

## **locked facilities**

In the spring of 1999, Brett Simmons spoke to me about the possibility of facilitating a literacy class for patients in the locked psychiatric facility in which she works as an art therapist. We agreed that I would teach a 6-week module in order to model literacy work for her and her colleagues who would then take over the class from there. Aside from the fact that I had to be let into and out of several locked areas in order to reach the classroom, from the moment I sat down inside the room I felt like I was in any adult education class in any old building. I saw small bodies, large bodies, hopeful eyes, apprehensive faces on that first day of class. I draw this comparison *not* to pathologize literacy learners, but rather to draw connections between what I see as very real pain experienced by many adult learners (and teachers) and those for whom such pain becomes unbearable, and *is* in fact a medical/mental health issue. What I see as a unifying thread across these groups is the fact that at some point in their past, many adults in adult learning classes have been told that they are stupid, that they are less than, that they are other. In the psychiatric hospital I saw women ashamed of their bodies, angry people and people who chose to participate in a literacy class because they wanted to read and write. They didn't come to the literacy group for therapy – this was made clear at the outset – but to participate in language and literacy work.

While having entered the hospital with some of my own apprehension and a sense of possible 'triggers' for participants, I increasingly came to feel that this was yet another group of learners, with whom the same care would need be taken as it is on the 'outside.' Brett encouraged me to talk to the students as I would talk to anyone. This suggestion made me aware of the ways in which I speak to people both in and out of locked facilities.

My time in the facility also gave me opportunities for long conversations with Brett about the nature of mental illness generally, and about the effects of trauma specifically; effects that were present in many of the learners in the class I facilitated at the hospital. That course continues at the hospital because of Brett's commitment to the work and her tenacity in seeing that the hospital support it as a valuable experience for its patients.

**Brett** wrote the following about the world?

### **Literacy and Violence- *Behind locked doors***

#### *1. Partnership between art therapy and literacy*

After fifteen years working in a variety of settings that provide services for the mentally ill I have found that there are many forms of self expression needed by

this group of people who have major communication problems because of their illness. For many, the comfort of artwork or music making is sufficient and allows for the least challenges to self-esteem. For others the struggle for language, for the sentences and vocabulary to describe what may never have been verbalized is paramount. In my work as an art therapist I developed writing groups and groupwork that combined writing and artwork. Through this I learned that there are also literacy issues in the adult psychiatric population, often in part because of the typical teenage onset of serious mental illness. Working with the Director of the Day Treatment Center, with the support of the Clinical Director, in the summer of 1999 we decided to attempt to combine literacy with art therapy at Westboro State Hospital. Turning to both SABES at Quinsigamond College and Literacy Resources/RI, based at the Swearer Center for Public Service at Brown University, for support, I was able to implement this through co-leading a 6 week pilot group with Janet Isserlis.

## *2. Issues of violence for incarcerated learners*

For the incarcerated person, imprisoned or committed to a psychiatric hospital, the crisis has passed and issues of violence that interfere with learning come from symptoms acquired at least in part from the stress of having previously endured homelessness, trauma, recurrent hospitalizations and encounters with law enforcement. As an art therapist bringing literacy into a long term psychiatric facility, my concerns about the effects of violence on learning are different than those of my colleagues in the NIFL fellowship. Inside the locked setting I need not worry about precipitating a crisis through a learner- patient disclosing abuse histories or even ongoing issues of domestic violence. (In the latter case, the hospital can intervene on the patient's behalf without involving the legal system or the police, although as in the world 'outside' we can only encourage a person to leave the unsafe marriage or partnership). Groups for the management of trauma and for learning about treatment issues related to mental illness have long been a staple of rehabilitation programming.

Conversely, the idea that literacy and/or basic adult education is important to the long term success of independent living for the mentally ill is revisiting an idea that was cast aside due to budget cuts and the shrinking census of the state psychiatric hospitals. Presently, it is the patients who press the administration for education because they sense this will assist them in maintaining themselves outside of the asylum structure.

3. *Violence within the sanctuary walls as further impediment to learning*

Realistically, a unique culture of violence exists within the asylum walls. Patients periodically explode. Restricted to locked corridors, and battling hallucinatory thought disorders, agitated patients often, and completely randomly, hit staff or other patients. Despite clear instructions not to respond to violence with violence, intentionally or instinctually this does happen. Thus the traumatized find themselves in an environment that can be retraumatizing, only this time there is no 911, no unlocked back door, no concerned neighbor to call the police. Lifted from the streets or from their families to be provided with 'asylum', they find peace is intermittent in bedlam. Currently, efforts from the institution to address the effect of the traumatic environment on staff and patients are not formalized. Training for staff to minimize violence is in process.

4. *Effective ongoing education in spite of violence*

The great gift we have, in spite of the intrusions of the unstable environment and the inherent instability of mental illnesses, is time. Throughout the past year and half, teaming my skills with those of Certified Occupational Therapy Assistant, Martin Proulx, we have successfully combined therapy with education for a small group of people at Westborough State Hospital. Our specialties already prescribe the use of materials ( writing, art media, crafts, cooking, gardening) as a conduit for self- expression, insight, relaxation and skill development. Combining the use of these activities with more structured exercises geared toward writing sentences, expanding vocabulary and increasing reading comprehension has merely required us, now functioning also as teachers, to be more directive and focused. Rather than helping people through open ended exercises that ostensibly have no right or wrong outcome, learner-patients come to the classes understanding that they will be supported with full recognition of their psychiatric and learning disabilities, and that only with regard to their "school work" will they be corrected. Suddenly they are in a class, not group therapy, and there is something of a 'right answer'. In therapy, concrete, observable, measurable improvement is hard to pin down- not so when one is being taught to correctly write a letter, or fill out a bank check. Rather than looking for therapist guided insights, they are asked to pursue a known standard. However fluid that standard may be, it is easier to achieve ( and to demonstrate) than the more elusive requirements of sound psychiatric health.

5. *Successes of Art therapy/ Literacy within the locked setting*

Through implementation of our small literacy program we found our learner-patients to be willing and diligent students despite the hostile environment . Despite intrusions from schizophrenia and major affective disorders, despite substance abuse dependencies and character disorders, despite NCI commitments and other forensic issues, those who commit to the education groups are tolerant of each others' learning deficits and even try to help those with more learning hurdles than themselves. And unlike homework given in some therapy groups, the learner-patients ask what they can do outside of class and often complete this work.

It had been my hope in sharing my experiences with others in the fellowship that a method for addressing issues of violence might be created from our inpatient example. Attempting to bring the skills used inside the hospital into the community I had a brief opportunity to observe and then run one class at the Genesis Center, in Providence. While there, I realized the power a mandated reporter would have to disintegrate fragile family structures and disrupt the tenuous residencies of some recent immigrants. It was a potential responsibility I was glad to walk away from, especially given my awareness of the inadequacies of the state agencies that intervene in situations of domestic violence, immigration and abuse to elders and children.

Earlier in the year, one fellowship member brought up the idea of offering literacy classes in shelters - presumably at a post acute stage. The initial response to this idea was somewhat negative. But it is at this point where a combination of therapy and literacy could be effective if presented in a task oriented learning model such as the one that Janet Isserlis, Martin Proulx and I have used at WbSH.

Learners of many levels can process and express issues of violence through artmaking, music and movement without a confessional word being spoken. Clear statements about what must be reported and what can be left confidential should be provided to learners who engage in these activities. Expression of pain, even when not openly discussed, can be team building and also provide inroads for later service intervention , while cementing learning relationships that may ultimately be more liberating than the intervention of state agencies.

**9-20-2000**

An awareness of the similarities between the classes inside the hospital and those outside prompted me to consider another strand of the fellowship work, i.e. education in correctional settings. This exploration led me to direct literacy work with two women in prison, and to two days' observation of incarcerated men in sex offender treatment programs as part of the larger process of trying to understand the ways in which violence occurs and systems respond to violent offenders and victims of crimes.

Prior to beginning the project, it occurred to me that women in prison were very likely people for whom violence and trauma, in one form or another had to be important issues. An August 1998 research brief from the National Institute of Justice states that "women offenders have needs different from those of men, stemming in part from their disproportionate victimization from sexual or physical abuse and their responsibility for children." It further states that "[e]lements deemed conducive to success in ... programs included many that were gender specific: staff who provided strong female role models, the opportunity to form supportive peer networks, and attention to women's particular experiences as victims of abuse, as parents of children, and in negative relationships to men."<sup>1</sup>

1 Merry Morah, Timothy S. Bynum and Barbara A. Koons (August, 1998). Women Offenders: programming Needs and Promising Approaches, Research in Brief, National Institute for Justice.

In September 1999, I met with the Roberta Richman, warden of the Women's Facility at the Adult Correctional Institution in Cranston, Rhode Island, and with one of the full-time adult educators at that facility. At that time the educator chose not to participate in the project. After some thought and discussion, I asked to be allowed to work as a tutor with incarcerated women for a period of four to six weeks, thinking this would enable me to become familiar to the women before attempting to speak to them about issues of violence and its impact on their learning. I knew that I had no right to ask or expect that women would speak to me (an outsider) and also felt uncomfortable about doing so just to 'further' my research. We agreed that I would begin tutoring that fall and would eventually try to start a discussion and/or writing group for women wanting to share their experiences of violence and learning.

Due to unavoidable delays (jury duty, holidays, scheduling conflicts), I didn't begin tutoring until January, 2000, and have continued to tutor on Tuesday mornings since that time. I began working one-on-one with Jessica, a young woman who had been incarcerated in 1996 at the age of 14. Her crime was a violent one, her sentence is very, very long. After I'd been working with her for a couple of months, a correctional officer approached me about working with a second woman. Slightly taken aback that a CO had made the request, I asked her to check with the educator on staff and in March began working with Susan. Both Jess and Susan have given me permission to use their names here.

As a weekly visitor to the facility I have limited access to and understanding of life in prison. I don't pretend to be an expert at corrections education. I've attended a conference on the subject, have spoken to local colleagues but am new to this area. I include this section as an invitation to colleagues working in corrections and to those contemplating such work as my reflection on the need for our work to be safe regardless of where it occurs and as a reminder that adults in programs on the outside may have also spent time in programs on the inside.

2 See for example, Prison Activists Come of Age, The Nation, July 24/31,2000, by Bell Gale Chevigny and Lost in the Shuffle: An inside look at women in prison, text and photographs by Rachel Leventhal, Doubletake, Winter, 2000.

I've read of prison projects in which former inmates and other peers work with prisoners<sup>2</sup> and concepts of support are acknowledged as important factor in prisoners' 'rehabilitation.' I've also learned from both Jess and Susan, and from having overheard conversations that should be but are never private that trust and community are difficult, if not impossible, to build in prisons and that no one really trusts anyone ever. Knowing that I don't know all there is to understand about the dynamics of prison life, I don't assume that either of my learners trusts me or any one else. My task is to be fully present to them, to listen to what they have to say, to do literacy work with them and hope that this work is seed work – is planting seeds that may take fruit, that may assist the women. Both learners have been extremely generous in giving me feedback about materials I've brought them that deal with violence explicitly and have also challenged me to find other materials that address interests that they have named. Since August, when my work computer was upgraded to a fast new laptop, and with the Warden's permission, I've been bringing the laptop into the facility where both learners are typing – one working through a typing tutorial, the other typing up excerpts from her journal, and most recently, working on assignments for a word processing courses she's just started.

3 © 2000 Push. Howard R. Swearer Center for Public Service, Brown University

This following is excerpted from "Are We Asking Enough?," an article written in the spring for Push<sup>3</sup>, a publication of the Swearer Center for Public Service, where I'm based at Brown University. In that article I referred to Susan as "Mary." Although she'd given me permission to talk about our conversations I hadn't felt comfortable, in this small state, using even her first name. [Last week she told me I can and I should]. I was moved to write the piece because of a statement Susan had made about being called stupid when she was younger. Hearing her story made own privilege sharply visible to me, a middle class white woman with relatively easy access to education and support for learning. Susan's received little of either; was shunted through special education classes, acted out, threw things. She left school, was abused by a male partner, lost her children to the state. For most of her life, she's been told that she's stupid. Less than. When she'd finished talking about school that morning, I said, "It makes me angry at every teacher who ever told you that you're stupid." To which Susan replied, "It wasn't teachers, it was my mother."

Traumatic events, as Judith Herman defines them, “overwhelm the ordinary systems of care that give people a sense of control, connection and meaning<sup>4</sup>.” While violence and abuse affect people across class, race and educational divides, a disproportionately large number of adults in learning centers (in and out of correctional facilities) have experienced trauma—political and/or personal at some time in their lives.

Learning language and learning to read and write have much to do with gaining a sense of control, connection and meaning. Adult learners, marginalized and at times without legal status or protection, lack access to the English language as a vehicle for self expression, self defense, self definition. Without an ability to read cultural codes, or to respond appropriately, adults can feel as if they have no control over their immediate conditions. Women in prison have virtually no control over their immediate conditions. They are told what to do, what to have, where to go, when to eat, sleep, and wash. Yet, for many inmates, the systems of care available in prison provide structure and a particular form of safety, in stark contrast to the remarkable failure of the systems of care available to many of them prior to incarceration. Prison also offers a form physical safety for women whose abusers are still at large outside. Another view of prison as providing safe haven within the whole cycle of incarceration and recidivism is beautiful delineated in Tony Parker’s *Criminal Conversations*<sup>5</sup>, a brilliant compilation of oral histories made by Parker in collaboration with numerous incarcerated, and previously incarcerated men and women.

4 Herman, Judith. *Trauma and Recovery*. New York: Basic Books, 1992.

5 Parker, Tony (ed.) and Keith Soothill (ed.) *Criminal Conversations: An Anthology of the Work of Tony Parker* London: Routledge, 1999.

This apparent contradiction—the tension between being held against one’s will while also being given access to housing, learning and various forms of support (meals, heat, counseling) has informed my work with learning both in and out of the correctional system. I see the tension – that one can be ‘safe’ in prison in some ways, but terribly at risk and vulnerable in others. I am not comfortable speaking for or about women in prison – it’s too easy to reduce them to something ‘other.’ I have not had the experience of being incarcerated. I have not been a refugee, either, nor have I needed to learn a new language to survive. All of which is a way of saying that those of us who do educational work need to acknowledge experiences that learners have had – traumatic, wonderful, surprising, dull. We can’t know the experiences of our colleagues, or of people we see on buses, meet at conferences, pass on the street. We need to take care with each individual we encounter; assumptions about who someone is or what s/he believes are easily proven wrong. Humans have resiliency, have unconquerable sadnesses, have all kinds of things happening that we can only guess about.

Acknowledging that trauma may have some bearing on learning doesn't mean that we expect less of students, or hold them to higher or lower standards of accountability. Instead, we need to ask more of ourselves to help learners name and meet their own learning goals, identify strengths. If learning is impeded by previous (or ongoing) experiences of abuse, violence, or political trauma, it's up to us to find ways to help learners get on with the work of school. If trauma as Herman says "overwhelms ordinary systems of care," what does support for survivors of trauma look like in a locked facility where control, connection and meaning are tenuous at best?

Educating ourselves about the cultures of violence, neglect, abuse and trauma and the ways in which this culture has shaped women's learning is part of the work. Acknowledging that learning is difficult for people who are afraid or have received messages about their own lack of worth or ability is part of the work. Some learners use all their energy to appear "normal" in either masking the fact that past abuse is present in their thinking, or that current stress is not consuming their waking thoughts and energy. Naming the stressors, and identifying times when learners are able to be more or less present to the learning situation can help them (re)gain control over their learning, over their lives.

Listening is a vitally important piece of this process. When I first began working with women in prison, we focused on the books and texts in front of us. Over time each woman spoke about things that were bothering them, things they like, people in their lives. Sometimes the entire session is a conversation. In the relative freedom of one-to-one tutoring in such a situation (without a test to pass in a given amount of time), this conversation is the basis of any work that can follow. I can't presume that I've built trust with the women. I do hope they feel that I listen objectively; I argue when I disagree with them and they argue with me. We argue safely. We laugh. We agree. We disagree. We communicate.

When I bring in readings that may be difficult for Susan to read – the content may be hard for her to revisit if it's a memoir about violence, for example. I explain to her what the writing is about and let her decide if she wants to read it. She's always wanted to read these pieces, and frequently asks for "more." She once read a piece in *Real Conditions* (described below) and, with prompts to write her own rendition of the story, chose to compose a complete fiction about a day she spent with her children. Only when I asked her if this was true did she tell me she'd made it up. She later wrote an account of a day spent with her children but wrote it, I think, to please me. She is infrequently interested in discussing writing – hers or that of others – but does, on occasion, share stories about people she knows, events she's

experienced. I wonder about the strength of writing as a vehicle of expression for her. I wonder if I'm the one trying to impose meaning for her in encouraging her to write.

My colleague Hal Adams, publisher of *Real Conditions*, a magazine comprised of writing by people in communities, came to two of the tutoring sessions with me. Both Jess and Susan shared their writing with us. Hal spoke to Jess about how the strength of her writing lay in its obvious dedication to the truth, which is the measure of all good writing. He also listened to the Susan's responses to writing, about domestic violence by a woman in Iowa that she had read in an issue of *Real Conditions* (see *in the classroom* to read those poems). Susan responded to the events detailed in the writing and to the writers' experience of domestic violence.

A few months after the visit, Hal recalled "encouraging Susan to write about some of the things she talked about with intensity (her mother, her children, the guard from high school – he was in special education classes with her, the impending move across the street. Oh, and there was that very funny scene of her dealing with the teacher – Susan getting under the desk, and someone in her class hanging the teacher out the window). But I think you had already encouraged her to write about these things. I wonder if she ever did."

She hasn't really. I still struggle with the ways that writing is and isn't available to her, and to others in adult education classes in and out of corrections' settings. Susan has indicated an interest in joining a writing group; time will tell if that group comes together and if it does, if she'll join it.

Hal's visit served several functions. Hearing him speak of the power of writing was important to both women. Being able to refer back to comments he had made after his visit also helped me in being clear about the writing work the women have done and that they continue to do. Hal was able to offer me feedback about my interaction with both women - to provide another set of ears and eyes and to offer opinions about the ways in which the work gets done. My hope in starting a writing group with Susan and others in the facility would be to bring in other colleagues and other inmates in order to see how and if those interactions might strengthen the inmates' valuing of writing as a means of expression, of telling the truth.

Early in September, after we'd been working together for several months, I asked Susan if she had anything she wanted me to tell teachers about working with women who'd had experiences of violence. She said that teachers should know that "... they had a rough childhood, they've also seen abuse in their life and they don't know what's right or wrong or

how to deal with it. [for example] .. like if your mother got pissed off at you before you went to school you had a guilty conscience and you don't know what to do, you don't know how to express your feelings. You hold it all in, til a point you get upset or aggravated and you take it out on teachers or one of the students."

[Then what happens?] "Then there's discipline, you're suspended, going to the principal's office or talking to a counselor."

[Did counselors help?] "No...because he wouldn't know what was the situation; he only hears one side not both sides."

Susan acknowledged that she'd had a hard time adjusting to classes in prison at first. "I would walk out of class, wouldn't do no work... After a while, I got used to it, I started doing work." I asked what her full time teacher at the prison does differently to help Susan learn: "She spends more time with the students when they need her."

I ask if there are things makes Susan feel more or less comfortable in school now. "No, not really.

You can deal with it more now than back in school than where you were younger, you're older to understand." While speaking positively of her teacher in the prison Susan also said, "I didn't like studying in here because I never liked school. I like this, but I don't like school school. This is one on one, not ten to the class." When I asked if Susan wanted to learn when she was released, if she'd go back once she was outside. She said that she wouldn't, and that she'd learn "on my time... Study by myself. If I needed help, if I had to, I would ask my sister." I push her a little: What would have to happen to make you want to go there? "... there's nothing very interesting to be in school." You're not interested in pushing your writing and reading further? "with you, I would... Even my tutor from my first communion, I haven't seen her in 2 months, they want to put me to another one, but I said no. I would feel uncomfortable. " [Susan was referring to a tutor who was working with her on preparing for her communion during the past several months]. I tried to understand why she'd allowed me to work with her, and yet was unwilling to have another tutor (in addition to and not instead of me). "[I was] not uncomfortable, I was already notified that you were coming. Ahead of time is when I knew for six months that you were coming.. They were always trying to find me a tutor.... I wouldn't go for a new one now, I wouldn't be comfortable. That's how I am."

"One more thing about teaching in prison: have patience. The student should have patience because the teacher's only there to help you and not to discipline you. Yourself is disciplining

yourself, it's not letting you learn...you're putting yourself in a punishment instead of talking your problem out... You're not allowing yourself to learn because you're punishing yourself – because you just don't want to learn and you wouldn't have the patience to learn.

Some of Susan's responses frustrated me because I'd hoped that she would have spoken to the positive impact of the many programs in which she's participated during her incarceration. I should be frustrated. Susan's not in prison to help me understand violence. She isn't there to make us feel good about the work we try to do. Her honesty, though, must guide the choices we make about how to work with learners with so few choices about what they do every day. She's read stories I've brought her, done writing, I think to humor me. I don't know where we're going with it all. She joined an organization for victims/survivors of domestic violence, wrote the letter of inquiry, received the materials with enthusiasm. Does it make a difference in her life? I don't know. I do know that if we're going to do the work, we may as well do it as carefully as we can, learning from the learners as we go.

A week after I'd spoken to Susan, I had hoped to ask Jessica for her input, too. On the day, Jess had a problem with her jaw and couldn't speak. For an hour we passed the laptop computer back and forth across the table.

**[Janet] What do you think is important for teachers who work with women who have had experiences of violence to understand? What are things that teachers can do that help women learn and what are some things they do that don't help?**

*[Jessica] My opinion about it all is that there really isn't much anyone can do to understand women like myself. It really comes with the wanting to do it your self. If the person doesn't want to help themselves there really isn't much anyone can do. Women like myself look for understanding, understanding from others. In other words no one can really understand why we are the way we are or why we do the things we do. It takes lots of dedication and time to get to know someone like me with a lot of negative thoughts and a horrible past. But there is something teachers can do, Teachers can be persistent with wanting to help and understand. I have a lot to thank my teachers for they have been patient and understanding to my needs and very persistent about my learning.*

**[Janet] This is really interesting. You touch on two important points. One, you say that there isn't much anyone can do to understand people 'like yourself,' which makes me want to ask who the people 'like yourself' are.**

**The second point is much clearer to me – I see a big part of our work being about not only helping you with reading and writing (and math, with Judy), but also sometimes our job together is to talk to each other, to listen to each other and share opinions. I'm not a shrink, I'm not a counselor, I'm a teacher. I believe that literacy is connected to a lot of things. I think that when you write in your journal you learn things about yourself. I think literacy is a tool for you to do a lot of things – to communicate with your friend and your family, to read about different places and people; I think it connects you to a lot of things. I think when we argue about things like Dominican people or opinions we have that aren't the same it's interesting because we're communicating. I respect your right to express your opinions, even when I disagree. We respect each other, I think.**

**When you say “Teachers can be persistent with wanting to help and ,” I think you're describing good teaching, period.**

*[Jess] People like my self , what I mean by that is a person with a past life experience like my life , living a violent home , in a violent Community and being a Hispanic young woman as my self. It's not easy living in such a cruel world where money and race are the two (2) most important factors of life.*

*Yes it is true I do have teachers that are very good at what they do, in fact I know you're one of the best teachers I've ever had. If it wasn't for you I would have never accomplished everything I have. THANKS I REALLY DO APPRECIATE IT ALL.*

**[janet] Thanks. You know I'm not hunting for thanks (but I appreciate what you've said).**

**I want to shift the topic a little, if that's ok. I hear a lot of people inside talking about trust. 'Outside' teachers talk a lot about building community and having learners help each other and get to know and trust each other. Is it possible to create similar learning communities, or writing groups, or other kinds of groups in here, do you think?**

*[Jess] The most impossible thing in this world is to trust someone . Many of us in here have trust issues*

*Because we have been hurt so much in the past . I really don't trust too many people, my fear of being hurt is much greater than growing close to someone. But yes it is possible to*



## **sex offender treatment programs**

In the early spring of 1999, at Richard Hoffman's suggestion, I met with Ross Cheit, a survivor of child sexual abuse and Professor at the Taubman Center for Public Policy and American Institutions at Brown University. Ross graciously heard my meandering questions and directed me to Peter Loss, ACSW, who runs sex offender treatment programs at the men's facility at the ACI. I was drawn to this side of the work by an increasing anger at men and an outrage I couldn't channel. I know that women commit acts of violence, but had really been immersed in stories of violence perpetrated by men.

6 A clear illustration of Richard Hoffman's analysis of the evil done to children by adults who hurt them sexually can be found at <http://www.vachss.com/mission/guests/hoffman.html>

When Richard had spoken to us, I asked him about forgiveness. He is clear in his views that there is the possibility of evil in the world and that his concerns do not lie with what happens to those who harm children.<sup>6</sup> The conversation with Richard made me think that I'd been asking the wrong question – that the issue was not one of forgiveness, but of understanding how, when the time comes, offenders –those who have committed acts of violence, sexual abuse against children and others of their ilk – return to communities. How can they be reintegrated? What happens?

In trying to understand why people commit what remain to me to be unthinkable crimes, I accepted Peter's invitation to observe two days of sex offender treatment programs in late March. The reader is cautioned that the following journal entry is graphic; it represents my attempt to make sense of two very intensive days of witnessing men's sex offender treatment programs, hearing their stories and observing their interactions. For those who wish to skip the journal piece, the critical piece of learning for me was this: Many of the stories I heard from men in the program (all of whom are incarcerated as sex offenders in the ACI's medium security division) were in part indistinguishable from testimonies I have also heard from victims of sexual and domestic violence.

Knowing that the men I heard had been themselves victims of childhood sexual abuse did not cause me to excuse or justify their crimes. (Indeed, in order to even contemplate this work, how can I pass judgement beyond my own visceral and personal reactions to the stories?). What did happen was that my outrage has found a larger focus; that of a society that allows its children to be so carelessly and harmfully treated, to be hurt, many times, by the very adults upon whose care they depend, adults in whom children blindly trust and by whom they are horribly betrayed.

*Journal, March 27, 00*

I wait for fifteen minutes, I'm early. I have a book, *New Versions of Victims*.

I'm ready

at noon he's not there

at ten past a guard happens to look. He'd forgotten to write it into his book.

buzzed in through four separate entrances. two doors, two sliding fences.  
one more door and we're on the campus.

It's a nether world, once inside. Is it day, night, raining, not raining?  
it's surreal, just physically. I lose focus and think I'm in school.

His three facilitators, Nate, John, Rick. reviewing men up for parole

" he's not ready"

" this is a red flag for me, he says his childhood was happy"

" he sugarcoats"

" he can't focus"

" he's using humor as a shield"

The first group, at 12:30. Each man must stand and introduce himself to me,  
the visitor. They have done this before. Name, length of sentence, years served,  
years in the program. name of the victims against whom his crimes were  
committed, his relationship to them. my daughter, my nephews, my step  
daughters, the daughter of a woman I dated.

in this session Tony takes the floor. Before we'd begun he spoke about how  
watching Jerry Springer used to make him tense; now it eases his tension.  
He's a little jokey, light. Apparently I'm sitting in his chair, across the table from  
him, because he comments on how different everything seems, how he's used to  
seeing people from over there, not over here. I offer to move, but he says it's ok  
eventually he cries.

Pete wants everyone to cry

Pete wants everyone to acknowledge what they own, to get rid of this garbage

The man to my left says hell and then excuses himself to me. Pete says if one more person excuses himself to a woman for swearing and not to him...

Antonio, I read his ironed-on name. Restraining order for life. to not see the child he abused.

"If you re-read your journal, you'll be embarrassed at who you were when you wrote it three years ago. that's progress. Same thing if you watch your tape." "Can we make a tape and show it to the women's center," someone wonders.

[What educative process do I think I need to find here?]

During the second session, the man to my right talks about wanting his kids to come and dump on him, vent, say they hate him so that he can take their pain away from him. He so wants to take that pain on for himself.

*What right do you have I wonder to take anything from them, to help them at all?*

This is the only time in four hours that I feel real outrage and feel myself feeling it, stripped of familiarity, of context, of anything I actually know or understand. The only judgement I actually hear myself make in my head. making big noise silently. What right do you have of absolution?

and who died and made me god?

What right do you have I wonder to take anything from them, to help them at all?

Although Peter calls people out when they talk about rights (it's not an issue of rights) this one question haunts me. As Tony is shuffling paper back and forth in his hand, I see a fragment of a sentence, written in school script, ball point pen: "I would put my penis in and then pull it out before ejaculating"

or words to that effect.

and this long before someone, the salt and pepper man with short short hair, his first name lost, talks about the orphanage. Someone I'd expect to see at a place called something family restaurant or a bar with amber tumblers. something with formica, or something more expensive, but plastic coated something.

last night, thinking about the fact that it was his turn to tell his history, his room mate reports he shouted, screamed, cried, punched in his sleep.

of all the horror that room contained, his orphanage and the neighbor who raped him at the age of twelve are what make my eyes hurt, my face hurt from tears, dry tears, unlubricated

The first guy in the second group; Pete tries to get him to focus. to say his anger

He keeps to himself. "I wasn't much of a people person before I came to prison."  
is the only time I want to laugh. a man across from me seems to think it's funny, too.

*for god sake these are all men who have committed sex crimes on children*

what has happened here?

in the orphanage

"to her credit, my mother tried to look after us."

why must you recuperate her? pete seems to think it's important to find the rage, to purge it, exorcise it, vomit it out.

men don't cry

marines, semper fi. fie.

only raw. my soul feels rasped. It should.

the orphanage

I keep wanting to call it the convent, because of all the nuns who ran it. who beat small children. who slept on the same big floor that children stripped, and washed and polished and rubbed once a month. where bigger boys abused littler ones.

"anal?" terry asks

"no,

oral."

"on them?"

"on us."

from the time he was six, maybe, or eight.

some of these stories are indistinguishable on the surface of those I read only last night - women's stories of their own abuse at the hands and fingers, and mouths, and dental instruments and tongues and pensises of uncles, fathers, brothers, mothers, step parents, grandparents.

Richard's strong image of what happens to small boys in emergency rooms. Being sewn back up.

Peter describing how Tony's children probably hate him, want to rip him a new asshole. But not hate, that's not the word. Hate is contested. Hope is contested. Taking on. He's asking them to take it on. to give it up. not to give it up to jesus, not to repent and find salvation. to give it up to find a way to cope. to do what, i'm not finally sure

There is talk about communication between the a.g.'s office and the victims. It's harder for the offenders if their victims are conflicted. It's easier if the victims just hate them. But do you want to try to talk to your victims if they want to talk to you?

If you hadn't been a good father, if there hadn't been something positive, there would have been no betrayal.

the convent, the orphanage. the neighbor who said if you help me mow my lawn i'll give you surprise later. who raped using force. (redundant, maybe, but a question that was asked) so that he stayed inside unless his brothers would go out with him. Who never saw the guy again, but if he heard the lawnmower would run the other way.

some of the men, in the group for a while, function like a somber but edgy Greek chorus, saying what Peter might say, calling out, calling into question.

Did you undersand what just happened here? how you used the word 'you'?

"You get to the point where you want to know what happened."

*You*, the almighty distancer.

How adamantly this man does not want to cry.

The long drive back at 4 o'clock. No NPR, no listening to the World. As soon as I am in my car, I only know to cry. Rain comes down, a little, then a lot.

in the middle of the afternoon, guards call names, inmates respond with numbers and letters - the location of their modules, their bed (E top 7, Alpha 363, or something. everyone knows the drill).

later another guard makes me produce the small key to the locker where (even though I have a badge to be in the prison) I've been compelled to leave my things.

trust is an issue in prison. no surprise there.

We don't know enough about the lives of our students and we'd be better off if we did

Isn't the way to learn about them through literacy - learning about her life through literacy;

She's the expert - she's not only full of problems; but that's not how I ask her to use literacy

She uses literacy to explore her world