetings, counseling and job training. The women arrive after coming out of mental institutions, as recovering addicts or after incarceration, and their stay is temporary: they are free to leave at will, though most stay for several months or longer, as they work on getting their lives back on track. Most of the women living in Hope House belong to groups on the bottom rungs of the social and economic ladders: women of poverty, released prisoners, substance abusers whose lives and families have fallen apart, women whose children have been taken away by court orders, women suffering from mental illness, abused women, women of color. These women's voices have long been silenced by personal and social criticism and labeling, and they are generally powerless in defining their own identity and/or as agents in their own lives.

For several years I have been working at Hope House in a weekly literacy class. Appropriating a Freirian approach, we critically read the world and the word through dialogues and readings of printed as well as visual texts (documentaries, commercial films, plays, art work) and through creative activities that promote reflection and further discussions (Freire & Macedo, 1987). We question, talk and write about our lives in attempts to “re-vision” them, as Adrienne Rich calls “the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new, critical direction” (Gelpi & Gelpi, 1993, p. 167). In our discussions, art projects and creative writing, class participants negotiate social positions trying to reposition themselves within their worlds, striving to communicate and connect to “the lost community” which they are trying to rejoin (Rich, 2001). In our work together over time we have managed to create a safe and respectful space where we listen to and support each other and where we all can talk openly about our lives, learn to see events from new perspectives and imagine possibilities of change (Ben-Yosef, forthcoming).

The circumstances of my students’ lives have determined that our classes focus on “a pedagogy of possibility” where “the agenda is to create practices that encourage, make possible, and enable the realization of differentiated human capacities” (Simon, 1987, p. 138). We do this by critiquing and interrogating current realities and existing knowledge, followed by opening up the thinking to expand what it means to be human and to contribute to the establishment of a just and compassionate community. Such a pedagogy involves a process of self-empowerment by allowing voice to those who have been silenced, providing opportunities of sharing authority, at the very least, in their own lives (Simon, 1987).

Raising student voices begins with letting them take authority of their own life stories: becoming aware of the powers they have to define their own reality (rather than allowing social and cultural conventions to dictate it, usually in derogatory terms), telling their own stories (presenting themselves rather than being represented by others), valuing themselves, their lives and experiences (rather than buying into the paradigms of outsiders), and dreaming and expecting better. Much of our work is done by focusing on language and its inherent power as a resource that can work for the students as they appropriate it for raising their voices and standing up for themselves. We aim for rekindling hope and vitalizing transformation processes (Christensen, 2000).

SELF-PORTRAITS

One of the ways we work together toward these goals is through self-portraiture (in a broad sense of the concept): different ways by which our class participants present and represent themselves, their lives and their experiences in writing and in art (some may call this “narrative art”). Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot wrote about portraiture as a method of inquiry and documentation through which it is possible to gain understanding of the “richness, complexity and dimensionality of human experience” in its rightful context, while “conveying the perspectives of the people who are negotiating those experiences” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p.3). Rather than mirror the subject (something an outsider might do), a self- portrait captures the person’s essence, and this can be accomplished with words as well as with art media. Self-portraiture as a methodology resists generalization and stems from a positive, humanistic perspective, giving voice to peoples’ experiences through the medium of narrative. Engaging in self-portraiture in a group is also a community building process, as we come to understand other peoples’ experiences (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

When we create a self-portrait and tell our own story it is an act of “self-representation”: we decide on the experiences we are ready to expose, we illuminate our lives and portray our sense of self and show ourselves as we wish to be seen and known. We become the subjects of our own lives (Lawless, 2001). We tell a story of a unique personal experience in an authentic, original voice, a narrative which is intimate and “true” in the sense of being our own. The process of creating a self-portrait is a learning experience on its own: we learn about the possibility of seeing ourselves from different perspectives and that human beings are multifaceted; we find our power in making choices, and we open up our imagination; we practice using our voice and try out/on possibilities. Telling our own stories can challenge versions told by others, those who don’t know or don’t care to know us as individuals in both our struggles and in our successes. And by sharing our stories with each other in a space that is open and accepting, we create bonds and cross borders into each other’s experiences, growing our understanding of differences and commonalities.

THE WORK

Dina rarely talked about herself. She had been a substance abuser, spent time in prison



and her son was being raised by her sister and brother-in-law. She had trouble patiently working her way toward recovery when she would get her son back, and was thrown out of Hope House twice for breaking her curfew. She was trying hard but was battling many demons and during our classes she was mostly listening, seldom speaking. One day she produced the following self-portrait in the form of a collage which tells the story of her journey from silence to voice. It is a

self-portrait in the sense that it tells about her unique experience and captures the essence of this experience: a struggle to overcome a personal obstacle with a successful outcome. The narrative aspect of the portrait is a full story with a beginning (silence), middle (a learning process) and end (finding voice); with a character who goes on a journey, finds new understandings and changes her life; building up to a climax (“I learned”), and with great sense of tension between the two sides of the collage in terms of both the written and the visual language - a tension that is resolved by reading the written words. The medium of portraiture has given Dina’s voice a stage, illuminating her struggle and newly found personal power. It is a statement of self-worth and self-respect.

Later, Dina wrote a self-portrait that includes a dream of a possible future:

I am Dina. I live in a sober house.
I say to myself every day that
I can live a normal life like
I once shared with my son and family.
I hope my family notices how hard
I’m working to get back their love that
I neglected for so long.
I dream that one day soon
I can have my life back together again.
I am Dina. I live in a sober house.

Dina's voice rings loud and clear in this portrait: she describes past problems, present struggles and her belief in the possibility of overcoming and transforming her life. She is telling her version of her life's story, portraying herself as a woman who has taken responsibility for and is actively involved with changing her life ("I say to myself," "I can," "I'm working," "I neglected," "I dream"). This text describes a quest for transformation and the hope it can be achieved through a newly acquired inner strength. And then we created another kind of self portrait: the list.

Laraine's self portrait (below) is a combination of print and visual symbols (the original was in color). She describes the present, which is going well for her, with many exclamation marks indicating excitement and strong, positive emotions. Yet she includes hints of her journey and struggles getting to this point ("No drinking 19 months," "Can sleep again," "No more nightmares").

Looking, Looking, Looking **Daughter** working, working Job hunting *Car* shopping, *Hoping* sweet friendly funny animated best friend *Linda*, **Linda**, **LINDA**, Best, Best friend *Flo*, **Flo**, **Flo**, sister and buddy! Happiness is **Tracy**, **Brian**, **TRACY**, *Brian* Love *Cats* and **Dogs** Favorite colors Black and Pink "No drinking **19 months**" "Happy 19 months" Can sleep again! No more nightmares! **Beach**, Beach, Beach! Exercise a lot! **Brownies**, Brownies, Brownies **Pizza**, Pizza, Pizza! Love my *Computer*!!!!!!! Knowledge is Power! Keep on Learning! Learn new things Hope is getting my own *apartment*! Getting my own *car*! **Miss my mom**! Love my two **Dads**! Not lonely anymore! Happy at last! Want my own *cat*! (Badly) Hoping to stay Happy and content! Prefer cool weather! Love music, especially rock and roll, some heavy metal! Love **computer graphics**! Can never get enough! *Appreciative* and *Humble*, finally! Awake from a life that was better to sleep through! Love camping, Hiking, Sea World, Fire Places and being able to gaze at the stars and appreciate them. Best of all I am **grateful**! Being able to live in a world I used to be very afraid of facing! *Life is good*!

Here too we find a full story in which the difficult beginning is inferred (substance abuse), a trying journey to being able to live in and face the world is mentioned (sleeplessness, nightmares, loneliness, fear) and an end - the present - which is the main focus of the work, where Laraine says she is awake to life, has close

relationships and friends that make her happy and has come to a point where “Life is good.” The overall picture one gets is of a woman with a strong sense of self-worth, empowered to face life and do what is necessary to move ahead (job hunting, car hunting, learning). A woman who has found her voice and is unafraid of raising it.

CONCLUSION

“The impulse to create begins – often terribly and fearfully – in a tunnel of silence,” writes Adrienne Rich (2001, p. 150). Breaking the silence and energizing a process of self empowerment have been our main goals in the literacy classes at Hope House. Self-portraiture was appropriated in our work because of its flexibility as a tool that lends itself to storytelling from multiple perspectives, gives the artists/writers a vehicle for voice as well as authority over their own narrative, allowing them to reestablish themselves as subjects of their own lives. The ability to review their lives “with fresh eyes” from a new, different and critical perspective that foregrounds agency, self-worth and the possible, infuses power and hope into the process of transformation that the women at Hope House are working hard to achieve.

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