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TODAY I AM PROUD MYSELF: TELLING STORIES AND REVALUING LIVES

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BEGININGS

I was an elementary school special education teacher who studied Literacy and became a college professor. In this learning process I became aware of both the power of language and the power of literacy to give voice to marginalized groups in society. One day I discovered Hope House, which is a home for recovering women established to help those in need of a place to live while recovering from mental illness, drug and alcohol abuse, incarceration and other traumas. I approached the home's director and suggested volunteering to teach a weekly literacy class for the residents. I had never worked with adults before, let alone women recovering from trauma, but when I brought up the idea, the light in the director's eyes and the strong hug she enveloped me in, just threw me right into the water, where I learned to swim.

At the time I began the class there were about 20 women in residence but only 2 showed up, actually – down – as we congregated in the basement which serves as the living room for the house: Sula¹, was in her mid 20s and could not read or write at all. Originally from Honduras, she had recently given birth to a boy who she was not allowed to keep, but whom she would be able to visit at the office of social services during Christmas. Isaiah was what Sula talked about all the time and it was for his sake that she desperately wanted to learn to read and write.

Maru came too. Her father had sent her to the U.S. from Africa to study, but she got involved in drugs and prostitution and is now, in her late 40s, getting her life back on track. Maru read and wrote some English with great difficulty (the difficulty stemming in part from her need for prescription glasses, which she never had). She had no knowledge of reading and writing in her native language, but a desire for knowledge was burning inside her and since the day we started, she never missed a class. Other women in the house said that they knew how to read and didn't need to participate. I believe they also wanted to check out the situation before committing, so in the weeks that followed, new residents would join us, then leave. One woman, in particular, would come down quietly and sit on the side, listening but refusing to join our circle or to participate in our discussions. After some time she would go upstairs, just as quietly as she came.

I needed to get more participants in order to begin a constructive dialogue. So I sent a message to all the women that for our next meeting I would bring a video and popcorn. Ten women showed up and we watched *Vera Drake*². Since this is not an easy film to watch (the pace is slow, dialogue in British English is limited and includes many silences, the topic is back-street abortions and the protagonist is an anti-heroine), and since I believe in critically reading films as texts which are sources of information and knowledge, I didn't let the women watch quietly. During the whole film I modelled critical reading by making comments, pointing things out and posing questions, encouraging the women to do the same (some cooperated but others were annoyed and complained about not being able to just watch the movie in peace). At our next meeting, six women arrived, creating the continuing core of our group, and a very strong discussion developed, originating in the film and moving out into the world.

CHALLENGES

What are the challenges a teacher faces in a situation focused on nurturing voice? First, creating relationships of trust with the students by establishing the classroom as a safe space for everybody to feel free to open up, think and say what is on their minds and in their hearts. The process involves "...honouring learners' silences as well as their words, bearing witness by being a caring listener, balancing expressions of pain with those of joy and humour, and offering content and activities that allow learners to share as much or as little information about themselves as they choose" (Kerka, 2002:3). It also involves being sensitive to the students' physical, emotional and material needs, helping them become them "available for learning" (Horseman, 200; Ben-Yosef, 2002): one woman would agree to sit only on the softest chair so we made it into a joke and accommodated her wish; another kept falling asleep as a side effect of her medication; our youngest and most troubled student had a very short attention span, so she would get up and leave suddenly and after a while one of the other students would bring her back down until she left again...; two of the women didn't have winter coats so I brought coats from home; when I travelled or entertained I always brought cakes or chocolates to share with the students, and sometimes I "snuck" coffee in, since I knew they all craved coffee but were allowed to drink house coffee only in the mornings. We were creating a community of learners that was framed by the space and activities we shared, but was also growing from the inside in the form of a web of strengthening personal relationships (myself included) originating in sharing of stories, experiences and secrets, learning from each other and caring for one another.

The second, yet concurrent, challenge relates to the use of texts appropriate in this specific situation, texts that can help shatter the silence and transform the learner from object of oppression to agent of one's own life (Freire, 1997). Maxine Green (1988) writes that mutuality, concern and the affirmation of other are not in themselves enough to bring about such transformation. What is needed is to challenge the language of texts that are couched in dominant male discourse, a language that denies body and feeling, and silences women's ways of knowing. We must use texts to unconceal, to create clearings and spaces where decisions can be made, where questions can be raised.

Between Sula, who was learning her ABCs, and Jill (the quiet one) who was an avid reader of historical fiction, there were diverse levels of literacy, interest and need. My aim was to include everyone in the critical discourse and for them to, ultimately, be empowered to produce, transform and reproduce meaning (Freire & Macedo, 1987). To this end I looked for materials that would be relevant to the students' lives, provide incentives for reading, critical thinking and a free exchange of ideas while, hopefully, motivating writing. I was hoping the women would be able to find voice and tell their stories as part of a process of self-exploration to promote identity construction, visibility and shattering the silence pervading the experiences of women who have been marginalized (Baird, 2001, Ben-Yosef, in print).

And the long term goals? Bringing the learners to a place from which they could produce their own knowledge constructed upon their own reality (Quigley, 1999); teaching them to use literacy for the purpose of “acquiring a sense of self worth and self preservation, a sense of being part of society” (Baird, 2001:177). And most of all, I wished to encourage them to recover their voices that had been silenced:

My voice was silenced from the time I was a little girl
I am now a voice trying on truth for a change,
looking to drop the lies, to become more honest,
lighter to carry myself from place to place.
I am now 50 plus and have chosen to stop running and hiding.
because I can't hide me from me.
There is much work to be done,
to live my life free from self doubt and embarrassment.
It's time to shake the past off my shoulders,
to get busy living in the here and now, right now!

READING THE WORLD AND THE WORD

Texts that would relate to the students' own experiences would enable them to access the larger concept of critical reading. Helen Frost's book *Keesha's House* (2003) fit our need. It tells the story (in verse) of a teen who established a safe-house for herself and other runaways. All the women could relate to the stories in the book (many of them, including myself, had teenaged children or had gone through experiences similar to those described in the book), and Frost's writing is discrete while the events described are far enough removed from the students' actual experiences so as not to intimidate the reader. After reading the first chapter I modelled responding to the language and structure of the text (repeated words, broken sentences, metaphors), as well as to the plot as a mirror of my life and as window onto issues in our society. When the students took up responding, lively and insightful discussions took place, largely about experiences that the women had (either similar or different from those that we read about) but also moving into larger social issues such as abortion, discrimination and bias, power and powerlessness, coming of age, lives in prison, etc.

When we read about a teenage girl who had to leave home because she was pregnant and her parents couldn't handle it, Sula told how she had twins at age 11 after being raped by her brother. Her mother proceeded to throw her out of the house, beginning many years of living on the streets. When we read about a boy whose parents couldn't accept the fact that he was gay, Lily told about the support she had received from her mother for her own lifestyle: “As long as you're happy”, she would always tell her daughter. When we read about one of the girls implying that she had already been in jail once before, Davina told how other inmates would taunt her because she liked to read when she was in prison. After watching the movie *Vera Drake* (Leigh, 2004), Jill talked about the other side of the issue, having been an OBGYN nurse and encountering women in the hospital who had back-room abortions that went bad and the how staff were desperately trying to save their lives. The story about a girl who didn't feel safe in the house because her mother's new husband would come into her room at night without permission, led Lidia to tell about being abused for years by her grandfather when her mother was hospitalized for long periods of time. She had never talked about this before, she told us, because she felt ashamed, embarrassed, not good enough. Bobbie described severe abuse beginning at age 8 which led her to run away from home and begin a life of drugs and addiction, she wrote:

My life and mind have always been in a spin, like a tornado.
Don't know where I'm going, but I know where I've been –
I've been through a lot in life that shouldn't have been.
I search for a magic carpet to carry me through to the clouds,
Trying to find my rainbow of happiness on the other side...

Our reading and discussions were very productive in terms critical reading and in terms of opening up and telling stories: talking about lives and naming issues and experiences. After watching “Five People You Meet in Heaven” (a film based on Mitch Albom’s book) and discussing friendship, which was one of the issues we found in the text, Polly said that she had just realized the strong bonds of friendship she had forged with two of the other residents, friendships the likes of which she had never formerly had with other women. Due to a traumatic event in her past, she never wanted to befriend other women, yet now, under the new circumstances of her life, living at Hope House with women in circumstances similar to her own, she has opened up and is thriving in these relationships which are helping her cope and deal with her life.

On another occasion, Ivy was responding to the writing prompt “A typical day for me is...”, and after describing a typical day she put down her paper and said:

I went to visit my mother today. She lives in an abandoned house and abuses drugs and I’ve been going to visit her since I came out of prison...but sometimes she really embarrasses me! She wants to walk down the street with me and then she goes around telling everyone ‘this is my daughter, this is my daughter’. She’s a bag lady and she’s telling everyone that I’m her daughter! I want to run away but people keep telling me she’s my mother and I have to put up with her!

Dorie, was sitting next to Ivy and couldn’t take her eyes off her. When Ivy stopped her story, Dorie said quietly “That’s what happened to me with my mother. I never told anyone about this before, but my mom is mentally ill and all the years when I was growing up she would tell people at the store “this is my daughter” and I thought ‘where can I hide?’” As our meeting came to an end, Dorie and Ivy, who had been living in the house together for 5 months and had never exchanged more than a greeting, stayed seated, talking, sharing stories and as I turned to say goodbye I saw them hugging and crying on each other’s shoulders.

We also made strides towards becoming more sensitive to “the art of words”: learning about the power of language as we learned about the power a reader has over texts and their interpretation (Rosenblatt, 1995). Davina told about how reading has changed for her as a result of our classes: “I never used to read but I started reading in prison because I needed something to do. Now I read because I like to. I read and I understand what the writer is doing. I understand why he is writing something or describing something in a certain way. In the past I hated these descriptions, but today I just can’t get enough”. Polly mentioned something similar when talking about reading films. She complained jokingly that after learning to “read” the videos in our classes, she can’t view movies anymore without questioning and responding to the story in real time, a habit that annoys her fellow viewers.

STALLED WRITING

Writing in our context was more difficult. Whereas the students had much they wanted to talk about and felt comfortable enough doing so, the effort involved in writing about their lives was too great for some of them, as was the intimidation of “formal” writing: fear of making spelling or grammar mistakes, not knowing “how” or what to write and maybe, even fear of the teacher’s critique, as they were used to in school experiences in the past. The only exception at this time was Lily, whose elder son was in prison, and although he had been there for several years, she had never visited him because she had been in prison herself; she had never written to him, either, because, she said, all she had to tell was bad news and she was afraid of making spelling mistakes. Now that she was out of prison and getting her life back in order she decided to write her son a letter that she would have me correct before sending. Together we went over the letter (which needed minimal correction) in which she apologized for not writing before. She told her son that she was in recovery and doing well. Two weeks later Lily received a reply from her son asking that she come visit him.

From my own studies and work with undergraduate struggling readers, I learned about the connection between writing personal histories and developing a sense of self, of agency. I believed that writing their stories in their own voices would help the women make deeper meaning of their lives, getting away from the negative categories they were condescendingly placed in by society and social institutions with which they came into contact (Ben-Yosef, 2008, 2009). I wanted them to use their developing critical reading skills to reread into their lives and find the positive, the strengths, the significant moments; to revalue their lives, which society refuses to value, and to have the students recognize "...that they can legitimately hold on to parts of the past even as they move into the future" (Silin , 2006:3).

Michael Morpurgo writes about his experience of writing while travelling with his parents on a sailboat (Peggy Sue) when he was 12 years old (Morpurgo, 2002:23):

At school I had never been much good at writing. I could never think of what to write or how to begin. But on the Peggy Sue I found I could open up my log and just write. There was always so much I wanted to say. And that's the thing. I found I didn't write it down at all. Rather, I said it. I spoke it from my head, down my arm, through my fingers and my pencil, and onto the page. And that's how it reads to me all these years later, like me talking.

- Maybe if my students could *speak* their lives onto the page, as young Michael did, writing would be easier for them, a more natural process?

At about the same time I saw Briski and Kaufman's (2004) documentary *Born into Brothels* where they shows Briski's work with children of prostitutes in Calcutta's red light district. A photographer herself, she gave the children disposable cameras to document their lives, and the results in terms of both photography and literacy, were significant and illuminating.

- Maybe the use of disposable cameras to document their lives would jump-start writing for my students?

WRITING FROM THE INSIDE

I sent word that I would be coming with cameras so that anyone wishing to get one should make sure to be in the house that afternoon. I gave each student (and any of the other residents that wanted one) a disposable camera that they were to use by taking pictures of anything they decided was significant in their lives. When the pictures were developed and returned to the photographers, I asked them each to pick a picture and tell us why she chose to take it. At first I wrote down their stories and later, I recorded them on video³. After telling their stories, the students wrote them down.

Lucy took several photos of the flowers in the back yard and told us:

First I took pictures of the flowers when they were very small and about two weeks later, when they had grown. I did that because they remind me of myself. When I got clean this time I was very immature, but now I feel that I'm growing each day, like the flowers.

Ann took a picture of an abandoned house and wrote:

I chose to take a picture of an abandoned house because two years ago when I was drinking, I lived in an abandoned house. I had abandoned myself and my life. I didn't care where I lived. All I needed was to drink.

While talking about her writing, Davina said that she is beginning to think that she is actually happy she went to prison. It was a slap in the face, so hard that it centred her life. It had taught her a lesson that no amount of preaching or threatening had been able to do in the past: she now knows that she does not want to go to prison ever again so she will keep away from the things that got her into trouble. Her older brother, on the other hand, is now facing a second, very long prison term. For him, she says, the first time around was not hard enough. Davina felt empowered by the changes she has made to her life and she was now in charge of the upkeep of Hope House and its yard:

Before Hope, I was a prisoner in my own mind,
an inmate locked up like a caged animal.
Today I am that no longer.
Today I feel empowered by giving back to the house
that showed me love and has given me strength.
Hope House has given me back my life and respect from my family.
Hope House has given my parents a daughter,
who has grown into a respectable citizen.
Who would have thought that I would hear from my mom,
the words I always needed to hear:
"YOU SOUND REAL GOOD, I LOVE YOU".

She also took a picture of a dog she befriended down the street, and wrote:

I've always loved dogs.
It's almost like they understand me,
and I can understand their need and desire to be loved.
This is Chew, my best friend. I tell him everything, although not in words.
When I feel happy, upset or just plain down, I go and sit with Chew.
I don't have to talk,
I can sit still and let my higher power speak to me in the stillness.

When I was young I was told that I was adopted from Canada,
that I'm Mohawk Indian and French Canadian.
Indians believe in spirit guides and so do I.
I feel that certain dogs trust me because they know
I have the Wolf spirit by my side.
The wolf is the teacher, the pathfinder and moon dog of my soul.

Ann took a picture of homeless men sleeping in the park.

I took a picture of 2 guys sleeping in the park because
I remember when I used to sleep in the park.
I would get a blanket from Free Lunch and
lie down on the blanket,
under a tree,
on the grass,
because I was drunk.

I can laugh at it now, but then it wasn't funny.
I was sad and alone,
with no one to talk to,
no one to listen to me.
I would pray to God, ask why I was living like that,
and I stopped believing in God.

Now I do believe, again,
but I have to remember those days to stay sober.

Nadine talked about a photo of the tattoo she had on her right shoulder:

This is a picture of my newly acquired tattoo,
a cross with a butterfly in the middle,
and in the 4 corners it says:
Only By God's Grace.

I remember lying in a foetal position on the cold concrete of a gas station,
excruciating pain.
I remember wanting so much to be out of pain,
wanting someone to make it go away,
wanting to die.
I remember waiting,
waiting for an ambulance
yelling at the sky: GOD, PLEASE MAKE IT STOP!

In the emergency room they decided to discharge me,
again, as they had done a week before.
The drug levels in my blood were so high,
they thought I was expendable.
“There’s nothing more we can do for her”, they said.
“She’s bleeding on your floor”, my boyfriend said.
“You’re very lucky he came with you”, they told me after the surgery:
entopic pregnancy, internal bleeding, severe blood loss.

The butterfly in the middle symbolizes
a new beginning.
It is an excruciating process to become a butterfly,
an exhausting process.
It isn’t easy and it takes a lot of work,
but to become that butterfly
I must work on getting out of the cocoon.

Maru had a friend take a picture of her in her African dress. She wrote:

That’s the way I used to be when I wasn’t using.
I used to be a beautiful mother.
But when I was using I was nobody.

Today I am doing the right thing.
Getting a new foundation for life.
Finding myself by myself has given me power.

Today, when I look at myself in the mirror, I laugh.
I am somebody:
Jesus loves me and I love myself.

Today I am proud of myself.
I am a powerful woman.
I hold my head high.

IN CLOSING THIS CHAPTER

Erin had joined us only sporadically. She was always off to her favourite meeting just as we were coming into the house. One day, as we crossed paths by the door she handed me the following piece:

I come from my grandmother’s dreams

A girl. Finally. The pink and white blanket envisioned a generation ago can be knit.
Only the best yarn will do.

Dreams can come true

Erin, you still do? Ha! Yes, every day I put cream on my elbows too. Feel how smooth.
Let me see yours. Oh, yes. You are a lady too. You are smart. You will graduate, get a
good job. Now why don’t you marry this one? He will have you, support you, be good to
you. Oh, I am talking, talking – the flowers! Why do you do this, baby? So much money!
Oh, Erin, I love you. I love your brother too, but you – ah, you know it.

I became my grandmother’s nightmare

Kicked out of college. For drugs! What is this? Marijuana now. Then it will be heroin.
Is she addicted? The soap opera showed it – the girl addicted to drugs, meeting the dealer
in a dark alley, selling her body. Not Erin. Why won’t her mother, her father save her,
make her be good?

There is no cure for nightmares

You must do as I say Erin. Go back to school. Be a mentch. Leave this – this place.
Who is this man? You MUST LISTEN to me. You’re lucky. You have parents that love
you, that want you home. My parents died in the war when I was 14. I was alone.
Fourteen. Go, go home. Erin, please. What is wrong with you? What are you doing in this
place? You are too bony. Eat. You need to eat, eat. I will cook for you.

I am waking up

I give her eulogy, high. Everyone says how beautiful it was. Reminds me how grandma stitched her every stitch with love. Back at his studio I rip the sweater off to look for a fresh vein. The needle rocks me to sleep. I dream that I'm clean, back in school, happy, bringing my grandma flowers, making her proud.

Dreams can come true

Happy Mother's Day grandma. I love you. I miss you so much! I'm 9 months clean. I wish you were here to see me like this. I'm trying so hard to be a mentch. I'm gonna go back to school, be an art teacher or an art therapist. I guess you know what I am doing now (not like you didn't have ideas when you were here. I know you knew it all). I'm sorry I hurt you so bad. I know you forgive me. I just wish I'd been good enough that you could've visited me, told me stories before bed.

And the flowers weren't much.

I wanted to.

I love you.

Our project is ongoing. New women join and veterans leave. Some go back to their old lives; some succeed in opening a new page and forging a new space for themselves. We celebrate anniversaries of "being clean", of being out of prison. Coffee has become a standard feature as have outings to plays and museums. Some of our students are open and expressive, like Bonnie, who at the slightest prompt would carry all of us into her last prison stay where she went through a harsh and humiliating boot camp experience, while others are reticent, like Ivy, who keeps saying she can't talk yet because it still hurts too much.

Writing has become easier, a more natural process of telling lives. Stories have become fuller, including dreams of future possibilities. In an effort to communicate with others we have posted the writings on the web at www.LiteracyAndLife.blogspot.com where there is also a short video showing our writing and learning process. You are invited to visit the site and listen to the stories, all of which were used, published and posted with the participants' full consent.

ENDNOTES

¹ All names are pseudonyms

² The movie tells the story of Vera Drake, a cleaning woman who gave abortions free of charge to "girls who needed help" in 1950's England.

³ I created a short video documenting the photography project. It can be found on the web at www.LiteracyAndLife.blogspot.com.

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