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Dancing on razor wire: Caring to write and writing to care in a women's prison

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Dancing on razor wire: Caring to write and writing to care in a women's prison

Simons, Kathe Penfield, Ph.D.

University of New Hampshire, 1994

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DANCING ON RAZOR WIRE:
CARING TO WRITE AND WRITING TO CARE
IN A WOMEN'S PRISON

BY

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B.S., Southern Connecticut State College, 1974
M.S., Southern Connecticut State College, 1977

DISSERTATION

Submitted to the University of New Hampshire
in Partial Fulfillment of
the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Reading and Writing Instruction

May, 1994
This dissertation has been examined and approved.

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4/15/94
Date
DEDICATION

For my family,
Al, Michael and Bethany,
whose caring continues to sustain me
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are many people who have accompanied me on my dissertation journey and I am tremendously grateful for their guidance and support.

My family has been my most constant source of support and encouragement during my four years of graduate work. My husband, Al, cheered me on when I pursued my lifelong dream of a doctorate degree. He also reflected my dream back to me when I was weary and considered turning back. He kept the home fires burning brightly when I needed time to read, study, research and write. When I needed to redefine the focus of my research, Al was a willing listener and helped me to find my way. His computer expertise was also an invaluable contribution to the dissertation itself. Our son, Michael, was always ready with a hug of encouragement and learned to relinquish the family computer to me on a moment's notice. Our daughter, Bethany, helped by cooking meals and gave me wonderful feedback on my work at the prison, and on my writing, especially the first case study. I dedicate this dissertation to my family—Al, Mike, and Beth—who accompanied me on my journey with tremendous enthusiasm and love.

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ABSTRACT

DANCING ON RAZOR WIRE:
CARING TO WRITE AND WRITING TO CARE
IN A WOMEN'S PRISON

by

Kathe Penfield Simons
University of New Hampshire, May, 1994

This qualitative study investigates the writing of women in prison as a tool to care for themselves and others. The inmates participated in a student-centered, socially contextualized, process writing class whereby they could write for their own purposes, and share and publish their writing. The study presents case studies of two women who were also involved in a peer-tutoring program (one serving as the tutor for the other) and who used their literacies extensively on their own time outside of the classroom.

Many of our nation's inmates are considered illiterate by standardized, school-based measures. Some participate in correctional education programs that primarily focus on decontextualized instructional methods that have a narrow definition of literacy. Also, some inmates are denied full access to education programs because of their institution's conflicting paradigms of punishment and rehabilitation.

The data were teaching records, open-ended interviews, observations of inmate students, student writing logs and writing samples, including personal journals. The data analysis was informed by the feminist inquiries of Nel Noddings
(1984), Carol Gilligan (1982, 1990), and Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule (1986). The primary uses for the inmates' self-sponsored writing were relationally oriented, and centered on the women's need to reestablish and maintain a caring network with significant people in their lives, most often with their children. In learning to care for others, the women were better able to take care of themselves and receive the caring of others. Other significant uses for writing included creating a personal history, grieving the death of a child, and aiding recovery from substance abuse.

Participatory literacy education in prison integrates personal and academic literacies. Process classrooms, inmate-taught classes, and peer tutoring offer students and inmate teachers opportunities not only to discover their own voice of authority as learners and instructors, but also to care for themselves and others in the context of their lives and in more meaningful preparation for returning to the world outside of prison.
INTRODUCTION

The Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to describe and interpret the writing of a group of incarcerated women and to analyze their writing as a tool to care for themselves and others. The women participated in a student-centered writing class that I facilitated as a volunteer teacher from 1990-1993 at a state women's prison in New England. Many of my prison students were public school dropouts and bore the label “illiterate” based on their standardized test scores. Adult illiteracy is much higher among prison populations—about 70 percent—than in the general adult population—about 50 percent (U.S. Department of Education, 1993). Prison authorities required those inmates enrolled in the prison education program to take the writing class as they worked toward a GED (General Education Development) certificate. Others, with high school diplomas or postsecondary education, were motivated to attend by their desire to write, to be with others, or just for curiosity's sake. The great majority of the women in the class were mothers, and most were also victims of abuse—emotional, physical and/or sexual. As members of this writing community, they went far beyond the explicit educational objectives of the prison education program and used language to fulfill their need to care for themselves, their families and others outside of prison.

The primary need of women to care for others has been widely documented by feminist scholars (Noddings, 1984; Gilligan, 1982; Bateson, 1990; Gilligan, Lyons & Hanmer, 1990; Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule, 1986; Martin, 1985; McCracken, 1992). Many argue that women create knowledge most meaningfully in the context of care, concern and connection, their central “ways of knowing.” Even
the self-directed writing of my inmate students was used by them for many purposes that were almost always connected to their role as caretaker. As part of this study, I will include case studies of two students and demonstrate the significance of their writing as they worked to reestablish and maintain a caring network with their children, their families and friends, and as they learned to take care of themselves.

**Finding My Way in the Prison Classroom: What I Knew and What I had to Learn**

When I began volunteering at the prison, I wanted to lead a "writers' workshop." Not having worked with adult students before, I came equipped with the pedagogy that had served me well as an elementary school language arts teacher: a student-centered approach that promoted the students' free choice of topic, daily time for both students and teacher to write, sharing of writing with a wider audience than just the teacher, positive response that supported future writing and opportunities for publication of student writing.

I wanted to incorporate as many components of a writers' workshop as possible in my new class at the women's prison. I purchased marbleized composition books for my inmate students, inviting them to keep journals. "Write about whatever you'd like," I cheered. "I'll be glad to read back to you if you'd like." Staggering under more than a dozen journals by the end of the first week, I realized that taking them home to write in was defeating my goal to have the women write daily in their journals. How could they write if I had the journals? They enjoyed the attention that a written response provided, but I realized it was more important that they maintained the physical ownership of the books. By the end of the second week, I stayed "after school" and responded to half of the women's journals on Friday, and planned to respond to the other half the following Monday. Before I left the prison grounds, I personally returned each journal to its writer. This plan
worked very well, with each student apart from her journal for no more than one hour once a week. Students would often invite me into their cells for an extended writing conference or simply a chat.

The women often chose to write about deeply emotional topics. In responding to a writer, I would often restate her own words, "You sound so very upset about not being able to see your daughter for the next month. It must be very difficult for you." My response extended the conversation and encouraged further writing. An additional strategy—asking questions of the writer—sometimes felt more comfortable to me than restating her painful words. Responses like "Please tell me more about your daughter. How old is she and what does she look like?" elicited enthusiastic writing from my students. The journals became safe places where they could "visit" with their children and families and share them with me.

After a few weeks, I was caught off guard when a few of the women no longer chose to leave their journals with me at the end of class. I felt a bit stupid and useless, and wondered if my responses had been somehow misinterpreted. Slowly, I realized that the women were beginning to write for themselves. This was a big step, and I was excited. Even better, the women began swapping their books with each other, and sharing portions of their journals aloud with the entire class. As the women began to rely on each other for listening, encouragement, and caring, a community of writers was created.

The women began writing more about themselves, their prison experience and what had brought them there. Journal entries grew into short stories, letters, poetry and personal narratives. Many women actively participated in a variety of groups run at the prison—Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous, "Healing the Child Within," parenting classes and others—in addition to individual counseling or psychotherapy. Their writing often dealt with the difficulties of addiction recovery or unspeakable childhood abuses. One woman chose to write in
her journal about being sexually abused by her uncle when she was a little girl, while another wrote about her drug abuse in a poem she read to the class. As I encouraged my students to work with topics of their choice, they wrote with a tremendous sense of purpose and motivation.

But student-centered, participatory education such as this in the prison setting is unusual. As I have attended correctional education conferences in both the United States and Canada and visited classrooms in other prisons, I have seen dozens of displays, workshops and classrooms that promote the use of computers and highly individualized skill-based materials (worksheets and workbooks). These tools minimize and often eliminate teacher-student and student-student interaction in their attempt to help students "crack the code" and "pass the test." These programs often appeal to correctional educators who deal with large numbers of students on a wide range of reading and writing levels. However, such skill-based, decontextualized instructional methods often perpetuate the public school model that didn't work for many who are incarcerated.

For some in the field of corrections, giving voice and authority to inmate students is a challenging and distasteful idea that could undermine what they see as the primary purpose of institutionalization—to house the criminal as punishment. Correctional educators (as employees of "the system") and volunteers wrestle with the limitations of their roles in the prison. They can be seen as the enemy by the inmate who hesitates to trust, or as "soft" or naive by a corrections officer whose primary concern is security. It is a tremendous risk to create a student-centered classroom in a prison culture that is centered on punishment and limited choice, power and control.

On the other hand, classrooms where inmate students can write for real purposes can create a sense of community. For those who are victims of abuse, participation helps them to discover their voice or rediscover their silenced voice.
Such an experience provides for some students collaborative partnerships (student-teacher and student-student) for the first time. As the teacher's and students' roles become blurred, the experience validates their ability to learn. As students use their voices to meet their own needs and the needs of others, they can see themselves and each other as worthwhile and caring members of a learning community.

The women in our class shared their lives with each other through their writing—journals, poetry, personal narratives, unsent letters, short stories, plays, children's books and more—and our community grew not only in size, but in complexity. Poems, letters and stories became the currency of caring as this group of incarcerated women wrote, shared, listened, taught and learned. Some came to understand themselves better not only as writers, but also as learners and as women. Some pursued their education with greater motivation, while others dropped out of school again as a way to demonstrate "taking back control" of their lives. (Several of these women continued to share their writing with me after they had stopped attending class.)

The women's writing also made an impact outside of the classroom. It left the room stuffed in pockets and was stashed in footlockers, slipped under locked doors, read to therapists, shared in substance recovery groups, mailed to children and lawyers, published on editorial pages of newspapers and in our own literary magazine. As I worked with my students, I found mismatches between how a woman "tested" and what she was actually able to do with her writing. Even those considered illiterate by standardized measures demonstrated how effectively they could use their writing to care for themselves, each other, and those beyond the prison walls. I asked myself how their writing could be discredited so easily by a prison education system bound to standardized measures of literacy? I wanted to explore my students' writing more thoroughly. Why was it so important to them?
This study increases our knowledge of incarcerated women as caring members of a classroom community that contributes to their fuller participation in education, rehabilitation and our democratic society. My study brings attention to an often forgotten portion of our nation's population and adds to our knowledge of women as writers, and adult literacy in general. It also calls into question the ways in which our nation values literacy and challenges the status quo of prison literacy education.

In Chapter One, I explore the definitions of adult literacy and research pertinent to its definitions, and describe the incidence and cost of illiteracy in the U.S. In Chapter Two, I present an overview of current literacy education practices and a survey of research about literacy education in correctional settings. I also analyze the impact of feminist inquiry on literacy education and its implications for prison literacy educators. In Chapter Three, I describe the setting of the study, and the methodological frame that guided my work. In Chapters Four and Five, I present two case studies: Julie and Rachel. In Chapter Six, I analyze the conflicting prison paradigms of punishment and rehabilitation, and underscore the need for a paradigm of caring in the prison classroom. I also explore the implications and limitations of the study and how this research can shed light on the teaching practices of adult literacy educators.
CHAPTER ONE

ADULT LITERACY: PERSPECTIVES AND PERPLEXITIES

Literacy: How Do We Define it?

What does it mean to be literate? The challenge to define literacy continues in academic institutions, in the workplace, in the military, and in government institutions. Literacy, illiteracy, functional literacy, minimal literacy, marginal literacy, prose literacy, document literacy, quantitative literacy, workplace literacy, computer literacy, and cultural literacy are among the ever-growing collection of terms used to qualify literacy by those interested in the issue of whether adults in our nation can read, write, or manipulate numerical operations effectively. These terms often do little more than offer ways to categorize people. The numerous definitions and standards of literacy, what Richard Venezky (1990) refers to as "literacy speak," do little to promote the development of literacy or inform the teaching practices of educators. What many of these terms do reflect, however, is that literacy takes many forms and serves many functions. There is an underlying need to link literacy skills to the social, political, economic and cultural contexts in which they are needed and used. In this chapter, I will not only discuss many definitions of literacy but also review pertinent research that has enlightened my thinking about the literacies of my prison students.

For a young mother, being literate can mean correctly reading the directions on a bottle of her baby's prescription medicine or using the grocery store advertisements to meet the weekly food budget. For a mother or father of school-aged children, being literate might mean the ability to read a bedtime story or help
with math or social studies homework. At school, where common notions of literacy revolve around formal learning and evaluation, being literate means passing a test by reading a passage and correctly answering questions about it. School is also where literacy is defined by passing standardized tests that compare a student's achievements with others' across town or across the country.

In the increasingly technological workplace, literacy means an adeptness at learning new skills on the job, reading manuals and interpreting documents, presenting knowledge to others in written or numerical format, using computers, and finding and solving problems. In the military, a recruit is literate if he or she is able to learn to maintain, operate, or contribute to the support of weapon systems or other highly technical systems by reading and interpreting text. To the government, a literate person is one who tells the Bureau of the Census he or she can read or has attended a given number of years in school. Also counted as literate are those citizens who successfully participate in numerous literacy studies commissioned by the government. Fortunately, these studies have begun to broaden the definition of literacy to one that considers its varied uses and contexts.

One such study, funded by the U.S. Department of Education, was a 1985 household survey of the literacy skills of American 21- to 25-year-olds (Kirsch & Jungeblut, 1986). A national panel of experts convened to construct a definition of literacy for the survey. They set aside the arbitrary standards of literacy (signing one's name, scoring adequately on a standardized test) and took into account several kinds of literacy tasks necessary in a variety of contexts—work, home and school. They defined literacy as, "using printed and written information to function in society, to achieve one's goals, and to develop one's knowledge and potential" (1986, p. 1-8). This definition was also used in the U.S. Department of Labor's 1989-1990 study of the literacy proficiencies of job seekers (Kirsch, Jungeblut & Campbell, 1992).
Most recently, the National Adult Literacy Survey (Kirsch, Jungeblut, Jenkins & Kolstad, 1993) adopted that same definition of literacy used in the two previous surveys and included three distinct categories—prose literacy, document literacy, and quantitative literacy—in which to organize the evaluative tasks required of the participants and to present the results. In its attempt to consider the practical uses of reading, writing and numeracy in its definition, the NALS Literacy Definition Committee "agreed that expressing the literacy proficiencies of adults in school-based terms or grade-level scores is inappropriate" (p. 3). There is a distinction between functional literacy that is practical, useful, and socially relevant for adults in a variety of settings and academic literacy that is based on school-related reading. "The types of literacy taught in most elementary schools seldom include the practical uses of reading and writing in everyday life" (Venezky, 1990).

The need to recognize and close the gap between the traditional forms of school-based literacy and personal literacies has been addressed by researchers and theorists in the field of education. Shirley Brice Heath's seminal study, Ways with Words (1983), noted disparities between home and school literacies and influenced my early thinking about the discrepancies between the women's uses for self-sponsored (home) writing versus their academic (school) writing. Heath's nine-year study of three communities gave extensive information about how the attitudes and discourse patterns of children differed greatly from the school personnel's expectations and perceptions, greatly affecting the children's success in school. Although studying adults, I find Heath's explication of the disparity between "home" and school literacies to be critical to my understanding of the mismatch between the inmates' literacies in the general prison education program and their self-sponsored literacies and discourse patterns.

Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater (1991) also investigated the public and private uses of language. In her study of university students she discovered that the curriculum
creates boundaries not only between students' public and private literacies but also between academic disciplines. In light of the "patriarchal practices and conventions" and discourse model of the university, Chiseri-Strater points to the need for change away from "the separation of students' private and public selves" and toward a curriculum that invites all students to participate more fully in their education by privileging alternative discourse forms (including autobiography, journal and diaries, narrative and reflective writing) and multiple literacies (dance, art, music, video, handwork) and evaluative tools (portfolios, multidisciplinary projects) (1991, p. 165). Her two case studies were significantly more "educationally privileged" than the majority of inmates I studied. However the institutional similarities and patriarchal influences of separation and compartmentalization in the university setting are comparable to those of the prison and prison education settings as evidenced in the apparent disconnections between the private and public, the personal and the academic lives of my students.

In Growing Up Literate: Learning from Inner City Families, Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines (1988) found that schools fail to learn about the lives of the students they teach, lives that Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines found to be rich with print literacies contextualized in the children's "personal, familial, and social histories" (p. 81). In a similar way, the lives of my inmate students were rich with socially-relevant multiple literacies, including drawing, painting, and quilting, that helped them to express their need to care. These literacies are not typically privileged in the standard prison education program.

Multiple literacies are also evidenced in student literacy portfolios developed by participants in the Manchester portfolio project, directed by Jane Hansen and William Wansart of the University of New Hampshire (Hansen, 1992). Such portfolios expand the notion of literacy beyond school-based work and help students develop the skills of self-evaluation and reflection. Rexford Brown (1991) also calls
for educators to recognize the "new literacies" that "go far beyond basic decoding and encoding, even beyond basic factual knowledge, to encompass how different people know what they know, communicate, think, and attack problems" (p. 142).

Harste, Woodward, and Burke (1984) and Wells (1986) also studied children's literacies, but their claims are relevant here. Harste et al. call for language teachers and researchers to consider the significance of how "written language is learned from the inside out in a socially supportive and conducive environment" (p. 230). Concluding his fifteen-year longitudinal study of children's language acquisition and use, Wells (1986) claims that "children are active meaning makers and that the best way in which adults can help them to learn is by giving them evidence, guidance, and encouragement" (p. 215). Similarly, the women in my prison writing class actively made meaning of their lives and their world as they guided, supported and encouraged each other's writing.

Mike Rose (1989) laments the "self-enclosed" and "shortsighted" curricular view of literacy that keeps American schoolchildren and later, adults, from "exploring the real stuff of literacy: conveying something meaningful, communicating information, creating narratives, shaping what we see and feel and believe into written language, listening to and reading stories, playing with the sounds of words" (p. 109). He reminds us that reading and writing are "fundamentally social." In his study of the lives of adults in remedial education, and speaking also from his own experience as a remedial student, Rose concludes that many adults are kept from (or have been kept from in their previous schooling) the "discourse of power" and that such exclusion keeps the undereducated at a continued disadvantage. He challenges American education "to create both the social and cognitive means to enable a diverse citizenry to develop their ability" (p. 115) by widening the "psychological and social dimensions of instruction" (p. 235). Often women in my prison writing class, by first writing and reading for their own social
purposes, uncovered their academic abilities and potential. Nonetheless, the authentic forms and functions of our personal, communal and community-based literacies often are not recognized by a system organized around school-based measures of evaluation.

Other significant studies of adult literacies by Neilsen (1989) and Fishman (1988) also shed light on my work. In Literacy and Living: The Literate Lives of Three Adults, Neilsen points to the significance of “becoming literate in context” as she examines literate behavior as a way for adults to “become themselves, to read and write their lives by acting upon their world and, in so doing, become more at home in it” (1989, p. 133). Similarly, in Amish Literacy, Fishman (1988) refers to the “cultural imperative” of literacy as she explores its functions of identification, affiliation, separation, and cooperation as a means of creating, maintaining and preserving the Amish culture. In my study, inmates often used their literacies to “create, maintain, and preserve” the relationships and culture of their families, while apart from them.

The social uses and contexts of literacy are generally put aside, however, when institutional authorities and policymakers continue to define literacy primarily in quantitative, school-based contexts. At the women’s prison where I conducted this study, all institutionally-recognized measures of literacy are based on formal criteria. An inmate who is literate can perform at the eighth grade level or higher on the TABE (Test of Adult Basic Education), has earned a high school diploma or has passed the GED (General Educational Development) Test. Yet such measures may not be accurate indicators of functional literacy. For example, an inmate who can’t pass the test or earn a diploma or GED certificate and is therefore considered illiterate, might still write letters to her children who are in foster care, to a judge for a sentence reduction, or to an admissions counselor at a drug treatment center. Even an inmate who reads four or five young adult novels in a
month, or writes pages of poetry about her childhood abuse is considered illiterate by the standardized tests that measure academic achievement. In the prison setting (as with other settings), the personal and authentic uses of literacy have not been considered benchmarks in the determination of adult literacy levels.

As background for this study, it is important to consider those individuals who are considered illiterate by the standardized measures that are most often recognized by institutions and policymakers. In the next section, I will explore adult illiteracy in the United States. How extensive is the problem? What are the costs of illiteracy? How have we, as a nation, responded to the problem?

**Illiteracy in America**

Until there is general agreement on how literacy should be defined and assessed, neither Congress, the Department of Education, nor any other agency or person will be able to decide whether there are 60 million, 27 million, 17 million, or 2 million functionally illiterate Americans (Venezky, Wagner, & Ciliberti, 1990, p. xi.)

**How Many?**

Our nation loves to count things. We want to know how many guns are purchased daily, how much money we are saving on long-distance telephone calls monthly, how many grams of fat we are consuming at each meal. We love numbers, but we don't necessarily understand their misuse and possible misapplications. The statistics about our nation's adult illiteracy, often referred to as the "numbers game" (Hunter & Harman, 1978; Kozol, 1985, 1986), are numerous, confusing, and can be manipulated to make just about any argument.

The U.S. Census Bureau, from 1840 to 1930, surveyed the nation's literacy level but dropped the literacy question from its survey in 1940, assuming that, by then, most Americans could read and write. Pressure from the military (frustrated by recruits with minimal skills) brought about the reinstatement of the literacy
question on the 1970 census. The census asked adults how many of years of school they had attended. More than 5 percent of all respondents reported less than a fifth grade education. With no further clarification, the government assumed that the majority of these people were literate, and declared that 99 percent of all Americans could read and write. Ten years later, the 1980 census reported another remarkably high percentage (99.5) of literate adults. The Bureau sent out printed forms to ask illiterate Americans to report their reading levels. It is highly unlikely that the form could be read by those it sought to identify. Population surveys, based on a small sample and obtained by home visits or telephone interviews, extended the data-gathering by asking how many years of schooling had been completed. The respondent was only asked if he or she could read if less than five years of schooling was reported. "It is self-evident that this is a process guaranteed to give a worthless data base" (Kozol, 1985, p. 37).

In contrast, throughout the 1980's, a range of illiteracy statistics from a variety of sources appeared in our nation's newspapers and evening news. In 1984, Barbara Bush told us that 60 million Americans "couldn't read or write very well." In 1985, Secretary of Education Terrel Bell, declared that the literacy of more than 70 million adults was "marginal" at best. By 1986, the U.S. Census Bureau had identified a downsized "21 million illiterates, give or take 3 million" (Kozol, 1986, cited in McCuen, 1988).

More recently, the government-sponsored National Adult Literacy Survey (Kirsch et al., 1993) reports that on each of three literacy scales—prose, document and quantitative—between 21 and 23 percent of the adults surveyed (representing 40 to 44 million individuals) have only the lowest level of skills. Tasks at Level 1 included reading to locate a piece of information in a sports article (prose), locating an expiration date on a driver's license (document), and totaling a bank deposit slip (quantitative). Across the three scales, between 25 and 28 percent of the adults
surveyed (representing another 48 to 54 million adults) performed at the second level. Tasks at this level included interpreting an appliance warranty, locating an intersection on a street map, and calculating total costs of purchase from an order form.

Another one-third of those assessed, representing some 60 million adults, performed at Level 3, with tasks involving writing a letter of complaint, reading a bar graph, and using a calculator to figure a discount. Those successful at the highest two levels were only 15 to 17 percent (representing 30 million) at Level 4 and 3 to 4 percent (6 to 8 million) at Level 5 (Kirsch et al., 1993).

The total number of adults represented by those performing at Levels One and Two of the NALS is 90 million. These figures represent our government's best and most recent calculation of the number of adults in our nation with significant gaps in their functional literacy.

More relevant to my research about women in prison, the NALS included a sampling of men and women in our nation's federal and state prisons. Over 1,000 men in prison and 71 women in prison were included in the study (Kirsch et al., 1993, p. 7). Not surprisingly, incarcerated individuals were far more likely than those in the general population to be in the lower levels on all three scales. The proportion of prisoners at Level 1 was 31 to 40 percent (as compared to 21 to 23 percent of the general population); at Level 2 the proportion was 32 to 38 percent (as compared to 25 to 28 percent of the general population (p. 51).

These statistics about illiteracy in both the general and incarcerated populations, are a reflection of at least what is wrong with our educational system. They are incomplete without consideration of the costs of such sad news.
At What Cost?

Illiteracy is linked to many social ills—poverty, unemployment, crime, and our nation's decreasing competitiveness in a global economy. It is costly to the government—in unemployment and welfare payments, in the increase of violent crimes and prison construction. It is costly to our military services—in the lives of our troops and people around the world. Illiteracy costs businesses in lost wages, lower productivity and the retraining of workers, and in lost international commerce. Educational institutions pay the price of illiteracy in testing and retaining students, in providing special education and in retraining teachers to work more effectively with remedial students. The personal cost of illiteracy is often paid in incalculable frustration, humiliation, and low self-esteem, and, sadly, is often passed on to the next generation.

Literacy's strong connection to economic status was underscored by the aforementioned National Adult Literacy Survey. Using federal poverty guidelines, more than 40 percent of those who performed on the lowest level of the National Adult Literacy Survey were in poverty, as compared with only 4 to 6 percent of the adults performing at the highest level (Kirsch et al., 1993, p. 60). It is estimated that $5 billion a year in taxes goes to support people on welfare who are unemployable because of illiteracy, and that illiteracy costs businesses and taxpayers a total of $20 billion per year.

The military pays a price when it considers the literate competencies of its forces. Our nation's ability to defend itself and intervene effectively on behalf of other nations, is directly linked to the effectiveness of its military training. Yet literacy levels are so variable, that the military resorts to the use of visually-oriented comic books as one of its most common methods of instruction (Kozol, 1985). The very security of our nation's weapon arsenals, the safety of our troops
and of people throughout the world is linked to the functional literacy of our military forces.

In the American workplace, illiteracy is costly due to errors, lost productivity, and the difficulty of retraining workers with new technologies. Once again, the costs incurred can be not only financial but also fatal. Misreading or misreporting lab results can cost lives. However, illiteracy is significant not only in the highly technological workplace, but also in agriculture and service industries. A herd of prime beef cattle was destroyed when a feedlot worker who couldn't read well mistook poison for a nutrition supplement. An illiterate employee, working for an insurance firm, sent out a settlement check for $2200.00 instead of the authorized $22.00 payment (Kozol, 1985). The costs are passed on to the consumer in higher prices for products and services.

Recently, however, Hull (1993) challenged the reductive rhetoric of "workplace literacy," and argued for closer examination of the relationship between literacy and actual job performance. She called close observation of workers, the collection of personal stories from workers participating in work-based literacy programs, and a rethinking of work-based literacy programs that often focus on decontextualized learning. She warned that a singular and exaggerated focus on worker illiteracy takes our attention away from other factors that affect our nation's international competitiveness, including "the dynamism of the economy, industrial efficiency, state interference, and socio-political stability" (p. 30).

In the academic arena, illiteracy costs taxpayers and students when achievement lags and teachers require students to repeat a year of school. Annually, our nation spends large sums of money testing and retesting students with standardized measures that compare schools' effectiveness in teaching reading, writing and math. Academic support services and specialized instruction are costly and not always affordable by the districts who may have the greatest number of
students in need. In an attempt to keep abreast of technological advances, school districts that can afford it, also spend money on computers and technical assistance for teachers and students.

The political participation of illiterate adults in the United States is also compromised. Many choose not to vote because they cannot read and understand voter information or read the names on the ballot. In 1985, it was estimated that, "the number of illiterate adults exceeds by 16 million the entire vote cast for the winner in the 1980 presidential contest" (Kozol, 1985, p. 23). Illiteracy undermines the full participation of our citizenry in its democratic decision-making and costs some citizens their right to have a voice.

The personal cost of illiteracy is more difficult to quantify but no less important. Aside from lost wages and limited opportunity, adults who cannot read, write or calculate often face humiliation, frustration, and lack of self-esteem. They cannot take care of their children as safely or effectively as parents who can read and write. They cannot maintain family relationships over distances that require reading and writing. Some have learned strategies for faking it—ordering from the menu last when dining with friends, wrapping a hand in a bandage in order to avoid filling out a job application, "reading" bedtime stories to their children with the aid of tape-recorded books, making expensive phone calls instead of writing letters.

While these strategies may allow adult illiterates to cope, they perpetuate the family cycle of illiteracy; the costs are passed on to the next generation when children of dropouts are six times more likely than average to drop out of school themselves (“Creating an Upward Spiral,” 1992, p. 3).

**Illiteracy in Prison**

Among the voiceless in our democratic nation are those who live in our prisons and jails. Few would argue the correlation between undereducation and
incarceration. A male with seven or fewer years of schooling is more than thirty times as likely to be in prison than a high school graduate. Approximately 45 percent of federal inmates and 65 percent of state prison inmates lack a high school diploma (U.S. Department of Justice, 1992, 1993). Existing research suggests that the recidivism rate of inmates involved in postsecondary education programs is substantially lower than those who were not (McCollum, 1993).

Our nation's total prison population continues to grow at an alarming rate, more than doubling in the last decade and reaching a new high of 883,593 at the end of 1992 (U.S. Dept. of Justice, 1992; "Prison Population," 5/1/93). Both the number of female inmates and the proportion of the prison population they represent is on the rise. From 1980 to 1989, the female population in state prison facilities increased by 202 percent, as compared to an increase of 112 percent in the male population in state prisons. In 1981, female inmates represented 4.2 percent of all state and federal inmates; by 1989, the percentage of female inmates had risen to 5.7 percent (U.S. Dept. of Justice, 1992). The costs of building, staffing and maintaining new prisons are staggering. Over 300 new state prison facilities were opened nationwide between 1986 and 1991 (U.S. Department of Justice, 1993). As we pay the price of filling more prisons with undereducated men and women, it is imperative that we also pay attention to how they learn so that we can increase their chances at staying out of prison later. Successful educational intervention in the form of effective prison education can help not only to undo the damage of earlier non-productive education but also to stem the tide against our nation's growing prison population.

The incidence of illiteracy in our nation, and its high concentration in our prisons, should be of great concern. Its costs, both monetarily and in human terms, are substantial and deserve our attention. Our government's response to illiteracy, especially for incarcerated populations, continues to be ambiguous, as demonstrated
in its bureaucratic language and lack of adequate funding. (For a fuller description of my research on our government's response to illiteracy, please see Appendix A.)

The Commitment to Literacy Education for Inmates

There is an uneven development of federal, state and local prison education programs throughout our nation, and it reflects the lack of sustained federal and public attention to the educational needs of inmates. It also reflects the prison system's lack of commitment to the professional development of correctional educators and its reliance on volunteerism.

In 1986, a directory of 400 literacy programs (in federal and state prisons) reported that the quality of literacy programs varied greatly. While some institutions offered Adult Basic Education (ABE), "considerable integration of the literacy program with vocational and/or life-skills training, and some form of assessment" (Newman et al., 1993, p. 54), over half of the programs had nothing for special-education students or non- or limited-English speakers and staff development, especially in literacy training, was not offered in at least 40 percent of the federal institutions (Bellorado et al., 1986, II, p. vi). Currently, some states offer not only basic education but also college degree programs for their prison inmates. Some facilities are adequately funded and offer "state-of-the-art" education—well-trained teachers and tutors with small student-teacher ratios, GED preparation courses, on-site and off-site vocational and life-skills training, and computer-interactive courses with local colleges and universities. Other facilities offer minimal programs that are informal, unfocused and poorly funded. In county and local jails, where sentences are shorter, and space and funding are at a premium, education programs are minimal if not nonexistent. As recently as 1982, 73 percent of American jails offered neither education nor vocational training (Coffey, 1982).
For the few institutions that did offer education programs in the early 1980s, there was some attempt to professionalize prison teachers, who had previously most often been chaplains and volunteers (Pecht, 1983). In some locations, only unpaid volunteers continue to provide educational programs, while in others, there are no programs, volunteer or otherwise. In the prison where I conducted this study, none of the three teachers employed by the DOC were members of the Correctional Education Association. Their participation in educational conferences was not funded by the DOC.

By 1992, the educational programs offered in some local jails had improved somewhat due to the increased awareness and interest in adult literacy as a result of the work of many "including the Correctional Education Association, and the efforts of hundreds and thousands of local heroes and saints—unpaid volunteers . . . business people, lawyers, school teachers, and church folk" (Bosma, 1987). While these efforts resulted in the development of prison literacy programs that vary widely in their design, effectiveness and level of inmate participation, the situation has not changed for inmates in many other local jails where education programs are still not offered (Newman et al., 1993, p. 56).

In some parts of the United States, the privatization of prison education is a growing trend. (This is similar to the recent trend to privatize, or "contract out" medical services for inmates.) Some states, including Texas, Virginia, and New Jersey, have placed responsibility for the education of its inmates with independent state agencies, adult education departments or school districts (Pollack, 1979). However, the privatization of prison education programs can also be problematic. "Any advantage to be gained from separating the responsibilities of educators and correctional staff has to weighed against the possible disadvantages—such as the possibility of correctional staff sabotaging educational programs or the isolation of educational programs and staff from communication with the larger correctional
organization" (MacNeil, 1980, p. 212). The status of prison education programs, already marginalized in many institutions, can undergo further erosion when the use of privatized services creates an "us-them" mentality among education providers and employees of the Department of Corrections.

The state where I conducted this research has not privatized its prison education system and its teachers remain under the jurisdiction of the Department of Corrections. During my three years at the prison, I was often struck by the conflicting and confusing role of the prison educator. It was not uncommon, if too many correctional officers phoned in sick, for a DOC teacher to be told by the administration to patrol the halls with a walkie-talkie, to supervise rather than teach inmates. Always, the security of the prison and control of the inmates were the primary objectives, even if it placed the teacher in an awkward position and put classes on hold.

The value of (non-inmate) prison volunteers has been widely documented (Bayse, 1993; Newman et al., 1993; "Literacy: A Concept," 1989; Church, 1993; Bosma, 1987). In addition to being positive role models for prisoners, volunteers can provide vital services as teachers, tutors, chaplains, counselors, leaders of Twelve-Step groups (e.g., Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous), and recreation leaders (Bayse, 1993, p. 40). Because they aren't paid to be there, volunteers are often seen by inmates as more caring and concerned than those employed by the prison. More than fifty prison volunteers at the site of this study provide a variety of programs including painting classes, arts and crafts, Bible study, worship services, holiday parties, women's chorus, academic instruction, softball league, aerobic classes, parenting classes, "Healing the Child Within" groups and Twelve-Step groups. It is not unusual for prison volunteers to get involved in several projects at the prison simultaneously. During my three years at the prison, I have not only led the writing class, but also helped with arts and crafts, provided musical
entertainment for family holiday parties, and assisted inmates in the organization of outreach projects.

The extensive use of volunteers, while affirming in its openness to the community, reminds us that adult education and other rehabilitative programs in prisons are still not funding priorities. Many prisons and jails across our nation rely on the cost-effectiveness of volunteers to make up for the funding deficits of programming.

Moreover, inmates' rights are at the heart of the debate about education. Basic to the debate is the question what are inmates entitled to? Judges hand down ambiguous decisions in their uncertainty about the entitlements of inmates. Some serve in jurisdictions where rehabilitation (including education programs) is considered frivolous as opposed to the housing and punishment of prisoners; others are convinced by statistics that indicate education is our best chance at reducing recidivism (the return to prison for new crimes). In some states, including Massachusetts, "alternative sentencing" programs offer perhaps the greatest hope. Monitored by the courts, adjudicated persons, often first-time offenders, participate in educational programs that are held outside of traditional prisons (Newman et al., 1993). These programs are considered not only cost efficient but also educationally sound in their attempt to link offenders with a system that offers them a more promising future.

Now let us consider how literacy educators are addressing the needs of adult learners pedagogically, and in particular, how they are meeting the needs of those in prison. In the next chapter, I will examine what is current in the field of language arts education, adult literacy education and correctional education, with particular attention to the teaching of writing. What we know about how women write and
learn will also be considered as I review the feminist scholarship of Nel Noddings, Carol Gilligan, Mary Catherine Bateson, Carolyn Heilbrun and Mary Belenky and her colleagues.
CHAPTER TWO

LITERACY EDUCATION AND FEMINIST THEORY

Trends in Literacy Education: My Journey as a Teacher

In light of the changing definitions of literacy, many educators of children and adults in recent years have reconsidered the ways they teach reading and writing. As a special education major in the early 70s, I learned how to follow a rigid, prescribed curriculum that expected all students to learn in the same way. Through task analysis, I divided each skill to be mastered by my students into its smallest fragments. However, during my student teaching experience, the curriculum didn’t meet my students' needs. I considered my students' strengths and my own intuitions as I learned about more authentic and student-centered methods of teaching and evaluation.

Upon graduation, however, my first principal required the use of basal readers and curriculum guides. I wanted to tell him about what I’d learned from my student-teaching experience, but didn’t want to appear resistant or uncooperative. During that first year, however, I kept my eye on the teachers around me. Most clung to their teacher's manuals, but a few were different. Mark, a fourth-grade teacher, helped his students write stories about their field trip to the apple orchard and displayed their papers in the hallway. A few others let their students read library books during bus dismissal time. It didn’t interfere with the morning reading groups, and the boys and girls tested well at the end of the year. I dutifully recited my lines from the teacher’s editions, but cut many lessons short so we could read books together on the carpet at the back of the room.
Ten years and two schools later, I relocated in a different state. I attended a number of teacher workshops and courses about language arts, many of which advocated a process approach to reading and writing (Atwell, 1987; Calkins, 1983; Graves, 1983, 1990, 1991; Hansen, 1987). My new principal required me to use phonics workbooks and basal readers, but I realized that as long as my students learned the skills covered in the textbooks and workbooks, I could take authority in my classroom and eliminate repetitious work. I encouraged my students to read and write for their own real purposes. We used trade books and student writing to explore how writers really write in a variety of genres. I let Jennie write about her fight with her brother. Ricky, confined to a wheelchair, wrote about his first swimming lesson at the YMCA and then excitedly read it to the class. We wrote daily in our own journals and published a student newsletter. There was a great deal of traffic between classrooms as students eagerly shared their reading, writing and drawing with their friends. I also wanted my students’ parents to understand my teaching philosophy: parents were welcomed in our classroom to tape-record student readers and to take dictation from budding writers. I also sent an individualized parent-teacher dialogue journal home with each student daily. In the journals, I shared, in letter format, our successes in school and enjoyed hearing back from the parents about how my students were using their literacies outside of school.

At the end of the year, the boys and girls in my class did well on the standardized testing. I was proud of that and, at the same time, embarrassed by my pride. Was it a conflict of interest for a teacher who advocated a process approach to be pleased by her students’ high scores on standardized testing? I felt like I had a foot in each camp. Certainly the scores were one kind of confirmation of my pedagogies, but weren’t there more appropriate ways to evaluate my students’
growth, ways that were more closely connected to the purposeful and self-directed ways they were using their reading and writing? I felt hypocritical and confused.

**Language Arts Instruction: The Various Perspectives**

**Literacy Education in Public Schools**

The conflicts I felt during my first thirteen years of teaching reflect several aspects of our nation’s ongoing discussion about the best ways to teach reading and writing. Some educators subscribe to a language arts program that relies on a "bottom-up," skills-based philosophy, similar to the lessons I designed in the methods courses over two decades ago. Largely in response to a “back-to-basics” call from parents, taxpayers, school boards, educators, administrators, and researchers, such programs focus on building reading and writing (and math) skills, often in isolation from real texts and authentic uses. Students first learn letters and their corresponding sounds, combining them to build words, and later, sentences. Practice, usually through decontextualized drill sheets, spelling lists and workbooks, is considered a necessary ingredient for proficient reading. Writing is seen as separate from reading. Basal reading series and teacher-directed instruction are the steady diet. Students are grouped according to their ability as measured by standardized tests.

Proponents on the other side of the debate, often called whole language teachers (Goodman, 1986; Newman, 1985) or process approach teachers (Atwell, 1987; Calkins, 1983; Graves, 1983; Hansen, 1987; Murray, 1985, 1982; Rief, 1992) take a top-down stance. These educators believe strongly in the relationship between reading and writing and that students derive meaning not from isolated parts but from real texts, read and written for real purposes. Students learn to read and write by reading, writing, and sharing texts in a variety of genres with a variety
of authentic purposes. Plenty of classroom time is provided for reading-writing
workshops, when students can work individually or in small groups and can
participate in conferences with the teacher or each other. Phonics, spelling usage
and grammar are taught and learned in the context of trade books, "real" literature
and student writing based often on topics of their own choice. Student readers and
writers also participate in ongoing recordkeeping, self-evaluation and goal-setting.

Frank Smith (1986), a powerful progenitor of these latter approaches, argues
against the regimentation of "programmatic" instruction and the tyranny of
standardized testing, both of which he claims keep learners out of the "literacy club"
of readers, writers, and users of language. He supports those who oppose the teach-
and-test philosophy of education, reminding us that children have acquired (and will
continue to acquire) language through incidental learning (purposeful learning for
their own reasons) long before they attend school. "Most children have learned a
good deal about reading and writing before they come to school, as a consequence of
being inducted into the literacy club, not because of exercises and drills and tests" (p.
128). Smith contends that children and adult learners learn best when there is
collaboration among students and among teachers, and between students and
teachers.

Meaningful collaboration between students and teachers also extends into
the assessment process in student-centered classrooms. "Authentic assessment," as
Tierney, Carter and Desai have termed it (1991), uses a wide variety of student-
generated materials to gain a more complete profile of the student than a
standardized test would provide. These evaluative tools include student self-
assessments, teacher and student anecdotal records and observations, portfolios,
checklists, teacher narratives, interest inventories, learning logs, personal journals,
tape recordings, videotapes and more (Anthony, Johnson, Mickelson & Preece, 1991;
Graves & Sunstein, 1992; Tierney et al., 1991; Wilcox, 1993). These contextualized
assessments directly involve the student as decision-making partners in their own learning process. In addition, these kinds of assessments are more closely related to the students' authentic uses of literacy than are the standardized, decontextualized evaluations of most school settings.

**Adult Literacy Education**

Educators of adults also advocate a student-centered approach that focuses not only on real uses for reading and writing, but also on immersion in meaning-making tasks rather than fragmented skills development (Keefe & Meyer, 1991). As established in Chapter One, adult literacy is now understood to encompass more than basic reading and writing; it extends beyond comprehension and transcription. Definitions of functional adult literacy now include the social, familial, work-related, and personal uses of written language. Reading and writing instruction is most effective when it relates directly to the individual goals of adult learners and helps them to function more effectively in the workplace or everyday life. Literacy programs for adults are now offered in many places, including homes, schools, libraries, churches, prisons, community centers, and workplaces. The variety of program locations reflects the life contexts of adult learners. The contextualization of adult education is promising, but the appropriate assessment of such education lags behind.

The achievement of adult learners continues to be primarily and inadequately measured by a number of standardized tests including the TABE (Test of Adult Basic Education), and the GED (General Education Development) test. Both of these tests report results in grade level equivalents, comparing an adult's academic performance to that of a child (Metz, 1989), rather than effectively measuring an adult learner's progress in relation to his or her personal or vocational goals. Such comparisons to the academic performance of children can be not only
demeaning and condescending to adult learners, but also reminiscent of their former school failure.

The development of more appropriate assessment measures for adult learners is necessary. Informal assessments, including interviews, learning logs, reading-writing folders, and literacy portfolios offer more fully-developed learning profiles of adult students. Similar to those now being developed and used with younger school-aged learners, these alternative assessment measures are useful with adults because of their individualized, student-centered and contextualized nature. The importance of involving adults in directing their own learning and planning their own education has been well documented (Rodriguez, 1991; Soifer et.al., 1990; Rose, 1989; Fingeret, 1984). In the same way that student-centered teachers of school-aged children include their students in goal-setting and ongoing assessment, adult educators find their students more highly motivated when they are given an active role in developing their own education programs. Adult learners who participated in the 1993 National Conference of the Literacy Volunteers of America repeatedly spoke about the significance of the collaborative role they play in their own learning. Such collaboration allows them to maintain not only ownership of their learning process, but also their personal dignity.

Along with collaboration, intergenerational learning is a second important current theme of adult literacy education. Research concludes that the educational levels of parents, especially mothers, are related to children's school achievement (Kirsch and Jungeblut, 1986; Nickse, 1989; Sticht, 1988). Children who go home to families where literacy is neither practiced nor valued are at risk for illiteracy and school failure themselves. Intergenerational and family literacy programs, such as the federally-funded Even Start and those sponsored by the National Center for Family Literacy, offer a comprehensive and integrated approach to literacy education because they focus on parents and children simultaneously. The
components of these programs include early childhood education for the child, adult literacy education for the parent, as well as parenting and life skills classes, and time for the child and parent to interact. Such programs not only address the needs of undereducated adults, but also work to prevent school failure of children who are educationally "at-risk" because of their parents' illiteracy ("Creating an Upward Spiral," 1992). These programs also validate and nurture the parent's need to care (for his or her own youngsters) and be cared for within a community that promotes literacy.

The Promise and Politics of Prison Literacy Programs

Literacy Education in Correctional Settings

Recent research on literacy and literacy education in prison (Boudin, 1993; Hansell & Voelkel, 1992; Loewenstein, 1983; Moke & Holloway, 1986; Shethar, 1993; Traynelis-Yurek & Giacobbe, 1988) and the effectiveness of correctional education (Laurence, 1990; Linden & Perry, 1982) points to the need for literacy education in prison and to the significance of socially-relevant purposes for reading and writing. Only two studies (Boudin, 1993; Loewenstein, 1983) consider the literate development of women in prison.

Hansell and Voelkel (1992) studied male inmates participating in a literacy program as tutors or students. Upon analysis of inmate responses to a written questionnaire, they concluded that the better readers had a clearer sense of the purposes for reading. Moke and Holloway (1986) found that competency levels in math, reading and language were "woefully inadequate" among inmates who had earned high school diplomas or GED certificates, indicating functional illiteracy or possible learning disabilities. They argue that post-secondary education programs in prisons are "performing vital functions left undone by primary and secondary
schools throughout the nation" (p. 22). In another study, Traynelis-Yurek and Giacobbe (1988) link reincarceration to unremediated learning disabilities.

In "Participatory Literacy Education Behind Bars: AIDS Opens the Door," Boudin, an inmate and literacy educator at Bedford Hills (N. Y.) Correctional Facility for women, recognizes the benefits of a "whole-language" orientation to teaching literacy that is "based on the lives and experiences of the women themselves" (p. 231) and that includes the use of peer instructors. Boudin describes the process of community-building as her students collaborate to write a play about AIDS. Community-building in the prison classroom, as well as collaboration and peer-tutoring are significantly related to my study, even though Boudin reports from her perspective as a peer instructor. Boudin developed a literacy program for her fellow inmates that she describes as "meaning-based, problem-posing, and relevant to learners’ lives" (p. 210). (Boudin also addresses the conflicting paradigms of punishment and rehabilitation which I will consider in my final chapter.)

Loewenstein (1983), Laurence (1990), and Smith (1985) look at the teaching of writing in prison from the (non-inmate) teacher’s perspective. Loewenstein describes her work with women in a Massachusetts prison and focuses on her prescribed “five-step process” to teaching writing that includes having each inmate acknowledge feelings, experience herself as a separate person, choose a genre, perfect her work, and share her work. Laurence’s brief description “On Teaching Convicts” offers snapshots of several male inmates learning to read and write, but does little more than ask educators to help inmates find “meaning and value” in their prison lives. Smith (1985) investigates the “ethics” of teaching writing in prison, and calls upon teachers of inmates to foster the development of their students’ analytical thinking and critical integration of ideas.

Shethar’s case study “Literacy and ‘Empowerment?’” (1993) offers an in-depth look at the relationship between Shethar (a graduate student trained to tutor
prisoners) and her male inmate student during their involvement in a year-long literacy program. Shethar describes her misguided attempts to correct her student’s first writing. In frustration, Santiago (the student) resorts to the use of letter-writing (a form he is more comfortable with than the essay) to communicate with his tutor about his life in prison, and to make sense of his relationships to other inmates. Fortunately, Shethar recognizes the value of Santiago’s self-sponsored letters often written in his first language (Spanish), and encourages her student to teach her. The relationship between Shethar and Santiago in the context of the prison, as well as their mutual negotiation of the learning process and Santiago’s extensive use of letter-writing, is not unlike my work with the women in the prison writing class. Of all the studies I reviewed, Shethar’s, in many ways, felt most familiar and affirming in its treatment of the relationship between student and teacher.

Work by others outside the field of correctional education has also shed light on my research. Feminist researchers, including Nel Noddings, Carol Gilligan, and Mary Belenky and her colleagues have identified the primary need of women to care for others and have much to offer prison educators who work with women.

**How Women Learn, Write and Care**

In the last two decades, feminist researchers (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule, 1986; Gilligan, 1982) have challenged the predominantly male-generated theories in the field of adult psychological, intellectual and moral development (Levinson, 1978; Kohlberg, 1981; Perry, 1970; Piaget, 1952) by their willingness and determination to explore, document and theorize about women’s experiences. Their commitment to the inclusion of women’s voices and perspectives continues to have a tremendous impact not only on developmental theory, but also on the fields of
composition and education, particularly throughout the work of Noddings (1984), Caywood and Overing (1987), Witherell and Noddings (1991), McCracken and Appleby (1992), Flynn (1988), Bateson, (1990), Heilbrun (1988), and Gannett (1992). The collective work of these feminist scholars is useful as I explore the writing of women in prison as an expression of their caring.

**Carol Gilligan: An Ethic of Care**

Over a decade ago, Carol Gilligan and Lawrence Kohlberg co-taught a Harvard undergraduate course on moral and political choice. Gilligan (1982b) was curious about the fact that more women than men were dropping the course. After interviewing several of the female dropouts, she discovered that the "women were experiencing moral conflicts that simply could not be understood within Kohlberg’s framework" (p. 68), a framework based on research on male subjects. Gilligan’s dissatisfaction with Kohlberg’s theory of moral development led her into a research project in the late 1970s with Michael Murphy, a project in which she would study men and women and begin to "describe the apparent differences in moral development between the two sexes" (p. 68). Gilligan’s “ethic of care” was quite different from Kohlberg’s “morality of justice.”

Kohlberg had identified six stages of moral reasoning that he divided into preconventional, conventional and postconventional levels of moral judgment (Oja, 1991). Kohlberg’s stages are structural in nature, qualitatively different from one another, hierarchically integrated and emerge in an unvaried sequence or progression of moral reasoning. Each level consists of two distinct stages.

Kohlberg’s first two levels of moral development can be related to both the punishment and rehabilitative paradigms of prison. At the first stage of the preconventional level, the individual is egocentric, and is obedient to a higher authority in order to avoid punishment. By the end of this level, the individual
begins to value others but only in terms of serving his own needs in a concrete way. A prison system that operates from the punishment paradigm may encourage the inmate to stagnate at this preconventional level. An inmate who is "doing good time" follows all the prison rules, unquestioningly obeys the orders of correctional officers, and avoids further punishment at all costs. Prison systems, organized primarily by and for men, are designed to keep the inmate oppressed and under control, similar to what Kohlberg calls the preconventional level of development.

In Kohlberg's second, or conventional, level, the person is involved more in reciprocal relationships, wanting to conform to group norms. In the second stage of this level, the individual has a greater sense of social systems, wanting to preserve order in society, do one's duty, maintain rules and show respect for earned authorities (Levine, 1989).

In the first stage of the postconventional level of the Kohlberg moral framework, the individual finds it difficult to integrate moral and legal points of view, usually settling for a decision based on the greatest good for the greatest number. In the last stage, what Kohlberg claims to be the most advanced form of moral judgment, the individual's conscience and principled morality based on the abstract ideals of justice are what guides decision making (Oja, 1991; Levine, 1989).

The conventional and post-conventional levels of development would likely be the goals of inmate behavior that would be encouraged in a prison setting with a rehabilitative focus. Inmates, in preparation for a successful reintegration into the world outside of prison, would be given the opportunity to participate in miniature communities of democratic self-government (MacCormick, 1931), or to plan and work collaboratively with other students and teachers in an educational program. In such miniature communities and collaborations, inmates at the conventional and post-conventional levels of development would gain experience with the strategies of
questioning and challenging, as well as principled decision-making based on the
good of the community.

Gilligan’s research with Murphy (Murphy & Gilligan, 1980) of both men and
women generated a different model for moral development, one based on a morality
of care and response in relationships, as opposed to Kohlberg’s model based on a
morality of rights and justice. Later, in three studies (1982), Gilligan developed her
theory further, comparing the identity and moral development of men and women.
She identified among the subjects differing qualities of self-identification, moral
problem-solving, and even different uses of language when describing moral
dilemmas, real or hypothetical. Women tend to describe themselves in terms of
their relationships to others, while men tend to describe themselves in terms of their
accomplishments. Gilligan found women to be consistently more concerned than
men about not wanting to hurt others when considering moral issues. Her theory,
like Kohlberg’s, encompassed developmental stages of moral development.
However, Gilligan consistently found women operating from a stance of care and
responsibility in relationships rather than from the men’s typical stance of equality,
justice and reciprocity.

Gilligan’s model (1982) consists of three development stages and two
transitional phases. Like Kohlberg’s first stage, Gilligan’s first stage focuses on self-
preservation, caring for the self to ensure survival. The transition into the second
stage occurs when the woman gains an understanding of the connection between
herself and others and criticizes her “self-care” as potentially selfish. Responsibility
and a “maternal morality” emerge in the second stage as the individual tries to
“ensure care for the dependent and unequal” (p. 74). At this point in development,
the woman focuses all of her care on others and begins to deny her own needs. This
creates an uneasiness, a disequilibrium that constitutes the second transition. In
the third and final stage, the focus is on relationships and the tension of the
previous transitional period is somewhat resolved through a greater understanding of and appreciation for the interdependence of self and others.

Gilligan's stage theory provides a useful framework for understanding the writing of the women in my prison writing class. Women usually first wrote in journals and diaries, or in deeply personal, reflective poetry. (The journal-writing was never required of the women.) Many of the women wrote about their personal experiences related to prison—what put them there, past abuses, and how they were coping with their prison time. Often while continuing to write extensively about herself, a woman would write letters to her children and about her children to caregivers, lawyers, school counselors, or welfare caseworkers.

"One of the female offender's most urgent concerns is her children" (Carp and Schade, 1993, p. 37). According to the prison superintendent at the site of this study, female inmates primarily focus on their children, and on their role as mother. This was evident in writing class when women wrote continuously about their children, to their children, and as advocates for their children. Writing is one of the few ways a woman could be present to her children and their caretakers. "The result of this identification of women and child rearing is that, when women are incarcerated, they face a double social condemnation. Not only have they . . . broken the social contract of lawful behavior, but they have also abandoned their children" (Werner, 1990, p. 144). Writing proves a viable way for a mother in prison to re-establish her role of mother and to re-connect with her children.

As women used their writing to empower themselves as caring individuals, many, including some with no family ties at all, expanded their caring to those they did not know. The AIDS baby quilt project as well as knitting items for a local hospital nursery were popular activities. One small group initiated a "Walk-a-thon" in the prison yard to raise money for the local homeless shelter and soup kitchen. Another group hand-stitched a queen-sized quilt to be raffled at the local YWCA to
benefit the state AIDS foundation. One woman single-handedly stitched over 100 school bags to be filled by local children and sent to Third World countries as part of a community church project. Some of the women struggled to find a balance between caring for themselves and their involvement in outreach projects. Gilligan might recognize this “disequilibrium” as a gateway to the inmate’s understanding of the interdependence of self and others.

After more than a decade of research of women and men, it is possible to see the evolution of Gilligan’s research. She says her findings were “heard initially as a dissonance between women’s voices and psychological theories” (1988, p. 8), but in her more recent collaboration with Ward and Taylor (1988) about the development of girls, Gilligan notes not only the differences between the two moral voices, one speaking of “connection, not hurting, care and response” and one speaking of “equality, reciprocity, justice and rights,” but also the frequency with which these voices appear together, within one single person’s responses. She calls for an integration of the two moral perspectives, not only between men and women, but within individuals. Gilligan calls for educators to listen to and hear each other’s and our students’ voices in order to attend to the differences and the connections. She warns against the tendency to focus on “one voice,” while inadvertently silencing or losing sight of another voice. Teachers need to nurture both voices within each student. Teachers also need to be sure to honestly share both of their own voices with their students, striving for and demonstrating an integration of care and justice.

Gilligan’s charge to educators to integrate care and justice can be particularly challenging in a prison setting where issues of justice and rights are often raised. Inmates decry a system that “unjustly” accuses them of infractions, that denies them full access to programming, that strip-searches them after a visit with a family member. A prison teacher, or volunteer, is often required to turn a
deaf ear to such inmate complaints and to avoid sharing both of his or her own voices in order to guarantee prison security (as well as job security). An employee or volunteer who addresses the inmate's need for connection, care and response might be seen by a supervisor or co-worker as soft or naive. Prison educators are again caught in the conflicting paradigms of prison. However difficult it may be, the need persists for an integration of care and justice, of rehabilitation and punishment.

Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule

The research of Kohlberg and Gilligan, as well as that of Perry (1970) had a great effect on the work of psychologists Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule (1986) as they undertook research about women's "ways of knowing." They wanted to know how women know and view reality, and how they conceptualize the self. Specifically, Perry's theory of intellectual development of men "stimulated our [their] interest in modes of knowing" (Belenky et al., 1986, p. 10). Aware of the absence of women in much of the previous adult development research, they made the decision to listen only to women when they undertook their study of 135 women in the late 1970s. Before coming to this new research, Belenky and her colleagues had noticed, through their work with adolescents and adults in clinical and educational settings, that women often doubted their intellectual competence. For many women, the most important and valued lessons grew out of "relationships with friends and teachers, life crises, and community involvements" (p. 4). Their new work drew largely on Perry's research methods of "open and leisurely interviews" and used questions taken from the development models of both of Perry and Gilligan. Just as Gilligan had found with Kohlberg, Belenky et al. found that the women's thinking didn't fit easily into Perry's scheme of intellectual development.

In contrast to Perry's model, Belenky and her colleagues (1986) identified five perspectives from which the women in their study viewed their worlds. Using voice
as a primary metaphor because it surfaced so frequently in women's self reports, the researchers explored how women developed a sense of knowing and a sense of self. The stance of silence was the first of the categories in the Women's Ways of Knowing framework. From this perspective, the woman does not see herself as a learner, and sees all knowledge as coming from an "other." Unlike any of Perry's categories, women at this level "experience themselves as mindless and voiceless and subject to the whims of external authority" (p. 15). The second perspective was that of received knowledge. Like Perry's dualism category, the woman sees herself as capable of receiving knowledge from others—authorities—but not capable of creating new knowledge. Continuing the metaphor of voice, women at this stage "still their own voices to hear the voices of others" (p. 37).

From the third perspective, that of subjective knowledge, the knower can now listen intuitively to her own inner voice and identify herself as an authority. This new emphasis on personal truth is similar to Perry's third position of multiplicity. Truth is now identified as personally contextualized. In Perry's scheme, however, a young man's perception at the stage of multiplicity brings forth separation and differentiation from others. This is quite different from what Belenky and her co-researchers found with the women in their study. Whereas Perry's man might revel in being distinguished from others in his subjective truth, "the young woman usually approaches multiplicity much more cautiously... To take a stand against others means to isolate herself socially. She fears that engaging in combative measure in support of her opinion may antagonize and jeopardize her connections to others" (Belenky et al., 1986, p. 65).

The development of the inner voice, while possibly a "hallmark of women's emergent sense of self and sense of agency and control" (p. 69), can also signify a pulling away from others. While a few women at this stage were oppositional and argumentative, similar to what Perry would call "oppositional multiplists," most
were focused on inward listening and watching. This often brought about the kind of reflective and critical thinking that the *Women's Ways of Knowing* researchers found in the stances of *procedural knowledge* and *constructed knowledge*.

From the fourth position, that of procedural knowledge, two distinctive forms emerge as women use reasoned reflection to question their own and others' authority. The orientation referred to as *separate knowing* (a term Belenky et. al. borrowed from Gilligan) involves critical and rational thinking and a degree of impersonal objectivity. “Feelings and personal beliefs are rigorously excluded” (Belenky et al., 1986, 109). These rigorous thinkers are always looking for errors and contradictions in their own thinking as well as in the thinking of others. From the stance of *connected knowing*, on the other hand, an individual still values knowledge that comes from personal experience and relationships with others. Here, women try to learn new ideas through attempting to understand each other's experientially-based logic. Criticism of each other's thinking comes only after a sense of trust has been developed (p. 118).

Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule claim that the two stances of *separate* and *connected knowing* are not gender-specific but that they may be gender-related. They found that the “voice of separate knowing” was easily identified in the interview with women from “highly selective, rigorous, and traditional colleges like the one from which Perry drew his sample” (p. 102). The voice of connected knowing was more difficult to hear because the researchers weren't used to listening to “relatively unschooled women.” Once they did identify it, however, they found the connected voice in the lives of even the most educated women they interviewed.

The fifth position identified was the stance of *constructed knowing*, integrated the separate and connected voices into one voice. Women in this position were
described as articulate and reflective people who learned to speak in a unique and authentic voice. Belenky et. al. (1986) described the constructivists:

They noticed what was going on with others and cared about the lives of people about them. They were intensely self-conscious, in the best sense of the word—aware of their own thought, their judgments, their moods and desires. Each concerned herself with issues of inclusion and exclusion, separation and connection; each struggled to find a balance of extremes in her life. . . . Each wanted her voice and actions to make a difference to other people in the world. (p. 133)

Unlike the final stage of Perry's developmental scheme, women in the fifth position of the Women's Ways of Knowing study were often constructing knowledge with special attention to integration with others' knowledge that they'd learned. Constructivist women "are seriously preoccupied with the moral or spiritual dimension of their lives. Further, they strive to translate their moral commitments into action, both out of a conviction that 'one must act' and out of a feeling of responsibility to the larger community in which they live." (p. 150) This view of commitment to community and relationships is markedly different from Perry's last set of positions that focused on commitments, usually in terms of their career implications for the individual.

The Women's Ways of Knowing researchers, in discussing the implications of their findings on the work of teachers, took exception with earlier recommendations made by Kohlberg and Mayer (1972), who had promoted education as a means of developing the individual towards "natural directions of development." These "natural" directions include principled moral judgment based on individual rights and a way of learning based on separation (Belenky et al., 1986, p. 228). Reflecting on their own work as well as the work of Gilligan (1982) and Lyons (1983) about women's moral and intellectual development, Belenky and her co-researchers postulate that women may be more "naturally" inclined toward an ethic of
responsibility and response than to an ethic of right, and to connected rather than separate knowing.

There are a number of implications for all teachers and learners based on the findings of this research about women and learning. Students could understand that knowledge is created rather than dispensed (Freire, 1970) if the teacher were to openly and honestly share his or her thought process, including struggles, misgivings and formulations. Belenky et. al. use the metaphor of teacher as midwife in describing the process by which the teacher assists students in “giving birth to their own ideas, in making their own tacit knowledge explicit and elaborating it” (1986, p. 217). The midwife-teacher model is similar to Freire’s model (1970) of the partner-teacher who fosters critical reflection in the classroom through an open, thoughtful dialogue. Teachers who promote a connected approach to teaching and learning, nurture and foster their students’ development of knowledge and thinking without usurping the ownership of that knowledge.

The connected teacher helps students to discover their own (the students’) thinking and invites a variety of opinions. Instead of the student struggling to take on and adopt the teacher’s ideas, as in a separate learning situation, the connected teacher tries to put himself or herself into the shoes of the student and look at the material from the student’s perspective. Educators who advocate student-centered classrooms promote independent thinking and cognitive development by giving students responsibility for their own learning and the learning of other students, and by requiring students to be responsible for their own language. In process approach classrooms, both students and teachers read and write, make individual choices about what they will read and write, write in response to what they read, share their responses with each other, and challenge and encourage each other to grow. Such classrooms promote both the individual and social development of the participants, as students and teachers learn to care for themselves and each other.
With the teacher as a participant who reads, writes and reflects along with the class, students can also sense a greater connection with their teacher.

What are the implications of this work for those who teach women in a prison setting? A program based on Belenky et al.'s connected model would facilitate women's development as they participate in a learning community where they could develop a sense of power, voice and authority. However, in a prison environment, facilitating the inmate's development in this way may be in direct conflict with the punishment paradigm. A prison teacher committed to the connected model might be seen by co-workers and supervisors as too friendly or non-authoritative with inmates if he or she shares the classroom responsibilities with the students, or emphasizes "understanding and acceptance over assessment," as Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule advocate. It would be important for the teacher to communicate openly with supervisors and co-workers about the model and goals of connected education.

Collaboration, another goal of the connected model, can be problematic for inmates who are not allowed contact outside of the classroom. Not only are the inmates isolated from each other much of the time, but also the prison staff is isolated from each other. Time for collaboration, both in the classroom and after class among students and among teachers, is an important consideration.

In an environment that promotes separation by virtue of its disconnections of inmates from the world and from each other, the goals of connected learning and collaboration are difficult, but achievable. In contrast, if the ultimate goal of incarceration is to create responsible people who can work together and contribute effectively to a community, it would be difficult to construct an argument against connected education.
Nel Noddings' Framework of Caring

The work of Carol Gilligan and the *Women's Ways of Knowing* researchers has been furthered by many in the field of education (Caywood and Overing, 1987; Gannett, 1992; McCracken and Appleby, 1992; Noddings, 1984; Oja and Smulyan, 1989; Witherell and Noddings, 1991). Nel Noddings extends the models of responsiveness and connected education more fully into moral education with a framework of *caring* in which all, both men and women, can participate (p. 172). Her theoretical perspective is very relevant to the setting of the prison classroom where I taught and researched for three years, and was helpful as I considered the functions of the women's writing.

Noddings (1984) believes that the ethical ideal of caring is "characteristically and essentially feminine," but, since it is a system that can be shared by men and women alike, she prefers to call it an alternative, rather than a feminine, approach (p. 8). Furthering her model into the education framework, Noddings describes the teacher as a "one-caring" and the student as a "cared-for." She asserts that the goals of the educator are to promote, maintain and enhance the ethic of caring. The essential elements of the caring arise within the relationship between the one-caring and the cared-for. It is within that relationship that we can best understand what caring is, as well as its risks and limitations.

One of Noddings' major claims is that, in a caring relationship, the one-caring must see the other's (the cared-for's) reality as a possibility for his or her own. "Apprehending the other's reality is the essential part of caring from the view of the one-caring" (p. 16). Displacement of one's own reality to take on the reality of someone else, what Noddings terms a "motivational shift," is a difficult and challenging task that involves some distraction from oneself. It is an especially troublesome and arduous task when working with women convicted of crimes; it may demand taking on the reality of a woman who prostituted herself to buy drugs,
who murdered her battering partner, or who abused her children. However, the motivational shift does not mean that the one-caring adopts or endorses the reality of the cared-for; it does mean that the one-caring see the other's reality as a possibility. It is possible to walk in someone else's shoes without approving of the walk. Setting aside personal judgments can contribute to the goal of readiness for caring.

Also, there are times when it is impossible to take on another's reality. Noddings rejects the notion of "universal caring," that is, caring for all others unconditionally. "Not only are there those for whom I do not naturally care—situations in which engrossment brings revulsion and motivational displacement is unthinkable—but there are, also, many beyond the reach of my caring" (Noddings, 1984, p. 18). The notion of universal caring can be put to the test for teachers (and other staff and volunteers) in the prison setting when they find certain crimes (and criminals) repugnant. Noddings does suggest, however, maintaining "an internal state of readiness to try to care for whoever crosses our path" (p. 18).

Rather than focusing on judging, a one-caring should be interested in "heightening moral perception and sensitivity" on the part of the cared-for by continuing to express his or her own commitment to caring (Noddings, 1984, p. 90-91). By adding a "personal commitment and example," he or she can maintain the goal of the ethical development of the cared-for. In the classroom, such a relationship certainly indicates some level of personal disclosure on the part of the teacher, and this can be powerful and yet problematic when dealing with an incarcerated population. While encouragement, personal disclosure and interest from the teacher may be a positive experience for the student, a teacher's personal relationship with an inmate can be seen as suspicious or misinterpreted as favoritism by co-workers, supervisors, and even other inmates. According to those
who misunderstand the benefits of a caring relationship, inmates are to be “held at bay,” kept under control, and treated with a professional degree of neutrality.

Caring in a Prison Classroom

In the prison, staff are required and volunteers are encouraged by the DOC to remain somewhat “anonymous” to the inmates. The teacher shouldn’t display pictures of her children on her desk; she should use a permanent marker to black out her home address on magazines brought in from home. The security of each staff member’s family and personal well-being is protected through relative anonymity. However, such anonymity need not prevent the teacher, or staff member, or volunteer from acting out the commitment to care for the inmate.

When I began teaching at the prison, I wanted my students to know that I cared about them. I was advised during my DOC volunteer training, and reminded later, by the DOC teacher, not to ask the women about why they were in prison and not to tell them where I live. However, as women wrote in journals that they asked me to read, or in pieces of writing they chose to share, I often learned their stories. Learning how similar our life histories often were, I wondered, silently at first, about what it was that brought me to the profession of teaching, rather than a life of substance abuse and criminal behavior. I made a conscious decision to be very open with the women about my own family history of alcoholism. I wanted them to understand that, in some ways, we weren’t that different. As the women chose to write openly and honestly about the childhood sexual and physical abuse, about their addictions, about their lives, I responded to their risk-taking by listening. I had to put myself in their shoes, nonjudgmentally, to understand their reality. (The inmates, by virtue of their prison sentences, had already been judged. Further judgment, by me, was unnecessary and served no purpose.) Noddings claims that only in this self-denying action—engrossment in the other—can one truly care.
Once the one-caring sees the other's reality, he or she can act to "eliminate the intolerable, to reduce the pain, to fill the need, to actualize the dream" in the cared-for (Noddings, 1984, p. 14). In a classroom, the caring can take place in dialogue—talking and listening, sharing and responding to each other (p. 186). In a classroom in a women's prison (the prison being a place the inmate often sees as silencing, punishing and uncaring), the dialogue of caring, the discourse of concern and connections, takes on added significance. As women talk with and listen to each other, students and teachers all, each can be a one-caring and a cared-for. As the one-caring's actions are received, understood and accepted, she is also cared-for. The reciprocity or responsiveness of the cared-for is another important element in the caring relationship (p. 70).

In the beginning, I felt awkward talking or writing about my children during class at the prison. I worried that sharing stories with the inmates about my son and daughter would make their sense of loss greater—they had limited access to their children, and I was sure that my story would underscore their isolation. Before long, however, I learned that my students could care for me by listening to me talk about my kids, by asking me questions. 1 realized that if I told them about a disagreement with my daughter, and how we resolved it peacefully, they would, in turn, talk about arguments they'd had with their children. We listened to each other's stories, and with their recurrent themes, the stories engendered more listening and caring. Mary Catherine Bateson (1990) refers to storytelling as "fundamental to the human search for meaning" (p. 34). In exploring each other's stories, we were creating our own.

Over a period of months, as we continued to write for ourselves and each other, to listen to our own stories and those of others, we learned more about how to care for ourselves and others. Sustaining long-term interest and commitment on the part of the one-caring was vital to the caring relationships created in the classroom.
The essential elements of continued interest and the continual renewal of commitment require a dedicated effort not only on the part of the one-caring but also on the part of the cared-for (Noddings, 1984). When the cared-for accepts the caring in a responsive, acknowledging way, the one-caring is energized to continue caring. Noddings warns, however, that the one-caring also needs to allow the cared-for freedom to grow and to respond. "The cared-for is free to be more fully himself [sic] in the caring relation. Indeed, this being himself, this willing and unselfconscious revealing of self, is his major contribution to the relation" (p. 73).

Annie, a student in the prison writing class, was silent for the first six weeks she came to class. But Annie was not passive. She listened and watched the rest of us as we wrote and shared. I often sat in a chair at Annie's table, and stood near her when I talked to the whole class. I was sure to thank her for coming to class (even though it was part of her academic program). After nearly two months, Annie signaled me to come to her table at the end of class, to read her journal. I asked her to read it aloud, telling her that I wanted to hear her voice reading her words. She shook her head firmly, and handed the journal to me. I asked her permission to read aloud and when I finished reading, she wept. I wept when she told me it was the first time she'd ever heard her own words read aloud. It was necessary, in my caring for Annie, that I provided her the space she needed to be herself, at her own pace. Noddings tells us that both must contribute to the relationship; the cared-for must receive, and in that receiving, complete the caring offered by the one-caring. In the continued reception of caring, the one-caring renews his or her commitment to the relationship, and to the self; Annie and I both contributed to our relationship.

Caring for one's ethical self, according to Noddings, "can emerge only from a caring for others. But a sense of my physical self, a knowledge of what gives me pain and pleasure, precedes my caring for others" (1984, p. 14). Balancing care for others and care for one's ethical self is an important consideration. In light of my
work with women in prison, I consider Noddings' definition of the "ethical self" to be important. She states:

The ethical self is an active relation between my actual self and a vision of my ideal self as one-caring and cared-for. It is born of the fundamental recognition of relatedness; that which connects me naturally to the other, reconnects me through the other to myself. As I care for others and am cared for by them, I become able to care for myself. . . It is this caring that sustains me when caring for the other fails, and it is this caring that enables me to surpass my actual uncaring self in the direction of caring. (pp. 49-50)

This relation between the "actual self" and the "ideal self" can provide the same opportunities for conversation with the self that are provided in what Ann Berthoff calls "dialectical notebooks" (1987). In such journals, students use language to construct knowledge, to talk to oneself, to "make meaning." In the same way the relation of the ethical self connects and reconnects the self and the other, the women who use journals extensively, create an "other," a second self, with whom they can dialogue. This is a significant use of writing by women in prison who can dialogue with themselves in the pages of their journals or in the stanzas of poetry. With such writing, a woman can not only care for herself (as a one-caring), but be the recipient (cared-for) of that caring in the private place that Heilbrun calls "psychic space" (1988, p. 114).

For women in prison, far from familiar things, words take on significant meaning and power. Berthoff writes about the power of language, "Language gives us the power of memory and envisagement, thus freeing us from the momentary, the eternal present of the beasts, and recreating us as historical creatures" (1987, p. 12). The women in our class used words to create spaces (Heilbrun, 1988), and to hold in place and time the people and things they missed: they visited favorite beaches and dance clubs; they captured and relived visits with their children. They wrote to face fears: they confronted fathers who abandoned them and partners who beat them. They wrote their lives in the future: they envisioned themselves as
healthy women living beyond substance abuse. A woman's writing could be the re-

naming and re-visioning that Adrienne Rich (1979) refers to as "an act of survival."

As women gave and received caring in the writing class, by listening, writing

and sharing, they became better able to care for themselves. Self-care and self-
esteem are closely related (Bateson, 1990) and a woman often took care of herself

through her private journal-writing. The more public genres of poetry and personal

narratives often arose from lengthy journal entries. As the women shared their

stories, their writing became increasingly important for them. Certainly, those of us

who already valued writing influenced the others.

However, some of the women who were considered illiterate by the prison's

standardized measures, were among those who wrote for a wide variety of purposes.

The formal definitions of literacy simply did not take into account the multiple

functions of literacy that were a part of the daily lives of many of my inmate

students. During my three years at the prison, I observed many women who used

language to express their caring for themselves and others. They used their writing,
even when "silenced," as a way to discover and meet their own needs and the needs

of others.

Women, Silence and Writing in Prison

In Gender and the Journal, Cinthia Gannett explores women's use of writing,
especially journals, "to break their silence for the first time, to construct a self, to

find their voices" (1992, p. 178). Many of Gannett's female students were silenced

by what she calls "the all-pervasive mutings of education . . . socialization . . . [and] sexual violence" (p. 179). She also points out how these mutings and silencings can affect students and their sense of self as speakers, writers, and as knowers (p. 83).

Similarly, many women coming to prison are silenced and marginalized by extensive histories of abuse—physical, sexual, and emotional, as well as by their
socioeconomic position, and their undereducation (or miseducation). In prison, they are silenced again by the control of their lives and their language: incoming and outgoing mail can be read and censored; inmates can make only collect phone calls at specific times, and visiting hours are restricted; family members live far away and may refuse to accept the collect calls or be unable to visit. The inmate sees not only knowledge as coming from an "other," but also everything else—she is the recipient of food, shelter, and medical attention according to the prison's rules and schedule. Also, the inmate can be further marginalized by an educational system that promotes her literate development in rigid, narrow and decontextualized ways that don't recognize or value the major purposes of her self-sponsored language.

For many, writing can provide an escape from the mindlessness and voicelessness of prison life. It can be a tool to recover voice, in the relatively secret and private space of paper, where words can be spoken more safely. Carolyn Heilbrun, in *Writing a Woman's Life* (1988), tells us that "secrecy is power" (p. 116). Owning one's words and secret thoughts takes on great significance in an environment where anything can be taken from an inmate at anytime. Myerhoff and Metzger (1980) set forth the intentional "secret and private" nature of journals—"in the private pages, the writer can "admit the beasts and monsters, imaginings, and wishes" (p. 105). The act of expressing oneself through written language is a powerful act, a secret, even subversive, act.

Sherry, an inmate, has kept a journal since she was a teenager. "I write in it everyday, sometimes for hours," she told us in class. "It's always in the form of a letter. I named my journal 'Janelle.' So I always start, 'Dear Janelle..." Sherry often came to class with her journal open, pen in hand, as if she'd interrupted her writing just long enough to walk down the hall. The correctional officers were very aware of Sherry's passion for writing. They saw her carrying her journal at all times and sitting at her desk writing when they did cell checks. One day Sherry
didn’t come to class. The other inmates told me that Sherry was suicidal after committing an infraction and that she was sent away. The women told me that her journal had been taken from her by an officer and used against her. When Sherry returned from her two week stay at the secure psychiatric unit at the men’s prison upstate, I was eager to visit with her.

When the officer on duty in the “lock-up” unit (the most restrictive cell area) unlocked the heavy red door to let me in, I saw Sherry right away. She was sitting at a metal picnic-style table in the middle of the open “common area.” She was writing in a journal. She looked up at me, smiled and stood up, arms open. I gave her a hug and sat down next to her. Her skin was blotchy and dark circles hung under her eyes. “How are you, Sherry? Are you O.K.?” I asked.

She wiped her nose with the back of her hand, wrote another few words in the book in front of her, then pointed her pen at me. “Yeah, I’m O.K. They took one of my books, you know.”

I nodded my head and she continued with a grin growing on her face. “Well, I got mad and blew up and said a few things about one of the guards. I just lost it. The guard wasn’t following all the rules right to the letter and I realized I probably said enough to get him into trouble. Well, anyway, they realized I write all the time in this journal, so they took one from me. I got into big trouble! Well, you know, Kathe, it just doesn’t matter.” The mischievous grin grew even wider. “I spent all morning here having one of the other women help me. We tore up seven of my journals into little tiny pieces and flushed them all down the john.” She paused. “But here I am now, writing again. They can take ‘em. I can flush ‘em. But nothing can take away the fact that I wrote them!” Sherry clearly understood the power of language, and was willing to risk losing the power of secrecy. The act of writing, to her, was more powerful than physical possession of what she wrote. Her journals
could be taken away or destroyed but nothing could take away the act of writing them.

Audre Lorde (1984) wrote about the power of silence, words and caring at a time of crisis in her life:

I was going to die, if not sooner then later, whether or not I had ever spoken myself. My silences had not protected me. Your silence will not protect you. But for every real word spoke, for every attempt I had ever made to speak those truths for which I am still seeking, I had made contact with other women while we examined the words to fit a world in which we all believed, bridging our differences. And it was the concern and caring of all those women which gave me strength and enabled me to scrutinize the essentials of my living. (p. 41)

Women in prison are in crisis. Their lives are interrupted, they are separated from those they love. However, some will take the opportunity to change, to recover and recreate themselves, and to “break silences” as members of a community of women.

Sherry and others used language as the currency of caring in a discourse community behind steel doors and razor wire. In the prison writing class, I provided the women the major elements of the process approach—freedom of choice, plenty of time to write and interact, and response to their writing. In turn, the women’s words, both spoken and written, private and public, connected them to each other and to themselves in ways that privileged their need to care. Participation in the learning community also helped the inmates, silenced and powerless in the prison setting, to develop a sense of voice and power over their own lives. Writing, the basis for our work together, provided the women opportunities to speak, grow, explore, experience freedom and choice, and, most importantly, to care.

The women’s stories of literacy demanded telling, but, as a teacher-turned-researcher, the prison setting presented me with unique problems and challenging constraints. In the following chapter, I will describe the setting for the study and the qualitative methodologies that guided my work.
CHAPTER THREE

THE RESEARCH PROCESS IN A WOMEN’S PRISON

In this chapter, I will describe the setting for the current study in the context of a personal narrative that explains how I first came to the prison as a volunteer and the many contradictions I noticed during my first visit. A recount of my classroom experience with one student, Nancy, will help to explain how I was drawn into my research on the women’s writing. I will then explain the qualitative methods I used (some of which I adapted to the correctional setting) to collect and analyze the data. This research does not neatly fit into any one category; I have adopted the methods that best fit my needs from ethnographic, feminist, and case study research. In this chapter, I will situate myself in relation to the prison setting and to the methodologies that guided my work.

I was surprised by my first few months of teaching at the women’s prison. Women whom I had expected to be largely illiterate were using their writing in ways that were both purposeful and transformative. They had an underlying urgency to write, to tell their stories, to have their stories heard. They kept their lives and relationships afloat with the words they wrote. They immersed themselves in writing and sharing as members of a powerful discourse community that not only allowed, but also promoted, the sound of their voices. All of this, of course, happened within the larger context of a prison culture which worked to keep them voiceless and powerless.

Many of these writers had not completed their formal education; many were dropouts, from public high school or even earlier, who scored poorly on the standardized tests administered by the prison teacher. I wanted to know more
about the inmates' writing and why it seemed so important to them. Why was it that even for some of the least educated, writing came so quickly? What had been their experiences with writing in their previous schooling and in their families? What needs did their writing fulfill? These questions guided my semester's research project at the prison to fulfill a requirement for the graduate course, "Research in the Teaching of Writing." That project, the pilot for this dissertation, thrust me into the sometimes unwieldy role of researcher.

When I began as a volunteer teacher at the prison, I had no idea that my work would eventually lead to formal research with my students. My reliability as a volunteer not only helped to secure my position as a researcher with the administration, but also won the trust and participation of my inmate students as we strived to understand their uses for writing.

"Breaking In" to Prison

To fund my graduate studies, I was given an assistantship to supervise interns in the teacher education program of my university. Visiting classrooms as an observer was just not enough for me after fifteen years of having my own classroom. I wanted more direct student contact and considered volunteering as a literacy teacher of adults.

I phoned a nearby state women's prison to inquire about volunteering. The secretary told me that the prison already had a teacher and hung up while I was mid-sentence. I quickly redialed, realizing that I needed to talk fast to stress the volunteer component of my offer. Once connected to the prison classroom teacher, I explained my intentions. A limited budget prevented her from hiring a "much-needed writing teacher," and she eagerly accepted my offer. Pat, the teacher, invited me to observe a class.
Movement in the Prison: “The Control Officer Needs to Buzz Us Through”

A few days later, I follow Pat’s directions to the prison and drive into a rural area with farmland and few houses. Past a large pasture with a few cows, I spot a rundown farm and decaying barn. Just past the barn, the American flag is flying in front of a long paved parking lot. At the back of the lot is a tall chain-link fence topped with barbed wire. The fence swings around to surround a long, low, brick building with recessed windows.

I drive into the lot and park the car. With only my key ring and driver’s license in hand (as Pat had directed me), I dutifully lock my purse in the trunk. I walk through the half-full parking lot accompanied by the sound of birds coming from a huge tree just inside the fence. The large loops of razor wire overhead remind me of exhausted Slinky’s from childhood. Perched on the coils, between the glistening double-edged razors, are a few small sparrows. As I approach the front entrance, three or four of the birds sweep down from the right and take a new position on my left. I study the wire closely, amazed that the birds can maneuver so easily in the two inch spans between the razors. Teasing me, they dance quickly overhead, always landing with tremendous accuracy. Shaking my head in disbelief, I step up to the heavy black door and enter the small lobby.

The uniformed guard seated behind the thick glass window is difficult to see because of the sun’s glare over my shoulder. I shade my eyes and move closer to the window. The guard is seated at a large console of lighted buttons. He is surrounded by glass on three sides, and a large control panel is mounted on the wall behind him. On one side of the lighted console is a black telephone and on the other, a microphone and intercom panel. A small television screen, also to his left, hiccoughs through a series of black-and-white views of hallways, exits and outdoor accesses to the prison. “Can I help you?” he asks in a loud, but friendly voice as he leans toward
a small opening in the glass on the counter. I explain that I have an appointment with Pat and with the push of a button, he pages her.

Asking me to step aside to wait for an escort, the guard pushes another series of buttons that buzz, allowing several young women to come out into the lobby. They are wearing blue jeans and green T-shirts and carrying jean jackets. They smile at me and each one passes a photo identification badge through the counter opening before exiting through the same doorway I'd entered. Realizing they are probably inmates, I am surprised at the ease with which they walk out the front door. Curious about the security regulations, I stand and wait somewhat awkwardly. Another buzz sounds and a middle-aged woman comes out into the lobby, introducing herself as Pat. She asks the guard for an orange visitor's tag and hands it to me. A single “V” is hand-written on the tag. “Just clip it on your sweater,” she says, checking that I've passed in my driver's license and keys. “Is your purse locked in your car?” she asks with a hint of a smile. I nod and she turns back to the door.

“The control officer needs to buzz us through,” she explains, nodding toward the friendly guard. She places her hand on the knob of the inner door, awaiting his permission to re-enter. Pat swings the heavy door open easily as he buzzes us through the first door. She immediately begins her orientation speech as she leads me down the hall. I am distracted by our stop-and-go procession, and realize that the control officer is following us on remote cameras mounted overhead. My eyes search the ceiling ahead as I look for the camera—it's an eerie feeling knowing I'm being watched by someone I can't see. As each heavy metal door slams noisily behind us, another door buzzes and opens up ahead of us.

The prison hallway is white and I squint in the brightness. The glossy concrete block walls appear freshly-painted and I can't detect a single smudge or heelmark. Several male officers pass us in the hallway, each wearing a gun on his
belt, one speaking into a walkie-talkie. Two blue-jeaned women, one on a wooden stepladder, work together quietly to change a light bulb. A man in jeans and an outdoor jacket appears to be supervising them. We squeeze around the ladder and I realize that these must be more inmates. (I learn from Pat later that the maintenance man often uses inmates to make minor repairs.) The white linoleum floor is highly-polished and reflects the fluorescent lights overhead. Ahead, a single inmate sprays the cinder blocks with a cleaner that burns my nose. She keeps her head turned as she vigorously rubs the wall with a heavy cloth. I catch her eye and smile quickly as Pat leads me into her classroom.

The Prison Classroom: An Inmate Teacher Circles the Winner's Name

A group of eight or nine women are seated in orderly rows of trapezoidal desks, all facing the blackboard. Behind them along the white walls are two windows, framed in heavy black steel, and covered by thick rectangular bars. An oversized teacher's desk faces into the room. Behind it are two metal bookcases and a single four-drawer file cabinet. I recognize the green T-shirts and jeans the women are wearing, but two are wearing sweatshirts, one red and one yellow. Pat gestures to a steel black chair at the side of her desk, and invites me to sit down and listen to the class. She sits behind her desk, nods at the woman at the blackboard and whispers loudly, "This is Trina. She's teaching a spelling class." Surprised to see that Trina is wearing the now-familiar inmate uniform, I look questioningly at Pat. She continues, "Yup, she's an inmate. I'm trying to use inmates more and more to help with the teaching."

I lean forward and watch. Trina has printed each student's name on the blackboard. As each woman in the front row spells a word correctly, Trina marks a check after her name. The words come from a piece of paper in Trina's hand. I quietly ask Pat about the list. "She's using word lists that she comes up with
herself," she tells me. She explains that each Monday Trina produces a new list. The words come from topics that interest Trina—current events, legal language or psychology terms. The students practice writing them, put each word in a sentence, and take a spelling test each Friday. Today's competitive activity is in preparation for Friday's spelling test. It doesn't seem too different from traditional public school—assigned words, spelling bees, written sentences, and weekly tests. I am curious, though, about Trina's efforts to make the word lists somehow relevant, if not to her students, at least to herself. According to Pat, she seems to enjoy choosing words for her students. I feel strongly about letting students have choice. I am eager to share my ideas with Pat.

At the end of class, Trina applauds her students' efforts, posting a percentage correct next to the name of each student who has participated during class, and circles the winner's name. A few women who have maintained silence despite the others' enthusiasm, pass by Pat's desk quietly as they leave the classroom. A few woman congratulate the winner, thank Trina for class and smile at us as they head for the door. Trina erases the board thoroughly and stops by Pat's desk to introduce herself.

"Hi! Are you the new hairdresser?" Trina chirps, flipping her long hair back over her shoulder.

Pat laughs and holds her head in her hands. "Oh, my gosh! Is that what all the women thought? No, Trina. Kathe is going to be teaching a writing class here."

"Oh, that's great! I love to write poetry!" Trina continues. "No luck finding a hairdresser yet?" she asks Pat.

"I'm working on it. I've got a lead on a volunteer hairdresser. I should be hearing soon," she reassures Trina. "You did a good job today with the class. Thanks. I'll talk to you tomorrow."
By now, my head is swimming with questions. Hairdresser? These women get their hair done? And Trina and Pat speak to each other more like colleagues than prison teacher and inmate. I don't want to appear too awkward, so I decide to keep my comments and questions to myself for now.

As Tina leaves the room, Pat and I chat about the writing class. She tells me that some of the women are taking a grammar class and are trying to write essays in preparation for the GED test. "But some," she confesses, "can't read or write well enough for that yet." She asks me for my ideas.

I want to provide a classroom where women can develop their writing, reading, thinking and listening skills through personal journals and other writing. Drawing upon my previous teaching experience, I will invite my students to write on topics of their own choice, share, get feedback on, and revise their writing and experiment with new genre. I plan to offer personal written responses to each woman's writing, as well as write and share my own writing with them. I want to create a safe, nonjudgmental, supportive and caring classroom where women can risk in their writing and sharing with others.

Pat is quite enthusiastic about my ideas and we agree that I will start the following week. She will require all women who are enrolled in the education program to attend my class, and it will be open to any other inmates who wish to participate. Those in school also take a grammar class with Pat in preparation for the GED test. I'm willing to come in two mornings a week and ask Pat if she thinks an hour and a half is too long. "No, that'll be great. You could teach right in my room after Trina's spelling class and their smoking break. In fact, the first tier has lunch at 10:30, so how about 9:00 to 10:30?" Wow, I think. Lunch at 10:30? My face gives me away. "Yeah, I know it's early," she tells me. "But they're up at 6:30 for breakfast, and dinner starts at 3:30. Each tier eats alone so it takes an hour and a half to put them all through." I think about how hungry I'd be by 8:00 p.m. We
agree on Mondays and Fridays, and Pat suggests that I draw up some posters for
the bulletin boards throughout the prison.

Once we agree on when I’ll teach, Pat offers to walk me through the prison.
“This won’t take long. It’s really not that big. Only about ninety women,” she says
leading me to the end of the hallway to a large window that looks into a room larger
than her classroom. “Here’s a job site. In this room, the women work for the state
motor vehicle registry. They register all the recreational vehicles for the state.”
About eight or ten women line the two outer walls of the room, each behind a
computer terminal. Large charts posted above them provide numerical codes and
abbreviations for words like “street” and “boulevard.” A man, in street clothes, is
seated behind an oversized desk that is covered with papers and books. The women
appear to be working independently, some in pairs.

We turn around and look into another large room where a handful of women
are working at typewriters and computer terminals. They are separated from each
other by portable bulletin boards, each woman in her own work area. “Here’s the
Vocational Education program. The teacher in this program, Jan, is assisted by an
inmate and they teach things like bookkeeping, filing, word processing, typing,
grammar, shorthand, and public speaking.” A lush green plant is perched up on one
of several file cabinets behind the teacher’s desk. Jan is working with two women at
a table in the center of the room. A colorful bulletin board display that appears to
have been made by the students decorates one end of the room. Student names,
certificates of achievement, and phrases like, “You can do it!” and “I can learn” dot
the board.

Living Quarters: Barred Windows and Patchwork Quilts

Returning up the hallway, we pause briefly to look into the room across from
Pat’s classroom. It is crowded with exercise equipment—weights, a treadmill, an
exercise bench—and a large mirror covers the back wall and makes the room seem larger but even more full. One woman, wearing gray sweatpants, sweatshirt, and a “Walkman" type radio, is marching on the treadmill looking out the window. At the far end of the room is a portable cloth screen, creating a small area of privacy. Over the top of the screen, I can see someone’s head. “That’s where the physical therapist works. There really isn’t room anywhere else,” Pat tells me as we continue down the hall.

A small room, referred to as the “meeting room,” is next to the gym. We step into the room briefly, our footsteps echoing off the walls. The room has two bright blue, block-like, vinyl couches and a few stacks of black steel chairs against the wall. A rough wood box with a padlock hangs near the window with a sign “MAIL” on top. Through the window's bars, I can see more wire-topped fences, and beyond them, a wooded area. A large bulletin board is largely blank except for a few official memos, stapled and curled with age. Across the room are two vending machines, one with drinks, one with chips and candy. As we turn to leave, an inmate silently enters the room and heads for the maildrop with several envelopes in her hand.

Pat leads me past an alcove where two large industrial-sized washing machines churn and two dryers spin large loads of denim blue jeans and green shirts. Seated behind the large, wheeled, canvas hamper is a woman, her head buried in a book. She doesn’t notice us as we pass by on our way around the corner.

"Here's A-tier," Pat continues, leading me through a heavy steel door that is held open by a large magnet on the wall. We enter a very large open room with a shiny gray cement floor. It's hard to tell if the floor is wet from paint or freshly washed. In the center of the room is a pool table, and along the side walls several small tables with stacks of old magazines and books. Each cell on the tier houses two women. Some of the cell doors are wide open, others pulled nearly closed. In each door is a small pane of thick glass under which is posted the inmates’ names
and the painted cell number. We walk down one side of the large room towards a large wall of glass and bars that provides a view of the main road. I sneak a peek into a few of the open cells, but divert my eyes quickly, not wanting to appear too curious or invade what little privacy the inmates have. We stop near one of the cells that is open, but unoccupied.

There is a metal bunkbed up against the wall with a window. The room is only a little wider than the length of the bed. A single barred window allows a view outside from either bunk. On most of the beds are colorful, handmade quilts. "They make them in Hobbycraft," Pat tells me as she leads me on past more open doors. We circle the pool table and the cells begin to look alike. Each has two white footlockers, a small steel-framed desk, a black steel chair, a stainless steel commode and sink, and a bunkbed. Everything seems to be hard, cold and metallic, except the cotton bedcovers which look somehow out of place here. Several women have gathered in the common area for a game of Scrabble. One looks up and smiles at me as we leave. I say, "Hi," return the smile, loosen my collar, and follow Pat out the heavy door and down the hall.

We cross back to the other side of the prison, passing the laundry room again, and enter the "Dorms." Here is where the women live who are about to be released. Pat opens the first of the dorms and gestures inside. Four bunkbeds and eight footlockers are in the narrow room. There are also some standing metal lockers that remind me of high school gym class. These rooms are larger than the cells on A-tier, but house many more women. Farther down the hall are even larger rooms, with as many as six bunks.

In one of the dorms, I notice an older woman in a jean skirt and a tailored shirt. There is a book on her lap and she is talking quietly to one of the inmates, their hands together and eyes closed. They are sitting on the edge of the bed. "That's Jenny," Pat tells me. "She's a volunteer, too. She calls herself the chaplain."
She's here almost everyday and visits with the women all over the place—in their cells, in the lawyer's room, in the meeting room. They talk to her a lot.” I wonder how old Jenny is and guess that the book she's carrying is probably a Bible.

"Do they have religious services here?" I ask.

"Yes. In fact, that might be a problem since the priest comes in once a month for Mass and it's usually on Friday mornings. We never know exactly when he's coming but they announce it, and the classroom usually empties out. Everyone decides to be Catholic that day. It gives them a break." A church service once a month doesn't seem like it would be much of a problem.

We move on to the hobbycraft room. It is large and bright, with many windows. Two ironing boards are set up along the far wall, and a door appears to lead out to a basketball court and fenced yard that I can see through the window. Several women are seated at large worktables laughing and talking: two are crocheting, one is knitting, another is embroidering a picture. Two sewing machines are unoccupied. A fourth woman is working alone at another large table, hand-stitching a large bed-sized quilt. One more is at a round table by the window, sitting at an electric typewriter, a stack of books and papers on the table. The women interrupt their talking to look up and smile, "Hi, Pat!"

"Hello, ladies. This is Kathe. She'll be starting a writing class here next week. There'll be posters up in a couple of days with all the details."

The lady at the typewriter looks up briefly. The quilter calls out, "I love to write. Maybe I'll come."

"Hope so," I answer. "See you next week."

On the way back down the central corridor is the cafeteria on the left and the prison library on the right. The cafeteria is crowded with eight large rectangular tables, each with eight steel stackable chairs. At the far end is the larger counter and window that looks into the kitchen. "John runs the kitchen. He has several
inmates working for him during the day. They prepare all the food, and another crew goes in at night to bake the bread.” The kitchen is a stainless steel city of oversized sinks, stoves, refrigerators, pots, pans and utensils. “Some of the women turn out to be pretty good cooks!” Pat smiles. “But now I want to show you my favorite place, my pride and joy—the library.”

More Contradictions: “Good Housekeeping” for Them and Fingerprinting for Me

I eagerly follow Pat across the hall into a room about the size of her classroom. The only natural light in the library comes from two panels of glass next to and above an exterior door. Several fluorescent bulbs light the back of the room. The walls are lined floor to ceiling with black steel library shelves. Many of the shelves are nearly filled with paperback books, some shelves two rows deep, and one entire wall is shelved with hardcover books. Among the paperbacks are hundreds of romance novels, popular mysteries and tales of horror. Above the hardcover section is a small, but colorful assortment of oversized books, mostly about art and travel. There are five tables with bright yellow, stackable, plastic chairs. Several women are seated, reading local newspapers from the round table near the door. I am amazed at the dozens of titles on the tall magazine rack near the check-out desk. Among them are current issues of Newsweek, Time, Parent, Ms., Bazaar, Glamour, People and Good Housekeeping. It seems ironic to see magazines about being beautiful and decorating one’s home in an environment where inmates and their surroundings are kept stark, plain, and never private.

An inmate is seated at the desk, cataloguing new books from a carton on the floor. Behind the check-out is a wall of what appear to be encyclopedias; it is the legal collection which every prison is mandated to have available to its inmates for legal research. Books, bestsellers, magazines, newspapers—it seems an impressive library for an institution of this size.
As we head to the superintendent's office, I ask Pat about the title "Superintendent." Before opening the office door, she tells me, "They won't let her have the title 'Warden.' That's reserved for the administrator at the men's prison." She asks the secretary for a volunteer application form which I fill out right away. We leave the office and across the hall, Pat points out the "property room" where a single officer is seated behind a desk writing. "This officer processes all items that come in and go out, as well as new inmates and those going out for court appearances. That's also where you'll have to go to get your badge and fingerprints. We'll take care of that next week. Then you won't need me to escort you in and out."

I'm somewhat confused. Fingerprints? "It's routine—they'll run a background check, too." But I haven't done anything wrong, I think to myself. Why must I be fingerprinted? I swallow my question and continue to follow Pat.

Pat points farther down the hall, through more sets of locked doors. "Not much to see down there. The nurse's office, the dentist's office, the psychiatric social worker. There's also three more tiers, B, C and D. C-tier is for the new inmates who are quarantined, and for those who get a write-up and are locked down except for meals. C-tier inmates wear "greens" and aren't allowed to come out for any activities or classes. I take the library cart down to them once a week. D-tier is usually for inmates who are pre-trial, and from there, they can be promoted to B-tier. If they behave themselves and follow the rules, eventually they can move up to A-tier." The hall was long and bright. I thought about grades earned in school. D is poor, A is the best. Here I guess the dorms would be considered A-plus.

I return to the prison with the posters two days later and a stack of composition books for the following week. Pat reminds me never to wear jeans so I won't be mistaken for an inmate. She tells me that my Department of Corrections' background check is complete and that I'm approved as a volunteer: a background
check, fingerprints on file, a badge, no purse, keys turned in. I am ready to begin but can’t help but wonder what really separates me from the inmates.

**Gaps, Noisy Silences, and Questions**

*Journals, Letters, and "Multiple Choices"*

From the outset, I am amazed at how much and how eagerly most of the women write, many of whom I’ve been told can’t or won’t write. Even those who initially resist, eventually write once they understand that I won’t be correcting their writing and that they can write for their own purposes. They write pages and pages—about themselves, their pasts, their futures, their children, their families. When offered journals, many write daily and share their writing with me, accepting my offer to read and respond to their writing. Some write more than a dozen letters a week to family and penpals. Before long, others are experimenting with writing poetry, children’s books and personal narratives during class, and on their own time.

The prison superintendent sees me in the hall the first week of class and introduces herself. “Glad you’re here. I feel very strongly about education. It’s their best chance at not returning here once they’re out,” she champions as she continues quickly down the hall. “Thank you,” I call after her, pleased to know that she seems committed to education.

In class, the women are good listeners and support each other’s work—they set goals for their writing (daily writing, new genres, revisions) and share their work with great excitement and joy; they eagerly move aside desks and circle their chairs to listen to a woman read; they bring new women to class; they encourage each other openly; they write thoughtful responses to each other’s work. Ironically, many of those who still can’t pass the standardized tests and who see themselves as nonreaders and poor writers, are among those most willing to write and share, and
to improve their writing when it is purposeful and contextualized in their lives. When Candy writes a poem about the childhood abuse she suffered, she wants others to come to understand her through the telling of the horrifying experience. When Sherry writes a letter to the aunt who is raising her child, she wants her message to be clear and gets feedback from others in the writing class before she mails it off.

This community of writers happens to be situated in a classroom, but there is a striking gap between their discourse and the academic discourses that are validated by a larger prison education system driven by standardized tests and fill-in-the-blanks. The traditional preparation for the "multiple choices" of the GED test would offer these women few, if any, choices to use their literacies meaningfully.

Some of the women even have established writing habits that began in childhood. Sherry tells me that she's kept a journal since she was a little girl. Several others recall keeping diaries as teenagers, keeping them hidden from nosy brothers. One woman introduces herself as Janice and tells me, "I was on the run for two years with my boyfriend. We were fugitives from the law—went all the way across the country. We hid out in all kinds of places. Wherever we went, though, I always had two things with me—my writing portfolio and my electric typewriter! Every place we hid out had to have electricity so I could type. I'm sure glad you're having this writing class!"

I'm delighted by the women's response to writing and they seem pleased by my written responses to their work. I realize during the first week of class that my original plan to take the journals home to respond in, prevents the women from daily journal writing. So I change my plan, stay after class, write briefer responses, and leave their journals on a bookshelf in the classroom before I leave the prison each day.
There are a few, however, who take journals but refuse to write. I stress the importance of writing every day. "I'd rather write in my cell where it's quiet and I can be alone. There's too many people in here," Nancy grumbles. She keeps herself busy working in her algebra book at the back of the room and occasionally rests her head on her folded arms. Maybe she just needs some time to listen and to get used to the class. I decide not to push her, and, anyway, maybe she really does write in her cell.

Many of the other women begin to collect their other writing (besides their journals) in large envelopes they buy through the prison canteen service; I tell Pat that I'd like them to have writing folders. She offers me some tabbed manila folders, but they look plain and all the same. Over the weekend, I purchase an assortment of brightly colored folders to distribute the following Monday.

As the women clamor for their first choices of color, Nancy stays seated across the room, huddled over her algebra book. Pat, who is now comfortable enough with how the writing class is going to leave me alone with the women, gets up to leave the room. "Remember," she whispers to me as she nods toward Nancy. "Don't let them get away with that. If they're here, they should be participating in your class. Don't be afraid to make them do what you want. If they don't do as they're told, they'll get a write-up. You just let me know who's not being cooperative." I assure Pat that I don't want to cause any trouble for anyone, and that some women might need to just listen for awhile before they'll write during class. I don't want the authority. She raises her voice on her way out, "Nancy, please put away your algebra."

I scoop up an assortment of folders and approach Nancy. "Here, would you like one?" I think to myself, well at least she was writing something. I wish I could ask her to take her algebra book back out. She grunts, takes a red folder, puts it under her math book and journal. She rests her head on her books silently while
the rest of us write for the first fifteen minutes of class. The "free writing" time at
the beginning of each class is a guaranteed quiet time; it provides temporary respite
from the offensive buzzers, bells and blaring loudspeakers.

After about ten minutes of free writing, I announce that in about five
minutes we'll work together to build our topic lists. Using June Gould's book The
Writer in All of Us (1989), I invite the women to try a meditative exercise called
"Finding Your Childhood Voice" (p. 29). I wonder if the women will think it's too
"therapeutic" sounding, but I'm encouraged by their willingness to participate. Even
Nancy sits up a bit straighter, closes her open-again algebra book and shoots a quick
glance in my direction. I leave it up to them if they want to close their eyes to relax
while I lead them through a meditation on their childhood memories.

As I read, a quick glance around the room without craning my neck allows
me to see most of my students, except the few whose backs are toward me. Those I
can see have their eyes closed and appear relaxed. I continue:

Send your mind back to your childhood. See yourself in school. Feel the child
inside you breathing in and out. What were you doing? What were you
feeling? Who was there with you? Listen for your child-voice speaking.
What does it say? Sit quietly, letting your child-self stay in your body.
Relax. Open your eyes slowly. (29)

I read this last section slowly, giving us all time to think about our answer to
each question. Images of my school busstop and the "Chubby Department" at the
local clothing store of my childhood flash in my mind. I wonder what is going
through the minds of my students. I quickly and quietly ask them to take out their
folders and add as many topics as they can to their lists. I jot down a few ideas on
my list—the smell of a paper lunchbag, the humiliation I felt the day after my
father showed up at School Night drunk, the closeness I'd felt at age six or seven
holding hands with my little sister as we fell asleep in our side-by-side twin beds.
As I write, I look up quickly. All the women are writing, a few are talking. Several spot me still writing, and pick their pens back up to write more.

After a few minutes, I ask the women to share their new topics with the others at their tables. I move over and pull up an empty chair next to Nancy and invite the person to her right to share first. Moving counter-clockwise, we share—fights with mom, running away from home, a new dress, a special vacation. I take my turn and then turn to Nancy. I'm not sure why I expect her to share but she looks at me and answers in a broken voice, "I can't—it's—it's too painful. The memories of my childhood are too horrible." I gently touch her arm and thank her for being a part of the group. I knew she had risked even sharing what little she had.

Nancy Cares Enough to Write

The following week in class, Nancy’s algebra book is nowhere in sight, her journal is set on the table and she is busy reading a paperback novel. As I move around the room quietly to confer with individuals, I approach Nancy and ask her what she is reading. She raises the book off the table to show me the cover and title, Possession. "It's a horror book. I love reading this stuff," and she proceeds to tell me, in great detail, about the grotesque tale of a woman being held prisoner and physically tortured. She is approaching the end of the book and tells me, with the first smile I've seen on her face, that she can't wait to see how it's going to end. It was time to announce the smoking break. Nancy tells me that she doesn't smoke but would stay to finish her book. By the end of class that day, she's finished her book, and for the first time, leaves her journal for me to read. In the empty room, I sit down to learn more about Nancy.

I don't know much about her at this point, except that she likes reading horror stories, doesn't smoke, and has painful memories of her childhood. As I open
her journal, I notice the very tiny lettering she uses. Her first entry is dated the first day of writing class, and I try to remember if I'd seen her write. All I can remember is the algebra book. I read on and learn that Nancy considers herself hyperactive. She writes about how she loves the prison exercise room and about her need for frequent physical movement. She feels very confined and restless sitting in one place for more than two or three minutes. Somewhat puzzled, I verify the name on the journal cover and think about her decision to skip break to finish reading her book.

She also writes about hating to write and feeling that she has nothing to write about. I turn the page and find a lengthy entry, written the day after we'd done the childhood memory work in class. I read slowly about her visit with her little boy, Timothy, in the prison visiting room. She writes with incredible detail about the painful separation from her son. Her six pages of writing, almost like a series of photographs, recounts every moment of their brief visit. When I finish reading, I try to swallow past the tightness in my throat. I take a deep breath, and pick up my pen, wondering how I will respond to her writing. I think my written response will be important and perhaps crucial to Nancy's continued writing.

I write about how beautiful the piece is and how clear it is that she loves Timothy so very much. I ask her more about him and tell her about my own two children. Knowing that other inmates in class have children, I resolve to ask Nancy to read her piece during our next class, but decide not to mention it in the written response. I leave her journal on the appointed bookshelf in the classroom so she can pick it up later that same day.

I think about Nancy and her son a great deal over the next few days at home, and feel a mixture of guilt and indulgence hugging and kissing my own children good-night. I keep thinking about her writing—what did it do for her? Why had she been so resistant in class, but then written so much, in such great detail, later?
I return to the prison several days later, the fourth day of class, and see Nancy chatting with several other women when I enter the classroom. She is smiling and more animated than I've seen her before. While the women settle into their seats, I casually approach Nancy, almost as if mid-conversation, and say, "I hope you'll read your piece about Timothy today." I am sure she remembers what I've written in her journal, how much I like her writing. She smiles warmly and says, "Sure, but I don't know where it is." I look around her table, leaning to check the bindings between jagged stacks of textbooks for the smooth, black journal. Puzzled, I wrinkle my brow. Nancy tells me, "I never got it back." For a moment, I don't believe her. I look over my shoulder and spot her journal on the bookshelf where I'd left it and where it's been for four days. "You mean you didn't see my response to you?" I ask, feeling quite stupid and unimportant. Wanting to make sure she knew what she'd agreed to, I asked the unsilenced writer again, "Will you read your story to the class?" "Sure, if I can do it without crying," she answers.

After the 10:00 cigarette break, we circle our chairs for the first time ever and Nancy quietly begins to read her story about Timothy's first visit. When she needs to, she stops to take a breath before going on. The two women on either side of her reach over and gently hold her by the arm as she cries and finishes reading. We all cry together and by the following week, many more of us are writing stories and poems about our own children.

**Why Do They Write?**

My experiences with Nancy and others in the writing class raised many questions for me: How can some claim to hate writing or claim to be poor writers, and still write so willingly and powerfully? What factors within this women's discourse community affect their writing? What power structures in the prison culture affect their writing and their classroom experiences? Why do they almost
always write about their children, their families, and themselves? What are the functions of their writing? What is going on here, in this oppressive setting of prison, that motivates women to write and share so openly? And why are women, like Nancy—the dropouts and the undereducated—so much more willing to see themselves as writers when they can choose their own topics and not have to worry about making mistakes? How can women’s personal, self-sponsored literacies be validated in a prison setting that is historically designed by and for men? These questions led me to my decision to research women’s writing in prison.

Seeking Permission

Initially, I received permission for my pilot project, "Dancing on Razor Wire: The Uses of Writing in the Lives of Incarcerated Women." I needed permission from both the Department of Corrections (DOC) and the University of New Hampshire’s Institutional Review Board (IRB). A two-page “research brief,” a participant consent form, an interview protocol, and a preliminary bibliography were required by the IRB. A copy of the proposal went to the prison superintendent along with my signature on the DOC form that indicated my agreement to follow all institutional guidelines. In regard to access to offender information, I agreed to abide by all DOC policies as stated by the prison superintendent. I agreed to preserve the confidentiality of inmates throughout and after the project and to recognize their voluntary participation at all times (they could withdraw at any time). I also agreed to limit the dissemination of any research findings only to those approved by the Commissioner of Corrections. After she read my proposal and my completed form, I met with the superintendent. She stressed the anonymity of the inmate participants and told me explicitly that I was not to use a tape recorder within the prison at anytime.
The superintendent forwarded my proposal and the DOC form to the Commissioner of Corrections. Permission was granted with no time restrictions for the completion of the project. Shortly thereafter, the university approved my research for one year, with an option for annual renewal. The pilot study was completed in 1991 and was based on my work with nine women. They each gave me permission to use my anecdotal notes from my first months of teaching at the prison, including their writing samples.

I decided to extend the research as my dissertation, re-focusing on two case studies. There was more to learn and new inmates to teach me. I applied to both the IRB and the DOC to continue my expanded work.

The IRB, on consideration of my re-application, included a "prison advocate" at their board meeting. The advocate made the suggestion that I request a DOC waiver allowing me to use a tape recorder for my interviews with inmates. Apparently, another university researcher at the men's prison in the same state system had been granted an exemption to use a tape recorder. I remembered how emphatic the superintendent was when she told me I could not use a tape recorder, so I informed the IRB that I would not be requesting a waiver; the tape recorder was really not necessary. By this time, I actually preferred working without it (see "Collection of Data").

On the recommendation of the prison advocate, the IRB required me to amend the wording on the consent form, advising each participant that "it is possible, although not likely, that you [I] could be compelled to disclose information [to the prison or court system] about your [their] prior or current illegal behavior." The inmates and the prison superintendent seemed amused by this portion of the form, since they understood that any information an inmate shares with staff or volunteers is readily accessible by the prison system and courts. Final permission was granted by both the IRB and the DOC for my research to continue.
Research Methodology and Data Analysis

The purpose of my research was to describe and interpret the writing of women in prison and I explored the experiences of nine women who were among my first students. I then focused on two case studies. I wanted to understand their writing and schooling, their multiple literacies, and the contexts and purposes for their writing from their perspective, what Fetterman calls the "emic," or insider's, perspective (1989). I wanted to take an in-depth look at their writing in the multiple contexts of their lives, the classroom, the prison culture, and the world. I wanted to hear the women's voices clearly and have their questions and answers guide my hypothesizing. It was important to me that the inmates felt they were researching with me, rather than being researched by me, a distinction made by feminist methodology (Belenky et al., 1986; Gilligan, 1982). The research was theirs (as well as mine) as together we investigated their lives, their literacies and self-knowledge. As we learned from each other and reflected on our work, I wanted the research to be for them, rather than on them (Klein, 1983). Research for women is defined by Klein as "research that tries to take women's needs, interests and experiences into account and aims at being instrumental in improving women's lives in one way or another" (1983, p. 90).

My intention to maintain a reflexive stance was an overriding theme of my research. It was always a visit with an inmate, or a powerful piece of her writing that redirected me. Their words reminded me that their stories deserved telling. My own subjectivities could never be fully removed; ever-present, they directed my vision towards and away from certain women. A woman close to my own age, a mother, was someone I could sometimes easily identify with. It was often necessary for me to set aside the reasons a woman was imprisoned, especially if it were for child abuse or neglect, crimes which I considered particularly repugnant. I became increasingly tolerant of (deaf to?) vulgar language that would never be allowed in
my home. Throughout the research process, I needed to remember that I was listening with my ears, seeing with my eyes. Peshkin (1988) warns investigators to seek out their “situational subjectivity” throughout the research process and to “disclose to their readers where self and subject bec[o]me joined” (p. 17).

These considerations—contextuality, the hypothesis-generating activity of my work, the collaborative meaning-making with the participants, my reflexive role as a participant-observer, and my own subjectivities—led me to adapt ethnographic methods of data collection and analysis.

My research methodology was also directed by my political and pedagogical interests. As a woman, I was aware that my work, as well as the women’s writing and discursive practice, were not gender-neutral. I recognized the discrepancies between the women’s discourse in the writing community and the privileged academic discourse of the classroom and standardized testing. As Sullivan (1992) points out, “The academic discourses that men and women students must ‘master’ in order to succeed in the academy are largely inscriptions of male subjectivities; women have inherited modes of discourse that they have had little voice in shaping” (p. 39-40). These same discrepancies are present in the prison system with its focus on isolation and disconnection. This feminine perspective informed my work as I worked to understand how women in prison made meaning and socially constructed knowledge in the shadow of the “male subjectivities” of prison.

Collection of the Data

Triangulation, or confirmation of data from multiple sources, investigators and theoretical perspectives is a key element of ethnographic research and “contributes to the trustworthiness of the data” (Glesne and Peshkin, 1992, 24). Open-ended interviews, student writing samples and journals, observations,
anecdotal notes from class, and writing logs were among the variety of data sources that would help to answer my questions.

I held a series of interviews with nine women for the pilot project, and I interviewed two women (one from the pilot) more intensively as case studies for this project. Both questions and answers were discovered from the participants (Spradley, 1979). I followed each participant’s lead, starting with, but rarely ending with, my intended questions.

Typically, research interviews are tape-recorded, but the prison superintendent, as a condition of my research agreement with the institution, forbid the use of a tape recorder. (I assume that this was because of the legal ramifications of taped confessions; the superintendent also guarded the women’s privacy vigilantly when it came to any kind of institutional contact with the news media.) However, by the time I was ready to start interviews, I had established relationships with each participant. They knew that I was genuinely interested in what they had to tell me, and that I was fully engaged with them even as I typed. The use of my laptop computer (which some may consider invasive) actually proved to be a beneficial solution on several counts. Typing during the interviews eliminated the need for lengthy transcription work later; when necessary, to keep up with the conversation, I used a “shorthand” method to omit vowels. Unlike a hit-or-miss tape recorder button, as I “recorded” the words on the computer, it was easy to review them (“play them back”) with each woman simply by reading off the screen; the work went quickly and smoothly. Occasionally, when a participant would cry as she recalled a difficult part of her life, I closed the laptop computer and put it aside—my presence to the woman was more important than “getting down” every word she spoke.

The participants had the final word on the interviews when I returned the transcripts to them for further clarification usually within several days. This
technique provided opportunities for the deletion of misunderstood information, and more often, for the inclusion of additional detailed information. Finally, I asked each woman to choose her own pseudonym as well as those of her family members. This level of participation on the part of the women was in keeping with my goal to give them "voice" throughout the project.

I also collected student writing, including journals, poetry, notes, personal narratives and letters. Students were generous with their offers of copies—some xeroxed, some handwritten—of their writing. For seven days, they made notations in writing logs that asked for genre, purpose and audience for every instance of writing, both in and, perhaps more significantly, out of class. During class, I would often invite a student to record key points of discussion for me on the board or on paper. I kept anecdotal teaching notes and observations from the very beginning. Follow-up conversations with students, Pat (the DOC teacher), as well as other staff and volunteers enriched my understanding of both the classroom and prison cultures.

Analysis of the Data

Throughout the data analysis, I considered multiple sources of information. I compared what Julie said she did to what she actually did. I listened to the women's interpretations of things I had tried to understand by reading their journals or other writing. Reflecting on my own biases and ever-present subjectivities, I drew cautious conclusions from my work and continued to ask questions.

I looked for themes and recurrent patterns in the women's writing and in the data I had gathered. Why did they write, and why did they reportedly write more enthusiastically when they could choose their own topics, and share their writing with others? What did the women choose to write about and why? What purposes
did their writing serve and under what conditions did the women write while in prison? Where did their writing go when it left the classroom or prison?

I considered the categories of the functions of the women's self-sponsored writing in the theoretical frameworks of Moffett (1965) and Britton (1978). The women's writing as well as their classroom discourse could be categorized according to Moffett's four stages of discourse, a continuum that increases the distance between speaker (writer) and audience. I color-coded interview transcripts and writing samples by categories that included purposes such as "recovery of self," "care of children," "relationships," and "legal matters."

Britton's (1978) three principal categories of the functions of writing—transactional, expressive and poetic—as well as his ideas about social interaction between authors and readers were helpful as I reviewed the women's writing logs, my anecdotal notes from class, and written responses given and received by the women. I also considered the social contexts of the women's writing (LeFevre, 1987), indicating on the writing samples contexts that included classroom writing," "written out-of-class," "written and not shared," and "communication with others outside of prison." I noted when a woman wrote for herself, or for others. If she wrote for someone else, I asked what was her relationship to that person. Was an outside audience for the writing always important, and if not, why not?

The women's contextualization of themselves within their writing was also important when I analyzed their uses of written language. Writing that often began as "revised inner speech" (Moffett, 1988) evolved into more dialectical and dialogic forms (journals and letters) that created essential conversations with the self and others (Berthoff, 1987; Gannett, 1992) in an environment where open communication was often disallowed. Often, a woman's journal writing permitted her to "converse" with her self as an "other."
Also, Britton’s (1978) three stages of the writing process—preparation, incubation, and articulation—seem applicable to some of the women’s stages of “writing the self.” One woman “prepares” to write by listening to others’ stories, journal entries, and conversations, while another privately jots ideas—incubates her thoughts—in her journal as a prelude for later writing. For some, “articulation,” or what Britton calls the “pen-to-paper phase” comes with great urgency; for others, it comes later, and perhaps carries a greater risk.

I decided to include case studies to “humanize a stereotype” (Agar, 1980), to tell more fully the stories of two inmate writers. The strength of case study research comes “not in producing generalizable conclusions,” but in its “capacity for detailed and individuated accounts of writers writing” (North, cited in Newkirk, 1992, p. 132). The case study researcher draws on what Newkirk calls “a core of mythic narratives” such as the stories of impediments, struggle, and transformation evident in the work of Mike Rose, Lucy Calkins, Nancie Atwell and others. However, the authority of the case study’s narration—the telling of a story—is not enough either. The value lies in its contextualization and interpretation of cultural values. Contextualizing and interpreting the marginalized lives of women writers in the prison setting, in the writing community, in their school histories, in their families, will add to the believability of these narratives.

Both of the women had demonstrated a long-term commitment to the writing class and her writing outside of class, as well as a willingness and interest to participate in the project to learn more about herself. Such intense participation guaranteed both of them a great deal of individualized attention from me, a bonus in an environment that severely limits their access to family and friends. In fact, it was not unusual for both of the women I studied to go months without seeing any family. Many other inmates were visited weekly or even more often. In retrospect, I
wonder if such concentrated attention from me may have helped both of them to choose to participate.

The complexities of the women's personal literacies at home, school, and in prison could be best portrayed in what Lightfoot (1983) calls "portraiture." The case studies allowed me the luxury of intensive, personal exchanges with both women. Since building rapport and developing trust with women in prison can be challenging and very time-intensive, my time was best spent in extensive exploration of two women, rather than a more cursory look at many more.

Research may bring about changes not only in the researched, but in the researcher. I learned about the women I studied through important relationships, and, through those same relationships, I learned about myself—my own struggle with finding voice, my limiting perceptions, my capacity to care and my commitment to change myself and the existing power structure.

This study only begins to answer my questions about the functions of writing for women in prison and about the value of self-sponsored literacy development for women. It is my hope to enrich the conversations we need to be having with marginalized women in prison about their literacies and their education and to perhaps raise questions about other settings as well. For now, we shall initiate the conversation with Julie, the first case study.
CHAPTER FOUR

JULIE READS AND WRITES TO RECOVER

Introduction

An incarcerated woman’s ability to read and write can enhance her rehabilitation. In addition to providing a base for vocational training through formal education and job skills, it can promote her emotional well-being. Writing and reading in a variety of forms helps many inmates take care of both themselves and others. Celeste writes in her journal to make sense out of her father’s brutality or her own neglect of her children. Letters are slipped under Maria’s cell door at 3 a.m. by the officer-on-duty. She reads and answers them urgently and understands that they provide the only link to her family while apart from them. Cindy writes more formal letters to the judicial system, the social service agencies and the caretakers responsible for her children; she reads lengthy documents to understand her children’s progress while she is apart from them. Julie writes a poem or a personal narrative to share with her counselor or Alcoholics Anonymous group as a way to develop self-understanding and participate more actively in her recovery from substance abuse. The multiple functions of literacy are important to each woman’s emotional health while she writes to heal herself and nurture relationships.

What I have discovered, however, is that formal definitions and criteria for literacy in prison (or progress towards literacy) do not take into account these multiple forms and functions of literacy. Instead, they rely entirely on standardized and decontextualized measures. Even though Julie uses her literacy to successfully
meet her personal needs, she still fails to pass the test to earn her GED certificate. Her disappointment in not being able to score adequately, when combined with previous school failure, creates long-lasting and unnecessary scars that cause her to doubt her progress. When the prison doesn’t acknowledge these other kinds of literacy, Julie also learns to devalue them.

Educational participation in prison can also be hindered by conflicting messages sent by a system that says it values education but then requires an inmate to do manual labor outside of the classroom program that drastically limits time for education. Celeste, an inmate with a history of school failure, takes a great personal risk when she courageously decides to enter the prison classroom. That decision, however, is frequently negated by the prison’s more urgent need for her to shovel snow or unload trucks. It leaves her disheartened and defeated, causing her to question the value of an education.

My principal claim is that an inmate’s literacy development should be supported and encouraged by the correctional system in consistent and meaningful ways that go beyond standardized testing and classroom programs that mimic the unsuccessful school experiences of her childhood. When a woman is encouraged to read and write for her own needs as part of a caring community, her literacy development is furthered in ways that also meet her needs for caring, connection, and concern. In this way, her journey towards literacy is contextualized in personally meaningful and purposeful work that acknowledges her need to care and be cared for.

Julie is a 28-year old mother of four who quit public school at the age of fourteen when she began abusing drugs and alcohol. While in prison, Julie attended school full-time for nine months in preparation for the GED test before the prison authorities reassigned her to a job site out-of-doors. Then, the same authorities
permitted Julie to attend only one class three afternoons a week. The only class available was math, Julie's least favorite subject. She dropped out of school altogether when her frustration overwhelmed her. She chose to continue studying evenings with a volunteer peer-tutor (an inmate) to improve her reading and writing. Even so, by the time she moved to a six-month drug treatment program several months later, Julie had become an active reader and writer who used her new skills to take control of her life.

Julie continues to feel the stigma of not being able to earn her GED certificate while in the prison system. However, during her twenty-four months of incarceration, she learned not only how to read but also how to write. Julie spoke to a group of college students about her growth, "It's a sad thing to say but if I never would have come here [to prison], I probably never would have learned to read and write. I write poems and stories now and I never imagined that learning could be this much fun! But most importantly I am proud to be ME today."

Julie's journey towards literacy demanded perseverance, tremendous courage and self-discovery. In this chapter, I will describe Julie's literate development: her school history and family literacy, her involvement in prison education programs, and her self-sponsored reading and writing while in prison. Her literacies as measured by standardized tests and workbook pages, are limited and deficient, but powerful as evidenced in the deeply personal work she does to grieve the death of her infant daughter, to maintain contact with and regain custody of her children, to make amends with her terminally-ill mother and to recover from long-term substance abuse. Despite her unrewarded attempts to earn her GED certificate, Julie uses reading and writing to make meaning of her world, to connect herself to others and most importantly, to gain a greater understanding of herself in the caring relationships of her life.
Note: As I include Julie’s writing here, I have chosen not to edit but to reproduce it with all of its original spelling, punctuation and grammar. Whenever the spelling makes words especially difficult to decipher, I have included correct spelling in brackets.

Writing Class at the Prison

It wasn’t unusual for several new women to be in my class each week at the prison. As the prison population fluctuated, so did our class. What had originally started as a writing class had evolved into a reading-writing workshop and was open to any inmate who wished to participate. We used the terms “writing class” and “reading-writing class” interchangeably. Students who were enrolled in “Education” were required to be in attendance in my class, but other women who simply enjoyed writing would often attend, too. The class had been active for sixteen months when Julie began to attend.

On her first morning, the classroom was noisy and reeked of cigarettes as women returned from their ten-minute break. Twisting my arm through the thick brown bars to open the window a crack. Louisa shivered, moved away from her seat by the window and pulled her hands up into the long sleeves of her prison-aqua sweatshirt. “I’ll shut it if you’d like,” I called in her direction as I moved hesitantly back towards the window, but she smiled, shaking her head and took a new seat.

“No!” Other students spoke up. “The air feels great!”

“Our tier is about 200 degrees!!”

“Leave it open!”

The fresh air smelled clean and I made a mental note to close the window in a few minutes. I approached the new students, scanning the room quickly to see if I could spot any other latecomers I didn’t recognize. One woman who had come in
late looked a bit familiar but I wasn't positive. When she turned her head towards me, I thought I recognized her. Her hair was a different color than I'd remembered and she was wearing heavy eye makeup. "Charlotte?" I asked, not trusting my memory completely.

"Yup!" she chirped.

"Well, it's good to...I mean, uh, I'm glad to see...you're back!" The class erupted in laughter as I realized, yet again, that a response that worked well after a student's extended absence in public school, just didn't fit in this classroom. Here, in prison, a student's return to class usually meant a re-arrest and more prison time to be served.

"Oh, you know what I mean!" I laughed at myself.

"I wrote some poetry when I was out, Kathe. I don't have it with me, but I think I can remember some of it and write it down for you."

As the laughter died out, Pat (the DOC teacher in whose room I was teaching) covertly slipped me a note that read, "Julie Williams cannot read or write very well. We are trying to be sure she is given a task she can perform. Nancy Andrews is the same." I shot Pat a quizzical look, as if to ask where they were. She glanced quickly in the direction of one of the new students seated at the round table nearest the window. The other new student, Nancy, sat across the table from Julie.

At Julie's place was a pile of textbooks neatly arranged. She nervously straightened and arranged the books, first by thickness and then by size of the cover. She tapped her pencil nervously on the top of the pile. Nancy sat at attention at her place. I approached and welcomed them to the class, "I'm glad you're joining us today, Julie and Nancy. My name is Kathe and I'm the volunteer reading and writing teacher." Julie made brief eye contact and then looked back at the pile of books, squinting. "Here's a writing folder for each of you." I displayed five or six folders of different colors, allowing them to choose.
"You can write about whatever you'd like in this class," I offered. "Today, we'll be reading together, and then you'll have some time to start developing a topic list, things you'd like to write about. Later, some of the women will share their writing with the class. Perhaps someone at your table can help you get started by showing you her topic list." I wanted to be sure to give the students as much control as I could right away. The woman next to Julie opened a red folder, slipped out a paper and leaned towards Julie. I had learned that new students felt most comfortable when "veteran" students encouraged them by sharing their own work.

In the previous few classes, we'd focused on descriptive words and phrases in pieces we had read together and in our own writing. Today, I'd brought in Judy Syfers' piece, "I Want a Wife" from The Bedford Reader (1985). I had mentioned the title to the women for their consideration during the previous class and they'd seemed amused by the fact that it was written by a woman. Several volunteers took turns reading aloud. Julie sat quietly. We laughed heartily at Syfers' litany, "I want a wife who" does this and "I want a wife who" does that. Julie grinned and loosened her grip on the pile of books.

After we read and enjoyed the selection together, I checked the clock. It was nearly 9:30 a.m. and there was a good possibility that the Catholic priest would come today to hear confession from the inmates who wished to see him. His visit was loosely scheduled for alternate Fridays. No matter how riveting the classroom conversation was, or how bravely a woman was sharing writing for the first time, there was always a chance that half the class would noisily clear out if the loudspeaker shrieked, "Catholic confession will now be heard in the meeting room." Little could compete with that.

I asked the women if anyone wanted to share their own writing before we began our free writing time. Louisa giggled and raised her hand. Her Spanish accent was thick and she had been working hard on her spoken English with a lot of
help from some of her classmates. She waved a paper in the air and Rita, seated next to her spoke up, "She wants to read her piece. I have just about finished the translation." Louisa grinned widely as many of the others chimed in.

"Oh, that's great, Louisa!"

"Good for you!"

"Let's hear it."

I asked her to read her piece in Spanish first so the others could enjoy the lyrical sound of her language. I don't speak any Spanish and neither did many of the women, but I felt strongly that we needed to respect Louisa and her language. Those who did understand Spanish often sighed with pleasure as they heard familiar words. Louisa had been embarrassed the first couple of times I'd asked her to read, but seemed more comfortable now. She began to read her piece in a quiet voice, using a bit more inflection as she continued. She finished with a big smile on her face.

Everyone applauded enthusiastically even though many of them didn't understand the full meaning of her words. Then Rita launched into the English version, "What I like very much is dancing, beaches and different trips from town to town. It's very beautiful and it's very fun with the music and all the happy people on the buses." We laughed at Louisa's colorful descriptions of the special dances she'd attended in her homeland. I watched Louisa as Rita read. She clasped her hands with excitement as we enjoyed her memoir.

"Confession will now be heard in the meeting room!" The distorted voice on the loudspeaker blared overhead. Metal chairs noisily scraped the tiled floor and echoed off the concrete walls as the last few words of Louisa's piece were lost in the air.
"Thank you for coming to class today," I spoke loudly to those who were leaving. Louisa came to give me a hug before she left for church. "See you on Monday!"

As the women who remained wrote and chatted among themselves, I approached Julie and squatted down so I could look up at her. "How're you doing?" I asked. She shrugged and held on to her pile of books a bit more tightly. "I just want to let you know," I continued, "that I'm available to help you in whatever way I can. For some women, I've written down their ideas for them, like a secretary—just to get them started. Also, in another week or so, we'll be starting a program that uses children's books to help new readers. I'd love to have you join us. Quite a few of the women will be participating. You get to keep the set of books and they're beautiful. You can give them to your children. Do you have any children, Julie?"

It was a little risky, but I knew that asking about her children was a pretty safe bet. Most of the women were mothers and almost all of them loved to talk about their children. Julie sat up a bit straighter in her chair and let one arm slide off the table onto her blue-jeaned leg.

"Yeah, I have four children. They're with my mom." I focused my eyes on Julie as she told me about her three sons and her daughter. Her face brightened as she spoke and other women at her table stopped talking and leaned in to listen.

I made sure the women had plenty of time to talk during class. Talk usually precedes and enables writing (Calkins, 1983; Graves, 1983, 1991; Murray, 1968; Reif, 1992). Julie remained rather quiet during her first few days in class. She listened attentively as other women shared pieces about their lives and their children. She recalls:

In the first reading-writing class [I went to], I was very scared. I didn't know . . . I didn't dare to move. I just kind of froze. And then when I was asked to write, I was very leery—big time! I know it took me a few times to come to class and write. The first piece I wrote was "My Kids Say."
Julie brought "My Kids Say" to class but didn't want to read it to the group. I stayed after class to talk to individuals, especially those who were quiet during class. Sometimes, a woman would want me to read her journal and respond in writing. At other times, a woman would want to tell me about a surprise visit from one of her children, or to show me a romantic letter from her boyfriend. Julie remained in her seat that day until the room had cleared. Then she stood up and approached me, paper in hand.

"Here. You want to read this?"

"I'd love to hear it. Would you read it to me?" I asked, taking a seat and offering a chair to Julie.

"Oh, I don't think so," she answered. I looked at her with a smile and told her that I felt strongly about hearing a woman's writing in her own voice. She hesitated, then grimaced and took the seat next to me. Pat, the classroom teacher, left the room as she often did when a student remained behind with me. Making sure the rest of the room was empty, Julie read her first piece:

My Kids Say
I mixed up the kids lives and minds I am in prison 5 sales of cocain. I have taken something from theme that is me. I'm here and not with them. They are so little, they don't know what to do. Do they ask why I'm not there? Why can't she be here? Do we have to stay here with Mem? Does mommy still love us? They tell us she doesn't. Do you want us mommy? They say, Did she want her drugs more then us? Mommy don't love drugs. Love us. Why is she gone from us? Mommy come home an stay. We love you anyway.

"I can really hear your children's voices," I responded quietly. Julie hadn't told me before why she was in prison. It was the first time she'd written about it. Unlike some other students, Julie didn't ask me if I liked her writing, or if I thought
it was good. It was enough for her that I simply heard it. We sat together quietly and I listened as she talked about her children.

Julie's primary need to care for her children (Noddings, 1984) was clearly evident in this first piece of writing. She immediately took responsibility for her damaged relationship with them by confessing to her crime. She then invoked their presence through a dialogic script in which she wrote both roles of mother and children. She experimented with voice as she first wrote in her own voice, "I'm here and not with them," and then became the children, pleading, "Why can't she be here?" In her caring relationship with her children, she is the one-caring, and they are the cared-fors (Noddings). Julie attempted to take on their reality as her own (p. 14), by imagining their questions, "Does mommy still love us?" and "Do you want us mommy?" Through her clearly-stated words, Julie tried to experience the pain she had caused her children.

However, even in her imagination, Julie couldn't fully experience herself with voice. In the context of the written imagined talk of mother and children, there was no two-way conversation or response, no evidence of being heard, only a series of questions and statements. In the echo of her words and her children's words, there was still silence; the two-way communication was incomplete. Julie couldn't "hear" herself; she couldn't complete the acts of hearing and responding in "My Kids Say."

Ong (1982) pointed out the paradox of "intersubjectivity" in human communication when he wrote, "Human communication is never one-way. Always, it not only calls for response but is shaped in its very form and content by anticipated response . . . I have to be somehow inside the mind of the other in advance in order to enter with my message, and he or she must be inside my mind" (pp. 176-177). Julie, in her absence from her children both while she was in prison and before, doesn't know her children very well; she can't anticipate their response and in that way, she still can't "find" her own voice. In the piece, Julie works at
getting "inside the mind" of her children as evidenced by writing more than twice as
many sentences from her children's perspective than from her own stance as mother.
Yet, she interrupted her writing, stopping short of a direct response to her children's
questions, and did not complete the communicative loop.

Over the next few weeks, Julie became more attentive during class, actively
listening, looking at others, responding to others' work with smiles and tears. She
often stayed after class to share her writing with me. I listened and repeated aloud
phrases she'd written that had struck me. She usually wrote about her children or
about being in jail. She shared her writing only with me, understanding that my
response would always be attentive, encouraging and nonjudgmental.

I was curious about Julie's participation in her other classes, including
literature, spelling and math, all taught by inmate teaching assistants. As she
wrote and talked more in the writing class, I wondered if she were writing or
reading in her other classes. I asked Julie and she said things were O.K. but that
she was having trouble with some of the reading. "Those books are too hard for me
so I just listen a lot," she said. I checked with Pat, the DOC teacher, to see what
feedback, if any, she'd had on Julie's participation. She told me that Julie had
broken down crying in spelling class. Some time later, Julie recalled:

**Julie:** It was in Trina's class . . . we had a spelling test and I couldn't
spell the words and there were a bunch of girls in the class and I started
to cry. The teacher and a lot of the girls in the class told me it was O.K.
They got me to understand that it was O.K. to cry, and that I could write
a word over and over again until I got it.

**Kathe:** So the support you had from the other people in class was very
important?

**Julie:** If it were not for those other girls in the class who told me it was
O.K. that I cried, I think I would have quit school. I felt real low.

**Kathe:** You felt low?
Julie: Oh, yeah, I was froze to my seat. I didn't pick my head up. Until the other girls left. That's when I told the teacher (Pat, the DOC teacher) and Trina (the inmate teaching assistant who really taught the spelling class) that I couldn't read or write. It was the first time that I had told them I was a dyslexic person...I was bad on reading and writing...real bad.

Kathe: What was that like to finally be able to tell somebody?

Julie: The words, at first, didn't want to come out. But after I told them I felt relieved, and they were really into wanting to help me. They asked me if I wanted to read and write. I didn't think I wanted to. I had always been laughed at because I couldn't read or write. I definitely didn't want anything to do with reading and writing. Part of me was scared. Part of me wanted to learn. There were a couple of girls who laughed. I remember when Nancy (another inmate teaching assistant) asked me to read in class one day and I couldn't. She asked me to tell the others why. And one woman laughed. After that I told her why. After that I eased up a little bit...

The encouragement and concern of her classmates helped Julie to take risks in her other classes. However, she continued to compare herself negatively to her peers, often focusing on the grades she earned from her other teachers, rather than on her progress. She recalled her quietness in another prison class:

I felt low, real low. I felt that I wasn't smart like the other girls were. The girls could always keep up with the work. I could never keep up. I always gave in papers that weren't done. I wrote on the paper, "I can't do it." My grades were 38-46. Those were my grades when I first started school. I thought I could never make friends because I couldn't read or write. I stayed quiet and stayed to myself and stayed with the flow. It took me a long time to make friends here. I wouldn't talk to nobody. I kind of had a stutter to my words when I first came here. A lot of words I couldn't pronounce.

Julie continued to write for our class, and noticed that her writing looked and sounded different from the others'. She asked me to help her change a new piece, "Children," to make it look more like Rachel's or Charlotte's poetry, student work which had been copied and distributed to the class. She wanted to revise her piece of writing to look more like theirs—short phrases, line breaks, indentations. Julie's
words were much more stream-of-consciousness and prose-like. She was quite eager to "fix" each piece of writing and brought drafts to me after class nearly every day. She told me that late at night in her cell, she copied and recopied pages of her writing, experimenting with spelling and line breaks, making successive changes.

Julie recalled being focused on the line breaks in "Children" as she worked hard to make her own writing look more like her peers' poetry that she heard and read in class. She seemed to mistrust her own style, and remembered, "And then we broke it down.. You worked with me days and days on this to break it down.. Seven different times." I wanted her to focus on the message of her writing, but helped her with spelling of individual words and suggested line breaks when she asked. She discarded the preliminary drafts of "Children" and kept only this final draft of her fourth piece written in prison:
Children

Well, I have 4 children, 3 Boys and 1 girl.
Children remind me of a rime.
Just like this one
Little girls are made out of sugar & spice
   And everything nice
Little boys are made out of snails and puppy dog tails.
Well being a mom of 4 children is a wonderful thing in my life. The life my children have made for me
I would never want to change
   The life I’ve made for my children I want to change.

I can remember my first child being born.
I was so happy. I didn’t know anything about being a mom. My children’s ages are 12, 10, 5, 2
There quite little ones,
I put a lot of pain in there hearts
The love they have for me they can’t even share with me,
The feelings they have they can’t even talk to me, I have hurt them so.
I love them deeply inside of me
So I spell out all the hurten words. And turn my head when I speak. I wash them smile and they think it’s Christmas or their birthdays
See my sentiments is coming up soon.
   This is going to be pure hell for me.
   Not being with my children. I miss the kisses and hugs that they gave me everyday. And I even miss there massey rooms.
   When they needed someone to talk to I was there
   When they cried I held them tight When they fell I picked them up to make sure they were alright.
When I see theme now I wish I can be there to be there mom. And tell theme every day I Love you, And everything is going to be alright.
  See I lossed my children 3 months ago.
  And I am sorry. What I have done to theme.

Love Julie
Your Mom

In contrast to "My Kids Say," this piece of writing was written entirely in first person, from her perspective as mother. Julie was more comfortable with her own voice, and no longer found it necessary to "speak" through her children. The audience was unspecified, although she decided to end the piece as if it were a letter to her children. Now experiencing herself as unsilenced, Julie read the piece for the class soon thereafter. It was received warmly by the others. Most were aware that it was Julie's first attempt at reading aloud in class. They questioned her eagerly.

"What are their names?"

"Do they come to visit you?"

"When did you see them last?"

Such questioning often led us into more conversations about the women's children—the anticipation of a weekly visit, the disappointment of a missed birthday party, and the ongoing concern about their children's care. Polaroid snapshots taken in the prison visiting room were shared between tables, between mothers. I was hopeful that these kinds of responses, based on the content of the writing rather than on grammar and spelling, would help Julie and the others to keep writing. Such conversations not only validated the writers and stimulated more writing and sharing but also contributed to a sense of community in the classroom (Atwell, 1987; Elbow, 1973; Graves, 1983, 1990; Murray, 1985; Reif, 1992).
As they continued to support each other's writing and ideas, some women who claimed to not get along with each other on the tiers were surprised by their willingness to listen to each other in the classroom. Sometimes, they continued to listen to each other after class. They found that language, written and shared in a supportive community, offered a powerful alternative to an often alienating and divisive prison existence. As the women exchanged words, through poetry, letters, journal entries and personal narratives, they extended the caring community beyond the walls of the classroom.

**Julie's History as a Reader and Writer**

Julie identified herself as dyslexic and I was curious about her previous school history as well as her recollections of reading and writing at home as a child. Julie's prison experience was not unique; learning disabilities occur in inmate populations at a rate two to three times higher than in the general population (Herrick, 1988). Nationally, nearly sixty percent of women in state prisons are school dropouts (U.S. Department of Justice, 1991). How had Julie's learning difficulties been addressed when she was a child? What were the effects of her experience with literacy in her home and in her school? Were there gaps between her home and school literacies and, if so, what were the consequences of those gaps?

As a child in the 1970's, Julie lived with her mother and her two sisters in a New England urban area. In describing her early life, she told me, "I'm not from an 'alcohol home.' There was no alcohol or drugs in my house. I was never raised with it. It was a quiet, peaceful home. It was just my mom, me and my two sisters. But I was always a troublemaker."
Julie's "trouble making" involved unsafe activities, some of which endangered her life. Her great-aunt Frances lived nearby and helped Julie's mom with raising the children, especially when they were young:

**Julie:** My Aunt Frances would always be there to help my mom, she's pretty smart. She passed away about 10 years ago. She helped my mom a lot. She was my mom's aunt, my great-aunt. She used to have an old fashioned car and she'd take out the seat and lock the doors and make like a playpen for us kids. There were four of us. My Aunt Frances adopted my cousin Jeff. . . . We always lived in a duplex. She always lived in the projects. Boy, if she got mad at us girls, she'd let us have it! I always wanted to get at her plants. She always told me not to touch her plants. I didn't. I put my hands behind my back and bit them! Like the moth balls and Clorox I drank too! If I wasn't in the hospital for stitches, I was in there getting my stomach pumped.

**Kathe:** How old were you then?

**Julie:** I was just starting school. I think I was three or four when I ate the moth balls. They went to the Salvation Army box and robbed it, my mom and Aunt Frances. There were purses in there that had moth balls in 'em. I can't remember if it was the Clorox or moth balls, but they kept me in the hospital overnight. I remember breaking antennas off the cars. I got a whipping that time. I did some radical things.

Aunt Frances also helped Julie's mother with reading. Although Julie didn't describe her mother as dyslexic, she identified her as a poor reader. Julie's stepfather helped her mother to read as well, "She's been with him for almost seventeen years. He helps her if she doesn't know what a word means. She's like me. She always had a part of her family there [to help her read]."

I asked Julie if she remembered what bedtime was like at her house when she was a little girl and if anyone read to her at bedtime. She told me, "I really can't remember anyone reading to us girls. I never really had a life of people reading to me that I can remember." She paused and thought. She remembered very little printed material in her home except for some posters and her mother's mail order catalogues:

All I can remember is a prayer that we said at night. My mom would get it from Artex paint [a mail-order company]. It was a poster that had three
prayers on it. We each had a poster with a special prayer on it. I remember it. Each of us would say our one prayer. My mom would paint with those paints.

So many years later, Julie now recited the familiar prayer that she had also taught to her own four children, "Now I lay me down to sleep. I praise [sic] the Lord my soul to keep. Guide me safely through the night. Wake me with the morning light. Amen." Julie still remembered feeling close to her mother as she recited the nightly prayer, and told me that she wanted to pass this oral tradition on to her own children.

Julie's mother had also passed on to her the tradition of mail order catalogue shopping. I was fascinated by this practice that also limited her mother's personal contact with retailers, perhaps a strategy to hide her illiteracy. Julie answered with great enthusiasm:

Julie: [They are] the clubs my mom belonged to, like Popular Club. It sells TVs, stereos. Artex sells paints.

Kathe: Are they like Tupperware? She'd sell products and earn credits for products herself?

Julie: She would get whatever she wanted from the catalog. My TV and stereo cost $900, nearly $1000. She bought me my dishes, my silverware, my canisters. She goes through Fingerhut and all those guys too. My double stroller. Most everything I own comes from the Popular Club. There are coupons too. You can buy almost anything. Whatever I order, my mom gets half of that. That's how she got everybody Christmas gifts. Ten grandchildren! She could never get them Christmas gifts if she didn't do it that way!

Knowing that her mother couldn't read well, I was curious about how she managed ordering items. Julie explained that her stepfather helped her mother with all of the ordering. Julie passed these same few traditions—prayers recited together at bedtime and the pleasures of catalog ordering—on to her own children years later. Despite the few literary traditions of Julie's childhood home, it was important to her to share them with her own children years later.
However, she sadly remembered her mother's failed attempts to help her with reading and reflected on the intergenerational legacy of illiteracy, "She tried to help me read, but she's like me with my kids. Her hands were tied." Julie saw her mother's future, and perhaps, even their relationship, as limited by illiteracy. She repeatedly linked her substance abuse, her loneliness, her isolation and her always "being in trouble" to her inadequate performance at school as a child. Finally, a pregnancy at the age of fourteen provided Julie an escape from school. However, the escape plan was incomplete; in the home she made for her children, she was trapped with her frustration when she couldn't read to them or help them with their homework. Like her own mother, Julie's "hands were tied" as she saw herself as limited and inadequate.

Having had limited exposure to reading and writing at home, Julie traced her difficulties with reading in grade school. School was where she remembers first being labeled as limited and deficient:

I tried my best to stay away from it [reading] in school. When they asked me to read, I'd say no. I only read in resource room and speech. I tried to stay away from it. But I had good penmanship, though! I had workbooks, and sometimes you had to fill in the words. I really can't remember if I really sat down and wrote in school, but I remember having seven workbooks. In the third, fourth and fifth grades, they always used the same book. I was in Mrs. Hall's class. We did the same thing each year. She was the special needs teacher in fifth and sixth. Miss Crawford was third grade. Miss Tippitt was fourth grade. Miss Connell was first half of fifth grade. Then I moved into Mrs. Hall's special needs class.

Third grade wasn't too bad, I went to resource and speech. But by fourth grade, things got tough. I started crying. I was terrible in fourth grade. I tried to do the work but I just couldn't. I just passed by the skin of my teeth in fourth grade. They started the testing near the end of fourth grade. That's when they found I had dyslexia. My grade levels never changed. It's always been the same work. I could never get any higher. It could go lower, but it never went any higher.

Julie saw herself as "stuck," even as early as the end of fourth grade. Not only did she see her academic performance as not changing, but also the classroom
materials did not change. I asked her if she indeed thought that the materials she used in seventh grade were the same as those she had used at the beginning of fifth grade. She answered with conviction:

Yup, they were. I was in the same class all day, and the kids knew I couldn’t do it. Even the girls who were in the special needs class, they had a math or English class out, but the rest of the time they were in Mr. Porter’s class. But there were about five of us who spent all day with him.

Julie recalled how she felt about being pulled out of class for extra therapy:

Julie: I always felt frustrated. Then they called my name to go to Speech Therapy—her name was Miss Walker. She’d take out the flashcards. I always had trouble with the sh, ch, th [sounds]. It was frustrating to say these sounds. I couldn’t read the little words like tree and saw. I was really frustrated.

Kathe: Did you ever read stories?

Julie: Once I quit school, I never read any books.

Kathe: How about when you were in school? Did you read any books in school or just single words and sentences?

Julie: There was one book we always read. “See Jack run. Jack has spots.” Little words like that. We usually just read words.

Kathe: And did you ever do any writing?

Julie: No! Never even wrote a letter to nobody. I got too frustrated with it. Like, in school, they’d say it’s library time. I would pick a book and I would just keep it in my desk unless it has nice, colorful pictures. I remember crying a lot in school because I couldn’t do it. I remember thinking the kids were always looking at me and laughing ’cause I couldn’t do it.

I had a lot of fun at the resource room though. In the speech therapy, the teachers were kind of neat. Miss Walker was an older lady, but she got me to get the sh, ch, and th down. I had a speech impediment in third grade. I was a hyper child. I could never sit still. They put me on adrenaline.

Kathe: Ritalin?

Julie: Yup, there you go! My mom said I got addicted to it. She had to flush it down the toilet. If I had a hard time at school, I’d tell her I forgot to take it. So she knew I was getting addicted it, so she flushed it. So the lady at
mental health took more time with me. It didn't work. I was always in trouble.

What had begun for Julie as a reading problem was now compounded by a speech impediment, hyperactivity, ridicule from her peers, and her mother's concern about an "addiction" to the medication that was supposed to help her in school. All of these concerns, as well as Julie's classroom placement and increased time with the mental health worker, kept her distanced from her peers.

Julie attended school before the mainstreaming of special needs students had become the common practice that it is now. She had referred to her placement as a "resource room," which usually indicated that part of the day was spent in a regular classroom. She told me about trying regular classes:

At the beginning of 8th grade, I tried a [regular] math class. I cried through the whole math class. I just went one day. I told him I couldn't do it. He [Mr. Porter] put me back in his class. Him and Miss McCoy worked with me. When the other kids went out for their classes, he had work there for us. I only stayed in 8th grade for two weeks. Someone started calling me names because I was pregnant, so I quit when I was fourteen.

Julie made the decision despite being under the legal age of sixteen to quit school. Separated from most of her peers at school, she decided to sever the ties more completely by dropping out altogether. I remarked to Julie that she sounded unhappy at school. Remembering how she'd identified herself at home, I asked her if she also had been a troublemaker at school. She laughed, "I loved school! I enjoyed it, I just couldn't do it, so I gave up. I can remember being in Mr. Porter's class. He was a cool teacher. The class would be loud, and I'd lose my concentration. He'd let me go out behind the lockers to do my work."

Julie's classroom experiences in the formalized prison curriculum (classes other than the writing class) were similar to her grade school experience. Skills were often taught apart from meaningful context. She was tremendously self-conscious and sure that her classmates were laughing at her failures. It was difficult for her to maintain concentration in class and she felt most successful when
she could work alone or in a one-to-one relationship with a trusted adult. In these classes, Julie was still frustrated and self-conscious, expecting herself to perform at least as well as her classmates. She identified strategies that still seemed to work for her:

I'm still like that. I find a quiet place to go to be by myself. I'll have Pat write a slip out to let me go to the [prison] library. When Trina has science, all the girls can get their papers done in the class. I'm always the last one done. Trina will read the story, we'll go over the paper. Then I need to read it again, go over it all again. That's frustrating. I should comprehend it the first time.

I just feel I should be like the other girls. They can get it the first time. I should be smart just like them girls. I should be smart, not slow! It stinks because they can get 100 the first time, and I need to go back a second time to get a 100. Sometimes I get 80, I'll go back over the story. But there are just some things that she picks out that are hard. The other girls, it's not hard for them.

Rather than understanding these learning strategies as positive and helpful to her, Julie saw them as setting herself aside from others, making her different, a failure. She could remember only a few names of school-aged friends. As a child and even now, as an adult, she saw herself as a loner who was shunned by others:

Julie: I always felt by myself. I didn't hang around with too many people. The girls I did hang around we always smoked pot or got drunk. I was a loner, even in third, fourth, fifth. I didn't really get close to anybody. I'm still like that. I still don't get close to anyone. I try not to. They just leave. It happens to me every time. Kathy Recker in third grade—we got really close. She left. Cindy Wright—we got really close and she left. And there were a couple of others. They would move and go to another school. Or I would move and go to another school. My mom moved a lot. I've been to a lot of schools—three different states [in New England]. I don't remember too much about two of them.

Sixteen was the legal age to quit school and Julie had quit at fourteen. She explained that after quitting she'd attended a learning center for adults where she worked in the day care facility while she was pregnant:

I worked in the day care. I had fun there. I kept on getting sick every night when I walked home. Every night I kept getting sick. I was pregnant. I quit school and took care of my pregnancy and took care of my kid.
Then I got sick and they tried to send a tutor to my house. Welfare paid for it. But I just lost interest. I always made sure I wasn’t around the days she was supposed to show up. I ran away. I didn’t need it. I was pregnant. That’s when I had Cory. Then I had another at 17. I had five kids by the time I was twenty-five.

I stayed on alcohol and drugs. I smoked a lot of pot when I was pregnant with Cory. A lot of alcohol with Ryan. With Kacey I did a lot of cocaine. I tried not to touch anything when I was pregnant with Lise. She was O.K. but the doctor said she’s going blind. A lot of us have it in our family. Not the boys, just the girls. The eye disease is hereditary. When my mom got my kids [when I came to prison], they had lead poisoning. Lise was going blind and had bad ear infections. My kids were all falling apart.

Julie’s substance abuse, as well as her inability to read and write interfered dangerously with her ability to effectively and safely parent her children. She recalled one such incident with horror:

I overdosed Cory! He went through a double hernia when he was six weeks old. I gave him too much medicine. We couldn’t get him awake. My mom took him for the weekend after I gave him his medicine. I was under investigation for child abuse. I had to tell the welfare people that I couldn’t read. So every time the kids needed medication, my mom reads the prescription now. She can read them better than me. She bought me a special spoon. Then she writes it down for me and I put it up on the calendar.

Knowing that Julie’s mother’s skills with reading and writing were also limited, I was terrified as I listened to Julie. The legacy of illiteracy had been passed from mother to daughter. Julie’s own childhood had been far from safe, and now, years later, her own children were in danger. Together, however, Julie and her mother had strategized to make the best of a bad situation. As a young mother and active substance abuser, returning to school was out of the question. Julie saw no way out and concentrated her efforts on fooling others into thinking she was literate.

Julie tried to hide her illiteracy from others outside of her home. She remembered taking her children for immunizations, “When I took my babies to get shots, they’d give me a pamphlet. I just made sure that the nurse told me what I needed to know: no fevers, no puking, whatever. I could never read it. It had big words.”
Julie reminded me that several years ago her daughter Kacey had died of SIDS (Sudden Infant Death Syndrome) at the age of four months. Her recollections seemed somewhat confused, as if she never clearly understood what really happened to her daughter. Again, Julie relied heavily both on her mother’s theories about childrearing and hearsay:

“When Kacey passed away, I told the doctor I was high on cocaine when I went into labor. The umbilical cord was wrapped around her neck. She swallowed some of my blood and got a blood infection and it made her sick. She had to stay in the hospital for six weeks. The vessels in her eyes were broke, but other than that she was very healthy.

After she died, they told me I was on twenty-four hour surveillance, because they hadn’t done the autopsy yet. They said it was SIDS. There was nothing wrong with her, no drugs in her body. I blamed myself for her death but it’s something that happens to babies. They found out, or it’s my theory. They can get into a deep, deep sleep and forget to think and forget to breathe. That’s my theory that babies can forget how to think about breathing. My mom used to tell us never feed the kids bananas before they go to sleep because they’ll go into a deep sleep. It’s too heavy on your system. I did give her bananas the night before she died. I don’t think it had anything to do with it. But my mother would never give us bananas before we went to bed.

As a precaution, Julie was advised to have her next baby on a heart monitor, and to take a CPR (cardiopulmonary resuscitation) course but her limited reading skills made the course work difficult and the operation of the baby heart monitor intimidating. Even though Julie had reported her poor reading skills to the welfare authorities, there was no interagency communication about Julie’s needs; the CPR instructor had no way to know that Julie couldn’t read unless she chose to tell him, and she did not. She remembers the tactics she used to hide her illiteracy from her instructor:

Julie: I had to take CPR...that’s difficult when you can’t read. You have to read the booklet, and you have to know all about those leads. They came in from Smithtown. He [The trainer] trained me with the machine. We practiced on the doll, a CPR doll. That took four weeks. He came right to my house.

Kathe: Did he know you couldn’t read?
Julie: No, I never really told anybody. I kept it inside.

Kathe: How did you hide it from the CPR trainer?

Julie: He would read to me and we'd practice with the doll. I'd always tell him that I didn't like to read. I made believe I'd read it ahead of time. I always made believe I could read.

As Julie's children grew, she tried to hide her secret from them, too. She realized that she was missing something important in her relationship with her children:

Julie: When I couldn't read to my kids, I was losing out. I heard mothers say, "When I read to my kids, they fall asleep." I spent over $75 on books and tapes because I couldn't read to my kids myself.

Kathe: So, did that mean your kids thought you could read?

Julie: Yeah, only the 12 year old knew [I couldn't read]. He'd read me the notes that came home from school. If it was a permission slip, I'd just sign it after he read it. If it was a note of concern about them being concerned about his behavior, he'd read it to me—lots of big words. Cory was always the big reader. He read to the kids a lot.

Kathe: Do you remember trying to teach yourself to read with the tapes?

Julie: I remember telling Allen to follow the words with his finger and sometimes the words seemed fast and it got him confused. So I'd make an excuse and go do the dishes. On the night I got arrested, I was going to sit down and watch TV, and read to them, play some tapes with books, play a game with Cory. Everyday Allen wanted to listen to those books and tapes. I never stopped him. I would always put in those tapes and books. I'd always find something else to do. I don't want my kids to grow up not knowing how to read. It's a lonely world.

Julie clearly wants better lives for her own children, lives that include reading and writing. As she openly shared her childhood memories of home and school, she remembered very little reading and writing in her home with her mother, her sisters, her great-aunt and stepfather. School was a place she loved but her failure to perform adequately necessitated special class placements and speech therapy. School continued to challenge, overwhelm and frustrate her until she
became an active substance abuser and dropped out at the age of fourteen expecting her first child.

Five children and eleven years later, Julie still couldn't read or write except in very limited ways. It had nearly cost the life of her son, and was certainly compromising the quality of care she could provide to her children. She was still terribly humiliated by her lack of skill: other than her mother, Julie had only revealed the shame of her illiteracy to the Welfare Department who offered her no help. She worked hard to fool everyone else, including all of her children except for the oldest.

In prison, Julie was encouraged by Pat, the DOC teacher, to attend classes since her skills were so inadequate as measured by the educational testing completed at the prison. However, while the intake information was being processed, Julie "hid out" in her cell, confiding to a few corrections officers that she was afraid to come to school. Pat visited her cell several times to encourage her. Finally, the classification board (consisting of the two social workers) made the decision that it was in Julie's best interest to attend the prison education program and forced the issue. As part of the education program, Julie was required to attend my writing class.

Once in class, Julie worked to hide her learning problems from the others. With the caring support of other writers, she soon understood that her quality of life, including the relationships with those most important to her—her children—could improve if she could read and write. She made the courageous decision to expose her learning difficulties and use her prison time to focus on improving her reading and writing. She listened to other women's stories and worked hard to tell her own. She wanted to understand more fully and independently how to care for her children. Not only did she want to be able to read warning labels and prescription bottles, but also she wanted to help them with their homework, and experience the
pleasure of reading them to sleep. She wrote letters and made cards for her children, knowing that such correspondence helped her maintain her role as mother while she served time in prison. As Julie continued to write and share, she discovered new ways to take care of her children, and, perhaps more importantly, to take care of herself.

**Julie Writes to Grieve**

After only a few weeks, Julie’s voice was gaining strength. She continued to write on a variety of topics in our writing class, but would almost always come back to write about her children. She was getting more and more comfortable reading her own writing in our class, but I wondered if she were beginning to read aloud in her other classes. The texts read in other classes were usually written by someone else. I asked Julie if she were more comfortable reading her own work than reading the work of others. She told me:

Yeah, I feel more relaxed with it because I know what I’m trying to say, but with a book I don’t know what they’re trying to say. I don’t know if I can read it as it’s written, but with my own stuff, I know I can read it as it’s written.

Several weeks after sharing “Children” in class, Julie brought me the first of several pieces of writing about her daughter, Kacey. This signaled Julie’s first attempt to grieve the loss of her daughter through her writing. The piece was titled “My Daughter” and as she so often did in previous pieces of writing, Julie let Kacey speak to her through the words. It reminded me of the one-way conversational style of Julie’s first piece, “My Kids Say.” Kacey’s words are the final words written, and Julie signs Kacey’s name rather than her own, as if signing a letter, giving the final voice to her daughter rather than to herself. She found it necessary to give voices to the other—Kacey—in order to complete the writing:
To My Daughter up above.
You been gone 4 years
My heart hurt for you.
I miss you so
I lie in bed and think of you.
I sometime see you in the clouds
I wonder if you're still small
Or are you a big girl now.
Is your eyes still green
As the grass in the fall.
Is your hair still red as a
flower that is coming up
throw the winter ground.
I can remember
Holden you so tight
Your skin so smooth
When you were alive
I can remember the looks
You gave me
Just like saying
Mommy I am going away
But I love you so
Kacey

Julie wrote frequently about her loss of Kacey, and worked hard to restore and mend their lost relationship through her writing. Capturing the few memories she had about Kacey were vitally important. She often included specific details she remembered—the color of Kacey's eyes, the touch of her skin, how she smelled. She wrote about things they'd missed sharing together—birthdays and holidays. And in her writing, Julie could safely wonder about what it would have been like if Kacey hadn't died. I remarked to her one day after class that her writings about Kacey reminded me of journal entries, "It's almost like you've written these pieces over a period of time to help you remember Kacey. I wonder how they would all go
together to show how you’ve been since she died. What was it like for you soon after she died? And a year later? And now?”

We talked for awhile that day about journals and diaries. Julie knew that other women in class kept journals, but she hadn’t tried one yet. She was eager to write about Kacey in this way and we discussed how she might use the “pieces” she had already written to create “a piece” that told her story and Kacey’s. Over the next few weeks, Julie worked hard both during class and on her own time to write “My Thoughts to Kacey.” She sought help from friends outside of class, especially with spelling. She included many parts of her previous writing, and for the first time, she read several successive drafts to her classmates. With their encouragement, she submitted the final edited draft for publication in the fourth issue of Dream Weavers, the prison literary magazine started by our class. For the first time, Julie’s voice is clear through the entire piece, and she doesn’t give away her voice to someone else. She signs her own name at the end. This is Julie’s final draft:

My Thoughts to Kacey

When you were three months old, I took care of you.

But then you went away. I can remember your eyes green like your daddy’s. Your hair was so pretty, like a sunset going down into the red mountains.

You were so small, all you could do was sleep and cry. But I loved you so and now you’re gone.

The First Year - 1988

The first year when you were gone, it was so hard to go through life itself. I tried to go forward but just kept going backwards. I was lost in your love. I missed you so much.
The Second Year - 1989

The years are gone by. This is one birthday I missed you and cried. You should be walking and talking now. Happy Birthday. I missed watching you grow and all the things you were going to do. Even Christmas was bad for me.

What did I do to miss out on you? Your first word—would it have been Mommy or Daddy? I wonder how old you would have been when you started to walk.

The Third Year - 1990

I think a lot about if it is my fault you're gone. My thoughts go through me like a knife through my heart. When pictures are taken of the family, there seems to be a missing spot. When special holidays come around, I say to myself, I wish you were here.

The Fourth Year - 1991

Things I wonder about you...and the feelings I have for you. I can write them all down but it would take up all the paper in the world. It's hard to put them down so I'll keep them in my heart. It seems that I can't forget about you. All I can do is share things with you while you look down on me. I wish I knew if you can remember all of us. One of these days we'll meet and be together.

I love you Kacey.

Love,
Mom

In "My Thoughts to Kacey," Julie was finally able to take care of herself by writing about her own feelings and allowing herself to fully express them without deferring to someone else. Her participation in the writing class, as both one-caring and cared-for, allowed Julie to begin taking care of herself (Noddings, 1984). As Julie worked on revisions of "My Thoughts to Kacey," her self-care was evident in her willingness to start a journal; she created a physical, textual place of her own.
Julie's first journal was given to her by another inmate; it was a manila file folder filled with blank paper. Very little is secret and private in prison, and the journal became for Julie what Mallon (1984) calls the prisoner's "secret room," answering her urgent need for a place to "come alive." The first entries were short and always dated. As she experimented with the genre, Julie's journal entries became more frequent:

April 10, 1992—This book was give to me from Donna Brown

April 20, 1992—I am sick of crying

April 22, 1992—Another day in prison Same old shit. I am not in the mood to talk to eney one today. I can't stand Cheryl and its a bad feeling.

April 23, 1992—I found out my court date today. I hope it turns out good

April 25 1992—My moms legs went bad agin and I can't see the kids mybe next Saterday

April 27 1992—Well Hi I don't know what to do with myself. I am sick of being here. Dunit I what to go home.

April 28th 1992—Well its not a very good day. My room-mate went batty. My dotughter has been gone for 4 years today. And I got my 3 monuth chip tonight

This reference to her 3-month chip was the beginning of Julie's writing about her recovery from substance abuse. Julie was attending Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous meetings at the prison and had been sober and drug-free for three months. This was a very significant event for Julie, and she chose to record the event in her journal.

As Julie continued participating in her recovery meetings, the education program and writing class, peer-tutoring and the children's literature reading program, she continued to write in her journal. She experimented with more conventional spelling and punctuation, but kept her journal to herself. Myerhoff and Metzger (1980) suggest that journals are essentially "secret and private"
because "the emerging self must be its own witness first" (p. 105). Julie's journal was a place where she could safely experience her feelings of disappointment, frustration and loneliness. Writing in a journal in prison is risky business; the threat of exposure is ever-present. However, for many, the benefits are worth the inherent risks. Julie wrote in her journal knowing that a corrections officer could take it from her at any time.

Within a short time, Julie's entries became longer; she was learning how to use her journal. The relational focus of her life (Gilligan, 1982) was clearly evident as she referred to significant people in her life in every entry: her mother, her children, her boyfriend, her penpal, and an old friend now in prison. Julie reflected on her mood for the day—glad, good, fine, laughter, "giting alog good," bad—and also used the entries to "mark time." She even started making entries throughout the day, noting her changing feelings throughout the day. Julie's voice became clearer and stronger:

April 29 1992—Well I am glad todays better then yesterday I feel good I talked to my mom and she's doing good Thank God

April 30 1992—Well here I am another day behind the walls. This morning is fine. Well an old friend from the strees I now moved in my room today. I end this day

May 2, 1992—Well here it is Saterday morning. Alot of laughter and Trish and I giting alog good. Well the day ended. I wrote to Scott He will not write back and I feel bad. But the day went good. The kids came up and I had a good visit with theme.

May 3th 1992—I gont my letter back from [the drug treatment half-way house] and it was good news. My pin-pale wrote to Colleen to. I am in a good mood. Well the day is gone

During this same period of time, Julie began to participate more fully in her other classes. She started expressing herself in her current affairs class which was taught by the same inmate teaching assistant who taught spelling. Even though the format of Trina's spelling class was very structured and teacher-directed, her
current affairs class allowed for more flexibility, discussion and student response.

Julie told me:

Sometimes we'll see a movie, and Trina will ask us to write about it. We watched a movie about child abuse, and I wrote a poem. There are two different ways to write about child abuse—about how you went through it or the bad way. You can say I got abused as a kid, then you take it another way—I never got abused but I abused my child. . . . I wrote about how I abused my child:

Child Abuse

Black and blues a big person would do.
A child so helpless and fragile.
A cry of pain, a cry of worries.
Why hurt me Mommy I am sorry
Please don't hit me
I just did a mistake
Hug me Mommy
My head is spinning
My hands keep swinging
The voice saying stop
I look into his face
My heart bleeds
Damit I hurt him again
I have to get help
I don't want to hurt him
Any more

Again, Julie's writing took on dialogic qualities, as she captured words "spoken" by both her and her abused son. Walter Ong asserts that "both orality and the growth of literacy out of orality are necessary for the evolution of consciousness" (1982, 175). As she did with earlier writing, Julie entered the poem with an oral quality, giving voice to her thoughts, on the safe paper. The communication was still one-way; the son and mother didn't directly speak to each other. However, Julie
became increasingly aware of her thoughts—her consciousness—as she recorded the spoken words on paper.

The poem serves as Julie’s confession to the abuse of her son, much like the confessions often kept in secret diaries (Mallon, 1984). She accounts for her own actions and takes some responsibility by first witnessing, or confessing, to herself, through her own words and those of her son. However, unlike a diary, this confession will be made public since it will be read by Trina. Julie also might be asked to share it with other students in the class. Much later, in talking about the piece, Julie maintains a safe distance from her abusive actions by referring to the writing about her abusive behavior as a “bad way” of writing, rather than specifically naming the abusive behavior itself as bad.

Now, in the poem, as the one-caring for her son (the cared-for), she looks back at the tragic scene and takes on her abused child’s reality as her own (Noddings, 1984, p. 14), by speaking on behalf of her son. The child’s voice, embedded in the poem, cries out and questions Julie’s punches. Julie painfully recalls her anger and frustration, but never answers directly to the child, writing, “I don’t want to hurt him anymore.” She distances herself from the direct confrontation with her son at the very last moment by using “him” rather than “you.” It is also possible that the poem allows Julie an opportunity to “revisit” the incident and analyze it (“I have to get help”) from a perspective that she didn’t have at the time. Julie’s use of spoken, yet unheard, words, is reminiscent of her earlier piece “My Kids Say.”

However, another voice enters that Julie refers to as “The voice saying stop.” This speaker is never identified. It could be her son, but it is possible that it is Julie’s own internal voice, her conscience, now unsilenced, telling her to stop abusing her son. It could also be Julie herself, struggling against her own attacker; Julie revealed to me in a later interview that she had been raped as a young girl. Julie’s discovery of her “interior voice” could signal a move out of silence.
Belenky et al. (1986), in their work with abused “silent” women, found the women unable to speak out in protest of the abuse they suffered (p. 29). The women struggled to find their inner voice. As Julie now recollects her abuse of her son, she still struggles to find voice, and possibly, to separate her own experience (as a child) from that of her son. In her poem, Julie identifies the protester only as “the voice saying stop”—perhaps it is her son, or Julie herself. She may be giving her son a voice to protest; she may also be giving herself a voice of protest (as a child) or a voice of conscience as her son’s abuser.

Julie risked a great deal by writing this piece since it dealt with a painful and shameful part of her life. However, she knew that Trina usually avoided “direct contact” with the content of student writing by responding with brief written comments like, “This is clear,” and “You make good points.” Julie shared the piece first with Trina alone and then with several classmates. She chose not to bring it or the issue of child abuse into our writing class. Perhaps the abbreviated responses that Trina provided were safer than the deeper, more contextualized, intersubjective responses Julie would elicit by sharing this piece of writing with our class. She may not have been ready, especially since she felt torn about the abuse and undeserving of our care and listening.

Julie demonstrated a growing sense of self and self-in-relation to others as she wrote about both the loss of her daughter and the loss of relationship with her son. She continued to focus on her relational self not only in her poetry but also in her journal. And, as she “created a self” through her writing, she began to take more control over her life and her learning, especially in her active decision to becomes a better reader and writer.
Julie and her Tutor

I had offered the peer tutoring program to students routinely, but Julie had not been ready to expose her anxiety with reading and writing to a peer until after she cried in Trina’s spelling class. Now she was curious about the tutoring and asked me to arrange for a tutor. Pat and I decided together that Janice might be a good match for Julie. I made the arrangements for the two women to work together twice a week in the late afternoon after school.

Julie and Janice participated together in the first “Connections” reading program held at the prison. This program for new adult readers used children’s literature to connect readers to each other, to books and to libraries. Each tutor and student got her own set of books to keep. They worked together on their own time to read eight or nine books that would be the focus of special sessions held every three weeks. My nine-year old daughter volunteered to tape record each set of books, and the tapes were made available in the prison library. Each set of four sessions was built on a theme (friendship, courage, autobiography) and was led by a guest lecturer selected by the state library.

With input from Pat, I matched inmate tutors and students, keeping an eye out for personality conflicts that might arise. Tutors volunteered their time and the first group was trained by a state literacy coordinator. Once the program got going, I took over the recruiting, training and scheduling. Tutors and students were rewarded for their participation with an extra weekly visit. Such an incentive was motivating for some who had more people on their visiting list than there were scheduled visiting times. Others, with no one on their visiting list, were unconcerned with extra visits and just wanted to help another inmate.

In the privacy of the classroom after hours, Janice helped Julie read through books around the friendship theme. Julie came to me after several tutoring sessions and announced, “I don’t want to work with Janice anymore. She said she’s only
doing this to get an extra visit. It's just not working out. She doesn't really want to
tutor me.”

Julie had already taken enough of a risk asking for a tutor, so I took her
complaint seriously. After a brief consultation with Pat that confirmed Janice's lack
of commitment, I offered Julie another tutor, a woman she knew from our reading-
writing class.

“How about Rachel?” I asked her. “She's waiting for a student and you know
her from class.” Julie agreed. I got Rachel a set of the children's books and assigned
her to work with Julie twice a week. Julie remembers how she felt:

Sometimes it's hard to accept the help. I hesitated when Rachel offered to be
my tutor. It was kind of... I was shaky. I didn't know how to relax to learn
how to read. When we met on our days, it was kind of difficult for me. Here
I am, 28 years old, someone has to teach me how to read. It's kind of hard . . .

Rachel was sensitive to Julie's need for dignity and they knew each other
well from class. A passionate reader who discovered her own talent for writing
while incarcerated, Rachel openly shared her excitement for reading and writing.
Each tutor had been encouraged to build a trusting relationship with her student
and to provide time for conversation. Rachel found that Julie usually needed to
start a session talking, but that she (Julie) would talk quickly to get to the reading
task at hand. She let Julie set the agenda and pace for their work, asking her what
kinds of reading and writing she wanted to do after they finished reading the
assigned books.

Together, they devoured dozens of children's books on the prison library shelf.
The use of children's books, with the hope of being able to read them to her own
children, kept Julie's early reading achievable and entertaining. As an adult, she
could now begin to enjoy the books she couldn't read as a child. She recollected her
work with Rachel:
My reading took a long time. I had to start with books for a five-year old. Some of them were really difficult. I couldn't pronounce the words. I didn't know the vowel sounds. I didn't know what the letter was supposed to sound like so I couldn't pronounce my words. My 'b's' and 'd's'—I'd get them confused. Sometimes when I write 's's' and 'c's' I get them backwards or upside down. I catch myself now, though. This one here [referring to a reading list she'd made at my request], Baby's Boat has big letters but short, tiny words. I started out with that one. Then we started out with the Frog and Toad books, and Little Bear. That was a cute book. My favorite book was Is There a Lap for Me? That was sad. After the baby was born, the little boy kind of felt out of place because the mama always held the baby. She wasn't holding him as much as before as he asked, "Is there a lap for me?" I started crying when I read it.

Julie told Rachel that she wanted to concentrate heavily on conventional spelling in her writing. Rachel agreed and helped her learn to use the dictionary, but she also helped Julie to stay focused on the purpose of her writing, the meaning. Julie prepared for each tutoring and Connections session conscientiously and told me that she often worked alone in her cell, late into the night, reading and re-reading books, writing and recopying her writing.

Rachel provided Julie encouragement as well as serving as a mentor for her reading and writing. Julie humorously recalls Rachel's enthusiastic and persistent support in a piece she wrote and dedicated to her:

Books for Help

Read, Read, Read, Write, Write, Write,
when does it stop.
Books running threw my dreams
I never thought books had legs
I look into the books and there she is (Rachel)
Fancy words, Words I never heard befor,
Words I can't spell
Stop the words take this book throw it away.
No stop, you can do it.
Read, Read, write Rachel always says
Don't give up

121
It will come
Slow down
Put it down
Don't git upset
Take your time
Soon it will be easy for you
She always says
It will come
I have to say Thank You Rachel
You taught me well Rachel
One more thing, never say you can't
Because we can
Were doing it, and we've don it.

The oral quality of Julie's writing is again evident here, but in contrast to earlier pieces of writing, a two-way communication emerges. In the poem, Julie admits to Rachel her frustration with learning to read, and appears to reach the end of her rope when she confronts words in the text that she knows she can't spell. Rachel acknowledges Julie's frustration, but encourages her throughout the poem, diverting her attention from the spelling and "fancy words." She responds to Julie's frustration with "Don't give up," and "Don't git upset." Finally, Julie thanks Rachel for teaching her. Her voice is strong enough by the end of the poem to speak on behalf of both Rachel and herself, "Were doing it, and we've don it." As she celebrates their accomplishments in the poem, Julie experiments with writing conventions that she is discovering in her reading: she uses repetition, gives human characteristics to the books, and experiments with varying line lengths. For the first time, there is a playful quality to her writing. Julie was delighted to share the poem with other students and tutors, and laughed aloud each time she read it.

Rachel and Julie participated actively in the Connections large group sessions. They sat together, Rachel often encouraging Julie to share with the group.
something they'd discussed or written in their own work sessions. The discussion leader asked the women to relate what they'd read to their own life stories; student poetry and prose were often shared. Julie became more animated and often volunteered to read her favorite portion of the book being discussed or the poem it inspired. During the final session, a guest artist from the state university's theater department was invited to attend. She interpreted some of the women's writing that had been shared during the series.

Several weeks after the last session, the guest performer wrote Julie a short letter. She wanted her permission to include a poem of Julie's in her repertoire to be performed for audiences throughout the state. Julie was thrilled and wrote back:

Dear Samantha:

I'm glad that I could share the poems with someone. I thought I would be the only one to have these poems. I never thought I would learn how to write or read. But when I started to write poems I got very excited. Then I didn't know what to do with them after I wrote them. So I just kept them.

Well one of my other poems got published in a newsletter for women that have gone through rape. I sent them one and they liked it and published it. I don't mind if you perform it at all. When the day comes when you do perform it, can you let me know where and when. I wish I could be there to see it. But I'm tied up at this point in time. . . . Thank you very much for your time.

Julie Williams

Julie's words, written in an attempt to take care of herself and her children, were now leaving the prison and existing beyond the walls. In a sense, Julie was leaving the prison, too. Her letters, and now her poetry, read and interpreted by others, served as a valuable "placeholders" for her in the world beyond prison. As
long as her words could leave the prison, she existed for others outside of prison. As she became a reader and writer, her life became the “text” for other “readers.” She created relationships with others outside of her family and gained a greater sense of her own value. Language, once overwhelming and frightening, now enabled her to escape the boundaries of prison to care for others.

Julie Still Reads and Writes on her Own Time

Rachel tutored Julie through the late spring, and until mid-summer, just before Rachel’s scheduled release. They had become good friends and Rachel sensed that Julie might resist a new tutor assignment. She was right, but with our encouragement, Julie agreed to work with a new tutor. Rachel suggested that Julie start with the new tutor several weeks before Rachel was due to leave so that she could help Julie and the tutor through the transition if necessary.

At about the same time that Julie was preparing for Rachel’s departure, she received notification that her classification was about to be upgraded to “C-2.” The C-2 promotion comes when an inmate is within six months of leaving the prison. C-2 inmates are used to maintain the prison grounds and buildings by shoveling snow, raking leaves, planting, mowing, and doing indoor repairs and painting. They can be summoned at anytime to unload trucks of groceries, supplies and inmate canteen orders. It’s always exciting when a woman’s C-2 status comes through because it means she’s been following the rules and regulations appropriately and usually that she’ll be leaving the prison before long. (Some women with very long sentences—eight to fifteen years—can achieve C-2 status.) But it is also bittersweet, since it almost always means they’ll no longer be attending class full-time. I am puzzled and frustrated by the irony that an “upgrade” in classification actually limits educational opportunities for the women. Shouldn’t additional
education hold more promise for a woman than unloading trucks and shoveling snow would?

Julie's pending C-2 status meant that in about six months she would probably move on to the Department of Corrections' drug treatment program upstate. She was so proud of her accomplishments in school and with her tutor. However, she understood that she needed special permission (from the officer in charge of C-2's and the prison superintendent) in order to attend school full-time for her last six months in prison.

Rachel and Julie came to me in class as soon as Julie found out about her C-2 status. Rachel had already helped Julie with the inmate request slip to stay in school. But the women knew the history of such requests. It was rare for a C-2 to continue in school, even part-time. A few had made requests to continue attending our reading-writing class, but all had disappeared once seasonal outdoor work had begun. I hadn't seen a single C-2 continue as a full-time student in the two years I'd been there. I offered to speak to the officer in charge, with whom I had a good rapport. He was one of the few officers who always greeted me cordially, often thanking me for my volunteer efforts. When I approached him in the hall later that day, he grimaced, telling me that he couldn't promise anything. C-2's were required to work on buildings and grounds, and that usually meant they couldn't attend school full-time.

When I returned to the prison for my next class, Julie wasn't in the room. Pat told me that she'd been allowed to continue in school only in the afternoons, three days a week, at which time only math was offered. Math was the Julie's most difficult subject. However, she would be allowed to continue to attend the Connections series once every three weeks. I hoped that these activities would be enough to keep Julie tied in to the education program, but I was wrong. Julie's fragile focus was lost: full-time school was impossible. Once again, as in her
childhood, she was disconnected from school. She was also anticipating Rachel's pending departure. She remembers how she felt about leaving school full-time:

I lost all interest when they took school away from me. When you take reading and writing away from a person who's not written or read all their life, they lose all the courage to go back and do it. They're afraid someone is going to take it away from them again. . . . Once I left school, I spent a lot of time sitting out back in the [prison] garage [waiting for work to do]. . . . They said I had to work. I quit school because they wouldn't let me go to school full-time. They wanted me to work and go to school, and I couldn't do both.

Julie and her new tutor worked together for just a few weeks after Rachel's release. Julie missed Rachel and missed being in school. Mary Lynn, the new tutor, was frustrated and came to me for support. I offered to talk to Julie. We had several conversations about her concerns. "She just isn't the same as Rachel," Julie told me. I listened patiently, and agreed with her that Rachel and Mary Lynn were very different people.

"Yes, they're different, but Mary Lynn really wants to help you, Julie, just like Rachel did," I offered. It wasn't enough. The loss of the classroom community and her sustained relationship with Rachel were too much for Julie to overcome. Rachel had proved to be a valuable mentor and Julie couldn't, or wouldn't, find that same relationship with Mary Lynn. Julie attended one Connections series with Mary Lynn, but then dropped out of the tutoring program. Thus, Julie, who was pushed and had dropped out of school at the age of fourteen, and had fought so hard in prison to overcome her anxieties about reading and writing, was pushed and dropped out again at the age of twenty-seven.

Before Julie made her final withdrawal from the education and tutoring programs, I kept in touch with her. I often visited her at the end of my morning class when she came inside for lunch. Sometimes, I found her up on her bunk, her shoulder-length brown hair draped over an open book. She continued to work on her reading, checking books out of the prison library regularly. She improved enough to
read young adult novels that included Katherine Paterson’s *Bridge to Terabithia* and S. E. Hinton’s *The Outsiders*. She had established a reading habit that she was able to sustain independently, and, in the sharing of book recommendations with me and other inmates on the tier, she sought to recreate the community she missed.

Julie was now writing extensively also—poetry, personal narratives, and letters. Sometimes I found her writing a letter to her children, or coloring a picture for them. She was eager to share her writing with me. Now, rather than a journal, Julie had transformed her personal writing into an autobiography that she had started several months into her tutoring. She showed me four chapters of the book she had been writing alone in her cell through the late part of summer. Her success in both school and tutoring had given her the courage to use her writing to take care of herself.

Julie told me that this was the first time she had tried to tell her story on paper. She was using her writing to tell her own story to herself, to see herself, to create herself. She set aside her anxieties about spelling and grammar. Myerhoff and Metzger refer to such important personal writing, “The urge of the soul for a vision of its self, in its entirety, remains a strong human motivation” (1980, p. 98). Julie’s motivation to catch a vision of herself was sufficient to keep her writing, alone and with only herself as the audience.

The first two chapters, entitled “My Book of Life” and “My thoughts I think [Thoughts I Think]” have both the confessional and oral qualities of some of Julie’s earlier writing. The voices of her children surface half-way through the second chapter, and Julie focuses on her hopes for reconciliation. Chapters Three and Four, “Jail Time” and “The Book I what [want] to write” focus not only on her arrest but also on how she chooses to “do her time” learning to read and write. Julie ends with a sense of hope and determination to write a book about herself; Julie had trouble seeing that she was already writing that book, that she had unsilenced herself. She
had already come to voice in a way that Belenky and her colleagues describe as
coming to subjective knowledge, a time of “inward listening and watching” (1986, p.
85) She had moved past the stance of “silence” where all self-knowledge comes from
others (p. 31), and had moved into ways of knowing that were not limited to the
present (p. 26). She could now reflect on her past, and project her future. Much of
Julie’s earlier writing was written in the voices of others, like those operating from
the perspective of “received knowledge.” A woman like Julie, who has moved beyond
this stage “has begun to see her own thoughts orchestrating the changes that govern
her life” (p. 50). Julie was now able to listen to her “inner voice” as she took the
authority to write her autobiography.

By the end of Chapter Four, her last and briefest chapter, Julie began to see
that writing could help her do what Moffett calls “liberate [her] inner speech” (1985)
Ironically, Moffett, after teaching a weekly class of San Quentin inmates, compared
the thought process of a writer to that of an obsessive, compulsive criminal. Moffett
compares the recycled, redundant inner speech to the criminal’s behavior that leads
to incarceration again and again. The writer is “mentally incarcerated,” but can
offset the obsession by “all-out acting out, which may land you in prison, or by
writing out all the way” (pp. 305-306) Julie wrote out all the way:

Chapter 4

The Book I what to write

I came say to myself for years If only I gont [could] spell, read, write I got
[could] write a book about the things that I’ve been threw and the thing
I’ve done in my life. But its just so hard to write a book and do it the
right way. Well the only thing I can do is just keep trying and maybe I’ll
find somone to help me with the book I want to write. I gauss faith will
be the word I’ll keep with me intill the time comes were my book will be
wrote. When the book is writen all my feelings and bad mamoryies
[memories] will be out and my thouit and eney thing els that I need to say
and can’t say [with] my mouth. It will be on my hidin place I’ve been
looking for all these years. Well off I go to learn more, To finsh school.
Shortly after Julie wrote this fourth chapter, she withdrew from the education program.

Several months later, after eleven months in prison, Julie talked with me about her writing. Still writing on her own time, she recognized the impact that her writing was having on her:

Julie: There's a lot of feelings that come out in my poems that have been trapped for a while. I always wanted to write but I couldn't. It always came out backwards. I never could write.

Kathe: How has that changed?

Julie: My writing? My writing changed me—I'm thinking more about myself. A lot of my feelings I can control through my writing. Instead of screaming at somebody, I can write it down on paper—it comes out as a poem or it comes out as a story. My feelings just ease right out. It never made any sense [before]. I could write something a year ago—my feelings would not come out on that paper—it would come out jibber-jabber. It wouldn't come out—it wouldn't make sense. That's changed a lot.

Julie's words now made sense to her. She has learned to create with words, and was beginning to make sense of her world through language. Julie had so much to teach me and others about language and how it could change lives. When I asked her to be one of my case studies, she agreed but was somewhat surprised that I thought I could learn something from her.

**Julie Speaks Out**

During the time that I was actively involved with Julie, I felt that it was important for her story to be heard by others and for her to get some encouragement for the hard work she was continuing to do to extend her reading and writing. The superintendent of the prison was supportive of C-2's going out to speak to local schools and community groups. Other inmate students had spoken to domestic violence groups and high school civics classes. A professor of mine was teaching a reading and writing methods course to education majors at the nearby university
branch. She invited me to come speak about my research, and I asked if Julie could come with me to speak. Rather than possibly disappointing Julie before taking care of details, I made all of the tentative arrangements before speaking to her.

Julie was thrilled to be asked and eager to share her story, but scared. She asked for several weeks to prepare, and if it would be alright to read her speech. She asked another inmate to type it up for her and practiced reading it for days. Several weeks later, Julie delivered her speech in the university classroom:

Good evening. I'm honored to be here to talk to you all. Let me tell you a little bit about myself. I was in the fourth grade and they tested me for dyslexia. I had a real hard time reading and spelling. They put me in special needs classes. I tried my best to learn to read and spell. It seemed that I could not get it!

They put me in high school, and the special needs classes continued. The kids would call me names because of the special classes I attended. I got sick of it and quit school. I never went back to school. I was too scared. I lived my life not knowing how to read or spell. My writing was so bad that people could not read it. I could never write a letter and have it make sense. When my children asked me to read them a story, I had to make up my own because the words in those books were just as foreign to me as they were to them. The way I felt when I could not read that book to my children was DUMB, STUPID, and NOT A GOOD PERSON. Sometimes when I try to write, my B's and D's looked alike. I see my letters backwards. I always felt frustrated and gave up. I never wanted to learn. I kept saying to myself and others that I can't do it!!
Today I can say, "I can read" and it makes me feel good. I am striving to get my GED. I want to learn to put computers together. It has been my dream since the age of 14. I can now sit with my children and read them a story from the book. I am in prison now. It is a sad thing to say but if I never would have come here I probably never would have learned to read and write. I write poems and stories now and I never imagined that learning could be this much fun!! But most importantly I am proud to be ME today. Thank you.

Julie’s image of herself before she could read and write was similar to the self-descriptions of the “silent” women from the Women's Ways of Knowing study. They felt deaf and dumb, overwhelmed by inaccessible language. “Words were perceived as weapons. Words were used to separate and diminish people, not to connect and empower them” (Belenky et al., 1986, p. 24). The impact of years of workbooks and frustrating spelling lessons lingered as Julie referred to her childhood schoolwork as “reading and spelling” not reading and writing.

Telling her own story that night, Julie's voice grew higher in pitch as she excitedly shared both her progress towards literacy and her goals for future learning. The university students applauded, congratulating Julie on her tremendous courage and perseverance. At their request, she read several of her poems from the prison literary magazine. She answered the students' and professor's questions with care and quiet authority. The students enthusiastically applauded and Julie beamed proudly at her success.

Julie Reads and Writes to Recover

After eleven months at the prison, Julie was transferred to the drug treatment center. Julie’s nine months at the drug treatment center were to be divided into two segments: a six-month program of intense participation in therapy,
groups and meetings, and a three-month "bridge" program that provided a period of transition before three months at a half-way house. After that, Julie would be released on probation or parole.

On my first visit to the treatment center to see Julie, she told me about a decision she’d made to keep a journal, “I said before I left the prison, I’m going to do something strange. I’m going to keep a journal. So now I can look back on what I’ve written. It’s weird here.” Things were different here—a bit more freedom, no razor wire, all the women bunked in one large room, women and men living in the same building, intermingled at meals and at “house meetings.” Julie said it felt different, weird, sometimes scary.

As we sat together visiting in a small storage room, Julie pulled out a folder of notebook paper. I wondered if she’d forgotten about the journal she’d kept months before. She shared full page journal entries for her first two days at the center. Her sentences were longer and more complex than what I’d seen in her journal from the previous spring. Among many new people, Julie chose to confide in her journal; it provided her a sense of community.

In the first entry, Julie included many words that described the range of feelings she’d experienced during the transition day from the prison to the center: nervous as hell, upset, bored, glad, nervous all over again, scary, good. The second day’s entry, dated January 8, 1993, began with “Happy Birthday Kacey” referring to her deceased daughter. She described the view from the window, “The fog over the mountain like a blanket.” She wondered about the challenge of the regulation of not being able to talk to the men at the center for thirty days.

Two days later, in Julie’s next journal entry, she wrote about her uncontrollable shaking at a house meeting when she spoke up for the first time:

Yesterday the 10th I spoke in the meeting. I was shaking like mad but I got through it, twice in one day I spoke in the meeting and today the 11th I
spoke. I just wish I cant [could] stop shacking. I will soon I think I will make it through but for today I'll go easy. The new being of the day is knowing myself better and other's. This place I find very confusion sometimes and it scares me alot.

I showed interest in the lengthy journal entries Julie was writing. She spoke openly about her hesitancy to trust people and showed me another journal entry that demonstrated several attempts to take care of herself:

The walk I toke to sick call was the test that went through me. Was the test of trust. Looks on peoples faces give me a child or someone that cares and want to reach out in teach the A.A. [Alcoholics Anonymous] program stops that feeling in side me. I am here for help not for a boyfriend. I have to keep that in my mide. When this is over my life beings [begins].

I asked Julie who she was writing the entries for. She seemed surprised by my question:

**Julie:** Me! I never thought I could write at all, When I started to write, I said, "This ain't no big deal!" But now, it's my life! I could put anything down on paper. I don't have to share it. I don't have to carry it inside. That paper talks now, the paper carries it. I don't have to say it no more. When I feel that way again, I can go back and reread it and add to my talking paper.

**Kathe:** So the paper is talking to you?

**Julie:** Yeah, everything that I feel. I can just let it fly by now, I don't have to carry the anger, the pain, the hurt anymore! The paper does!

Julie had identified the dialectic quality of her writing, and the important "other" it provided for her in a new place where she felt very alone. The dialogic quality of her writing became crucially important to her as she was now even farther away from her children and the rest of her family, too far for visits.

During our second visit, Julie told me that her mother who suffered with asthma, had been put in the hospital again. Her mother's condition was serious and Julie was very upset by not being able to see her or at least have daily contact by telephone. She was also feeling the stress of not being able to see her children for the first thirty day she spent at the center. She found some solace in her journal where she wrote anxiously about her concerns:
January 16 1993  This is a good morning but I am worried about my mom. She's in the hospital again. My kids I don't really know what's going on with them. All I know is that my sister and I have no idea if they're O.K. or not. I always wonder if I got the strength to go on for these 30 days without seeing them. Somedays I just want to run but what good would that be. I can't do anything about what goes on there even if I ran there's no way I can take my kids home. I'll put them.

Julie's journal writing helped to provide her a much-needed psychological link to her children and her mother. The pages of her journal provided a safe haven where she could worry about those she cared about most. Her very busy schedule—working in the kitchen, attending group counseling sessions, a Women's Issues group, A.A. and N.A. (Narcotics Anonymous) meetings and house meetings—left little spare time, most of which she devoted to her reading and writing. In addition to her journal, she told me about writing to her mother and her kids, "I write to my mom, I write to my kids. I colored them pictures, and I wrote."

I was delighted and somewhat surprised when Julie told me that writing was a part of the drug treatment program. Julie told me, "What they make us do here, is they make us write a note to our kids about how we're feeling. Then on the other side, I wrote a little note to each one of them...I hope my mom will read it to all of them."

Julie also continued writing and revising poetry. She worked on one poem for four days, asking others to correct her spelling (she didn't have a dictionary) until three inmates insisted she put it away for thirty days:

They said if they seen me working on it, they'd take it away from me. I kept repeating myself. Instead of getting frustrated, they want me to put it away. But I took it out and kept working on it. It came out pretty good. I still have some work to do on it. There's three versions of it. I still don't like it. I shared it in the Women's Issues group, and then they asked me to share it in the morning meeting. It's my locked door that I write about a lot...I'll work on the same thing for days. There's no school here. At all. I don't like it at all. I guess they're supposed to be opening a school building here. I guess it's opening here in March. I guess the teacher—he doesn't work here anymore—said he'd get me some helpful stuff. In the meantime, I can just work on my writing, and my A.A. and Twelve-Step stuff.
Julie had learned that in the absence of books and school, her writing could be her text. She was well into multiple drafts, and persevered on her first poem, crafting and revising, much to her roommates' chagrin. She knew, from her experiences in the prison writing class, that by sharing her writing with others, she could take care of herself and find the sense of community she missed. The others in the Women's Issues group responded positively, encouraging her to find other "readers" in the larger community.

Even though she used her own writing as texts for herself, Julie missed the prison library; she complained that the treatment center had only one bookshelf of books. The books were either romance novels ("All love stories. I don't like love stories") or too difficult for her. She said the few magazines were "not the ones I'd be interested in." I asked her if she had any books of her own. She told me, "I only have three books I work with—the A.A., N.A. and Twelve-Step books." I assumed that the books had been issued to Julie since they were an integral part of the Twelve-Step programs she was required to participate in. She set me straight, "Diane [the prison's psychiatric social worker] gave me my Twelve-Step book, and one of the other inmates gave me my A.A. Big Book. I'm waiting for Mike [the director of the treatment center] to get me my N.A. book now. But if they didn't give them to me I wouldn't have any books to work with." As important as the books were to the program, they weren't readily available.

The books Julie referred to were an integral part of the A.A. and N.A. groups, and until now, I had never considered the "literate bias" of the Twelve-Step groups. Twelve-Step programs, all patterned after Alcoholics Anonymous, demand a high level of literacy and are spiritually-based. At each meeting (I had attended dozens of meetings as a member of Adult Children of Alcoholics), a text is passed around the circle of participants, and a chapter is read. Each chapter consists of several pages of rather abstract ideas about a suggested way, or step to take, to
improve one’s life. Then there are several pages of “testimony,” usually told in the first person. Participants are expected to read a paragraph or two aloud, although there is always the option to pass the book to the next person.

The threat of such a routine to someone who struggles to read or couldn’t read at all seemed to be a cruel irony. Not only is it difficult to get copies of the textbooks, but also there is an expectation of oral reading during the meeting from a difficult text. So many people like Julie are both undereducated and suffering from addiction and yet, they are expected to draw upon their limited skills in order to fully recover and start a new life, substance-free. As I sat and listened to Julie, I was silently enraged as Julie told me how difficult she found the three books:

I still have trouble with the N.A., A.A. and Twelve-Step books. There are still a lot of books I can’t read like those. I get frustrated. I just write. I put the books away . . . it’s the way they tell the stories that I can’t get. In the Big Book, the way they put the stories, it confuses me all over. I just get bored with it . . . I still won’t read out loud. She [another inmate] tried to get me to read it aloud at a meeting, but I told her I wouldn’t.

Julie expected that it would be awhile before she’d work up the courage to read at a meeting of people she “didn’t know.” I asked her what she thought would happen if she shared her discomfort with reading with others in the group. Remembering how long it had taken Julie to share her reading anxiety at the prison, I was surprised when she told me she already had here:

Julie: Yesterday, in fact, I did. Larry was reading in our group and he apologized for the way he was reading. I told him I quit school at fourteen, and that I lived a life without reading. I told him I had to start off with baby books. And that when I started to read, I was ashamed I told him it would still be a long time before I would read aloud [in a meeting here]. Another guy responded to what I said. He said that he can see a lot of faith in me and that I do want to learn to read. And that the shame and embarrassment wouldn’t come up again.

Kathe: Did hearing his encouragement help you?

Julie: No, it scared me more because of the humiliation. It came to me and I decided I’m really not going to read aloud until I get to know these guys
really well. It took me a long time to get to know the girls at the prison
(before I'd read aloud).

I offered to help Julie with some of the A.A. readings and she eagerly
returned to her dorm to retrieve the A.A. Big Book, a thick hard cover volume. She
showed me the story they'd read at the previous night's meeting. It was a five-page
autobiographical account of an alcoholic woman. The author reflected upon her past
and the present, but told her life story out of chronological order and it was quite
confusing. Julie told me she couldn't follow the story since it seemed to "jump
around so much." I drew a timeline and together we charted the events of the
woman's story. I pointed out to Julie the phrase "when I was a child." She found
the words "later in my teen years," and "after I got married." She relaxed her grip
on the book and sat back in her chair. The story now made sense to her but I knew
I couldn't be there to help with each reading.

In an attempt to offer help to Julie, I stopped at a nearby shop on my way
home. I also scouted "recovery" bookstores that carried A.A. materials in several
towns around the state, but found nothing written at an appropriate level for a new
adult reader. I even contacted the publisher directly and was told there was only
one set of supplementary materials on Steps 1-6 that were available at about a sixth
grade reading level. In frustration, I chortled, asking what an A.A. member was to
do for Steps 7-12. "Oh, by then, they've usually left treatment!" I was told. I was
furious, but at our next visit I learned that on her own, once again, Julie had
devised a way to use her writing to help herself. (I continue to network and search
out appropriate materials for participants in Twelve-Step groups; I have found
nothing but audio cassettes of the primary texts and Julie now has a set that
someone gave her.)

As Julie continued to attend meetings, she relied on the group discussions
and her personal writing to make sense of what she was learning about herself. She
wrote a letter to herself after several weeks at the center. In the letter, she clearly divided herself into two; the letter begins from the drug-addicted, alcoholic Julie and evolves, by half-way through the second paragraph, into the emerging Julie, working hard to become healthy. In the letter to herself, Julie clearly connects her early pain with not being able to learn; she identifies her ability to learn with her ability to change:

Dear Julie,

How are you today! We need to talk. I've put you through alot so many years I made your mind to think you hated yourself. I put you under a world of no love and made you a nervous person, I put you down were you weren't worth a damn, I've black and blued your heart and body. Even your words didn't make a dam. Your feeling didn't make anyone care. I always whated you dead. The life I whated you to live in was a living hell. Your happiness turned to darkness, I kept your blood blue, the air you breathed was poluted. I never whated you to accept yourself or like yourself (Keep the hate). I whated to keep you in pain (Don't chage.) I never wanted you to chage, I always wanted you to stay in a place were you could never learn. I wanted you sad all the time. You didn't need help, I liked you the way you were (Help Less.).

Now look what you did to yourself. You put your self were I wanted you in (Prison) But I didn't ask you to better your self you stupid dummy. Your imagination is gone wild, the walls we built are falling. Your doors are opening. Your feelings are coming out your not suppose to. Your suppose to keep them trapped. Didn't you like the 16 years we spent together. Tell you the truth (No) I didn't like the years we spent together. The help I have today I enjoy, I enjoy my company and I will learn to like myself and not be that nervous person you wanted me to be. I really don't want to do drugs aneymore but I feel like your stopping me from being the person I want to be.

I will change you, it might take years but it will happen. You will be a person, I can live with. But for now I'll work with you every day and love will come, and we will have a life we really want. I like we will start liking each other soon.

Love Julie!

From Julie?
I was amazed by so many things in Julie's letter—the two voices, sometimes
distinctly separate, sometimes blurred; the range of emotions she expressed; and the
conviction of her words, many spelled correctly. She dialogued with herself, and was
patient with herself, realizing that "it might take years" to be the "person I want to
be."

As she used writing as a tool for recovery, Julie shared her words with
individuals and in the different group meetings. I asked her how it would be if she
couldn't write, if she weren't allowed to write. She paused for a moment, then said,
"I'd probably be lost in a world with no tomorrow. My thoughts would always be
trapped in me... That's how people are getting to know me." Julie had used her
writing to recover from the death of her daughter and from the damaged
relationships with her children, and now wrote to facilitate her recovery from
substance abuse. On her own, she had often chosen the traditional women's genres
of letters and journals, always searching for the opportunity to "converse" with
herself or someone important to her.

Letter-writing proved to be crucial to Julie over the next month. Her
mother's health continued to fail dramatically. She learned that her mother was in
a deep coma, on a life-support system, and would die soon. The administration at
the treatment center gave Julie the choice of going to visit her mother before she
died or attending the funeral. Remembering her daughter's funeral with terrible
sadness, Julie felt there was no decision to be made. She wanted to see her mother
alive.

Julie wanted this last visit with her mother to be an important one. She
decided to write a letter of amends to her mother. Writing such a letter is often part
of the A.A. Twelve-Step program. In an attempt to care both for herself and her
mother, she apologized for her actions and reassured her mother that it was time for
her to let go and die. She comforted her mother who had raised Julie's children for
many years, and reminded her mother of their common loss—her mother had lost a baby girl many years before:

Hi Mom!

I've been doing ok. I am working hard on me. I really need to talk to you and tell you how I feel. I've put you throw so much in 28 years. You been throw so much with us 3 girls. You loved us and got throw everything that has happened in your life. Somthing tells me your leving us. Your holding on and your getting tired. I don't like seeing you this way. You know that everyone will be ok. Its ok to go out of this world to a better place. Go meet your little girl that you lost so maany years ago, Meet your granddotughter, Be with your Mom & Dad Tell theme all you love theme. Tell Kacey your her grandmother. Tell your lettle girl your her mom.

I'll say one thing, you hav been a wounderful mom. Its time for you to rest, You lived your life, You don't need enemore pain, Go and be happy. I'll see you agin, Your going to be a new life You'll be looking down at all of us. I'll make you very proud of me I am getting well. For the kids, I know they will be going to some-one else they don't know but they'll be ok. If they are like me they'll handle it just fine. Soon we'll be all togeather agin it takes time. Mom don't keep fighting go and rest now. You'll be ok. I Love You, I'll miss you. You'll be in my heart. You'll still be taking care of us but not on this world in sparit. You've done your job Someone els needs you now, Youre free and in peace now.

Bye Mom I love you

Julie read the letter to her mother in her hospital room while Jane, the corrections officer who accompanied her, waited in the hallway. Julie spoke warmly of the female officer's compassion, "When I first went to the hospital with Jane, I couldn't go in ... I turned away, and she [my mother] looked just like my uncle [before he died]. Jane helped me to go in. I called her name quite a few times to let her know I was there."

After Julie's visit, her sister read the letter to her mother four or five more times before she died. It was also read at the funeral and put into her mother's casket before the cremation. It was important to Julie for others to hear the letter, "I was going to ask Tabitha [another inmate] to read the letter at the community meeting at the same time that I was reading it to my mom. Someone else suggested
that my Mom should hear it first. So the next day, after I got back, I read it to the
community. Some people cried... My mom has a good place in my heart. She's
looking over me now."

Julie made several lengthy journal entries about her visit with her mom.
She wanted to remember every last detail of their time together: the color of her
skin and the noisy machines, reading the letter aloud to her mother.

In what seemed to me like the most bitter of ironies, Julie took the GED test
only three days after her mother's death. It was her second attempt to pass the test
in four months. Her grief so new and fresh, Julie struggled to do her best, knowing
that it would be months before the next available testing date. She told me how she
made it through the test:

I thought a lot about Rachel while I took it. That's the only way I can get
through it is to think about Rachel. When I get to a hard part, I think of
Rachel. What would she say? There was a lot of hard reading in that GED,
but I did it... I had to do some writing on television on the GED. After I
wrote it, I gave the paper back to her [the proctor of the exam]. And I read
the next section, and it sounded just like what I wrote! It was something!
Like I wrote about crime and how much of it is on TV, and how it teaches
kids the bad things.

I didn't really have a hard time reading the test at all. There was a lot of
noise. I couldn't really concentrate. There's a lot of noise out in the hall. We
got people running in and out. If I don't pass it, that's O.K. I couldn't
really concentrate. I kept thinking about Rachel and my Mom. It's one of my
dreams that I've wanted for a long, long time. I want to pass that. The math
section was at the end and I was really tired by then.

Julie seemed ambivalent about the test this time, accepting the fact that it was hard
to concentrate because of the noise, wanting to pass, but realizing that it was O.K. if
she didn't. She had devised another new strategy: she recalled the encouragement
she'd received from Rachel and her mother, and refocused on her dream to pass the
test. Again, the caring relationships in Julie's life sustained her, whether or not she
passed the test.
During that same visit, Julie read me the letter she wrote to her mother. The room was quiet, and the air felt thick and heavy. At our next visit, Julie told me that she had not passed the test:

It's very stressing knowing that I can't pass the GED. I've done it twice and I still can't pass it. It's so discouraging. I get kinda mad at myself, and I don't know...I know I'll do it again, because that's how bad I want it. I think once I get situated [after I'm out of prison], I think I'll have the courage I need to get the GED and pass it. I just flunked it four months ago. My reading and writing has brought up my self-esteem quite a bit. The only way people who can't read and write can do it, is if they want to. If they want to, they can do it.

Stating "I can't" rather than "I didn't" pass the test, Julie charged herself to find the courage she'd need to attempt it again. She recognized her determination to become a better reader and writer and now understood that telling her story had brought her far. She was working on many difficult personal "issues," talking in many different groups, reading and writing her way to herself.

The community she was building for herself was also helping to sustain her. Julie talked, for the first time, soon after her mother's death, about wanting to return to the prison. I had learned that this was a common pattern for inmates who were being asked to make more and more demands of themselves—it was scary business to move forward into the unknown. Julie had great support though and she told me, "I've been getting a lot of courage from the other people here. I asked Mike to take me back to the prison the other day. He said no because I've come too far."

Julie Moves On

Julie's efforts on behalf of her recovery were paying off; she was ready to move onto the next phase of the program. As part of her "graduation," Julie had to prepare a lecture about herself and her recovery to present to all of the other
inmates at the center. She was told to choose four pieces of music to be included in her presentation. She worked on several drafts of her speech during our visits and got special permission for me to attend the important event.

On the day of Julie’s presentation, we were in the middle of a brutal heat wave. I hopped out of my air-conditioned car and the hot, humid air felt oppressive. Julie greeted me at the door with a big hug and walked me down the long hallway to the cafeteria, now converted to a meeting room. Men and women in green T-shirts and long pants entered the room noisily. Many carried small electric fans and tables were moved against the walls near the electric outlets. It was the kind of day that even electric fans could not help, but Julie stood alone, nervously smiling, at the front of the room, fanning the index cards she clutched in her hand. Several men and women approached her with hugs, offering her good luck with her speech. A young man sat at the back of the room next to a stereo and adjusted the volume of the speakers as Julie tested the microphone.

Several dozen fans blew the hot air through the room and Julie stepped up to the podium. Before she began speaking, she introduced me to the group as her “teacher,” and thanked us all for coming. As she spoke, she made clear connections between her early failure in school and her addictions. She didn’t specifically refer to her more recent efforts to read and write; not everyone in the room knew Julie’s whole story, and she may not have been ready to tell them anymore than that I was her teacher. (Despite my reassurances, Julie was always sure that she was the only one in prison who had trouble reading.) In her speech, she made many references to the power of language in her life: others’ words had hurt her, she didn’t know what she was thinking, she couldn’t identify the source of words coming from her own mouth. The room was silent, except for the whirring fans, as she spoke:
My Addiction and Where I Kept My Feelings

Let me tell you a little bit about myself and my addiction. I lived my life with drugs & alcohol starting at age 11. Drugs & Alcohol were my best friends, I was handicapped. I kept saying to others and myself that I could do it, I was old enough. I can remember the kids at school that didn't do drugs or alcohol, called me names like Dumb, Stupid but I didn't care.

I put myself in special places and made friends with my thoughts I had about life. It felt good what I was doing getting high, I got to be somebody else. I tried my best to hide my feelings putting myself in the dark with closed doors and locked them. It seemed that I couldn't do anything right.

My feelings & me stayed there for many years. I was scared to let out the hidden feelings from behind my door of life. I lived not even knowing who I was. Life didn't make any sense to me, so, I made up my own life with drugs and alcohol. Making sure no one came in or to close to me.

I didn't want anyone in my life or my addiction. That's the way I wanted it to be. I strived through my life to make sure I got my drugs & alcohol everyday. I tried my best to do drugs & alcohol the right way. I never wanted to try to stop. I was having fun—using—by myself. I continued my life this way for 16 years, to where....

I didn't know what I was thinking. My mouth saying words not knowing where they were coming from and hurting others.

They way I felt was the way I thought I wanted to be. When I came to be a mother, I made my kids' life a place of hell. The frustration I went through when I didn't have anything to use—I could never imagine living without it. When I wanted to stop I couldn't. My addiction came down on me hard. It was along path that began to turn...The things I've seen & done, the places I've been, what I did wrong...The walls from life began to come down as my story goes on of feelings and living.

As I unlocked & began to open the door of darkness that had been closed for so many years, I found myself...feelings...pain. When I went to prison, I began to let go of my addiction. I was forced to let go and left with that door, the Door to me.

The pain carries me through another day. Now it's not the pain of dreams, of darkness—blood dripping out of my veins from the high I needed for the day.

It's the pain of discovering and feeling my feelings. It's the pain of living, not hiding from life. My addiction only brought me to a locked door, no key to my feelings and accepting the love I needed.

It's sad to say I had gone the wrong way, the things I did, the life I lived, hiding for so many years. I admitted and accepted my addiction when I went
to the prison and came to this house [treatment center]. I've done different things to help myself, changed my thinking, felt my feelings, and turned around to my life. I opened the door to Julie. I've taken the pain and talking to people in this house, listening to other people's feelings, my life has changed and so have I. I can finally say I know who I am, how I feel and what life is all about.

I don't need drugs and alcohol. I know where I am going. I can live today and help myself from the pain of darkness.

Today, I'm somebody and I love the person I am.

Julie spoke clearly and loudly as she spoke to the crowd of more than fifty people.

During the pauses in her speech, as each of her chosen songs played over the speaker, Julie stood tall at the podium even though there was a chair just behind her. She smiled broadly, scanned the room slowly and made eye contact with many of us. Several of the women flashed her "O.K." and thumbs up signs. Julie beamed as she finished her speech to the thunderous applause of her peers, now on their feet. The ceremonial speech delivered; Julie was now ready to move on.

As I listened to Julie speak with clarity and confidence, I thought back to our frustration with the prison education program and with the GED tests. In prison, Julie couldn't attend school full-time and she could not pass the standardized test. Yet, Julie's determination led her to take full advantage of many other opportunities: writing class, the peer tutoring program, Connections, her journal, her autobiography, the prison library, letter-writing. Julie's self-determination to learn had also brought her numerous opportunities to gain a greater understanding of herself. With her reading and writing, Julie worked on her recovery from substance abuse, settled her relationship with her dying mother, maintained contact with her children, convinced the judicial system of her sincerity to regain full custody of her children, and, most importantly, began to see herself as a worthwhile and capable person.

Julie has also discovered the gift of literacy that she can pass on to her children. She writes them letters and offers them the children's books we read.
together. She realizes that she can enrich the legacy she passes on to her children by sharing both her love of reading and writing. In much the same way that Rachel mentored her, she can now offer a valuable example to her own children:

He [my son] is at a low level. He has a hard time reading and spelling. I give him and the two little ones all my kids’ books. He reminds me so much of me, it's unbelievable. He's doing really well at school. He's trying real hard. He's going to be just like me. All I can do is just share what I've learned with him. What I told him, with our reading, I told him he's going too fast and he's being too hard on himself. I told him, "You're being too hard on yourself. Take your time. Be patient. Mom still has a hard time. But I'm working on it." . . . I have to give myself a lot of credit. Who knows what I'll be able to do in ten years? Maybe I'll wake up one day and know where to put a period or a comma! Or where to start a new line!
CHAPTER FIVE

RACHEL READS AND WRITES THE WORLD

Introduction

A woman in prison who is highly literate can use her literacies not only to take care of herself, but also to contribute to the well-being of those around her. She can even have a positive impact on those outside of prison. Rachel, a talented writer and voracious reader, uses her discursive "voice" to advocate for the silent women in her midst. She lives out her need to be connected to others (Gilligan, 1982) as she enables other women in prison to tell their own stories in their own language. She cares for and shows concern for others (Noddings, 1984) when she helps an inmate learn to read and write or teaches a prison class on women's journal and diary traditions. She helps others discover the power and the promise of language when she listens to and affirms their newly unsilenced voices.

Rachel, a high school graduate who attended one semester of college before coming to prison, is an outspoken proponent of student-centered education. In the prison education program, she participates actively as both student and teacher. She lives out her belief that reading and writing are critical tools of empowerment, as she creates collaborative networks—both within and extending out of prison—that help others to meet their needs. Rachel encourages her peers to use their literacies for their own authentic and meaningful purposes. She represents a valuable resource in our nation's "war on illiteracy"—the fight to help the thousands of literate men and women in prison.
With the predominant focus on illiteracy, it is easy to lose sight of the hope: there are many incarcerated individuals who are literate and educated. More than forty-three percent of the women (and more than thirty-two percent of the men) in our nation's state prisons have a high school diploma or one or more years of college education (U.S. Department of Justice, 1991). This statistic is rarely cited despite its inherent hope and potential for collaborative peer-education. When bureaucrats and educators play the "numbers game" with adult literacy, they tend to focus on "illiteracy" and to count those who need help, rather than also looking also at the hidden potential of those with the capacity to help. Educated women in prison (as well as their male counterparts), if they choose to and if allowed to, can use language—written, read, spoken and shared—not only to enrich their own worlds, but also to help others, the undereducated, discover the rich possibilities of learning about and rebuilding themselves and their worlds.

However, the use of inmates as teachers and tutors works against the prevalent punishment paradigm of many institutions. Educational programs can be seen as threatening because they hold the potential for inmate empowerment. Peer teachers and tutors can be seen as too powerful or demanding; the relationships between inmate teachers or tutors and their students can be seen as problematic by an institution that is focused on isolation, not rehabilitation. Such an institution usually isn't interested in promoting relationships of any kind between inmates. Some institutions don't trust that inmates involved in school are really working. Trust and power are big issues in a prison setting and can certainly interfere with the administration of inmate teaching programs.

Yet, when supported enthusiastically by the institution, participants can work effectively and productively. Peer tutors are successful in prison education programs in numerous locations that include Maryland, Missouri, Louisiana and Canada (Newman, Lewis, and Beverstock, 1993). Such programs direct inmates'
energies into positive, educational activities, and recognize inmates’ leadership potential (Dvorak, 1992). From an institutional perspective, there are several benefits: inmates in educational programs are less disruptive and more manageable; peer instruction is considered cost-effective. In the women’s prison where I conducted my study, a few inmates with post-secondary education are important members of the teaching team in both the academic and vocational programs. Many also participate in the peer-tutoring program as a result of their participation in the writing class.

The benefits of inmate collaboration can extend beyond the classroom and into other parts of prison life. Inmates listen to and care for each other and themselves in responsive ways that they carry out of the classroom. Conversations extend into the hallways, tiers and cells, the community of women recognizes their collective power and creates opportunities to reach out to others, even those beyond the walls.

When Janice and Mary work together to sew AIDS baby quilts or Susan, Rachel and Catherine organize a prison yard Walk-a-thon to benefit the local homeless shelter, they care for others in ways that reinforce not only their reading, writing and other forms of literacy, but also their collaboration, cooperation and leadership skills. Annie writes to her penpal in the local nursing home, and excitedly shares with other inmates the letter she gets in return. Her peers eagerly ask for their own penpals; they validate Annie’s writing in a way that is much more meaningful to her than a grade or percentile score. These examples of individual and collective social action reinforce the women’s need for connecting and care-giving in ways that promote the development of functional literacies.

From the very beginning, Rachel recognizes her fellow inmates’ need for connections and addresses them aggressively and thoughtfully as a teacher, mentor and advocate for her peers. Always a seed-planter, Rachel helps to bring about
many positive changes in the prison. She heightens others' awareness of the need for an AIDS support group, women's health education, college level classes, an orientation video for new inmates who had difficulty understanding the printed inmate manual, and more programs for the Spanish-speaking women. Rachel corresponds with knowledgeable people both behind the walls and, more often, beyond the walls, to gather information and expand the women's world: she writes request slips to the prison superintendent to suggest new programs for the women, to public health agencies to collect information about AIDS for the prison library, and to local colleges to find out about the funding of college courses for herself and others in prison. Rachel asks pointed questions and seeks creative solutions to improve not only her own life, but the lives of others.

In this second case study, I will describe and analyze Rachel's multiple literacies as she seeks to understand her world and herself, and as she helps others to learn about their worlds and themselves. Rachel's school history and family literacy experiences are different from Julie's; however, they share a common prison experience. As a peer tutor, Rachel invites Julie into her literate world, encourages her along their journey, yet always lets Julie set the pace. As a student, teacher, reader, writer and artist, Rachel confirms the tremendous human potential residing in our nation's prisons, that is, the literate men and women who, with appropriate support, encouragement and direction, can serve as mentors and teachers for the less educated.

Note: Rachel's writing is reproduced with its original spelling, punctuation, grammar and notation.
"I was Tired of Being Scared of Dying"

With short-cropped wavy hair and a swagger in her step, the woman confidently entered the prison classroom on my first day there. She balanced a thick manila envelope on her hip, and wore a pen stylishly behind her ear. She immediately offered to help translate my spoken words for two Spanish-speaking students in our new writing class. She seated herself comfortably between Rita and Louisa, looked up with a toothy smile and introduced herself to me, "Hi, I'm Rachel. I'm doing some writing with another instructor from the university. Maybe you know her?"

Rachel emptied her large envelope out on the table as she chatted about her "other" writing—a play she was writing. She sorted through dozens of handwritten pages and told me that she was the only remaining student in a play-writing course taught at the prison by a member of the state university's English department. Rachel hoped that her play would eventually be performed by the inmates. But today, in class, she had other writing she wanted to work on.

I was thrilled to have such an enthusiastic writer in class, and appreciated Rachel's generous offer to translate for Rita and Louisa. However, I realized by the end of the next class that Rita and Louisa were keeping her from her own work. I needed to ensure her time and space during class to work on her own writing. Within the week, I enlisted the help of a local high school Spanish teacher who agreed to translate the women's work on a weekly basis. Rita and Louisa enjoyed having an "outside translator" with whom they also developed a nice correspondence. As a result, Rachel was able to use her time in class to work on her own writing.

Rachel soon gained recognition in our class as a capable writer. She shared her writing eagerly with the whole class, often blushing when others expressed their delight with her words. She combined words in new and refreshing ways that often
left many of us amazed at how she could “paint” with words. Sometimes, in an attempt to take it all in, we’d ask her to read a piece a second time. Embarrassed, she’d agree and read again.

As Rachel discovered herself as a writer, she sometimes seemed baffled by her newly-discovered talent for writing. In *Notebooks of the Mind*, John-Steiner writes, “The development of the power and individuality of a voice... is a long and complex process. It builds on talent and opportunity as well as on a mixture of humility and self-confidence” (1985, p. 37). Ironically, at this point, Rachel found it easier to empower the voices of the other women (by encouraging their writing) than she did fully acknowledging the power of her own voice. Despite our affirmations, Rachel had a difficult time seeing herself as a writer. In fact, she was quite surprised by the writing she was doing in prison. She told me:

> My life, the last sixteen or seventeen years, I’ve been on the streets chasing drugs or doing time. I’ve always been creative, sensitive, bright... I didn’t write before. You have to understand my life was not much of a life. It was mostly a drug-filled life and bad relationships. Nothing existed beyond that... What happened here [in prison]? I was really, really tired [of my life]. Some would say, “Rachel, the odds are against you.” They’d think, “She’ll never make it.” For the most part, that’s sad but true. Most can’t get out of the system. If you can’t cope with the underlying problems, they’ll keep coming back. Well, I was tired of being scared of dying. I made a decision to do anything they told me to do to stay straight.

Julie had been frightened to come to school; Rachel was frightened to stay away from school. Like Julie, however, she was afraid about her writing and soon learned that with the support of her audience, she had important “stuff to tell:”.

When they offered the play-writing course, I signed up. I was terrified! I didn’t know if I could write! I started with an essay, then the piece on my father. Everyone liked it. It was a great burst! It surprised me. I kept going. It was almost like it [my writing talent] was lying there ready to happen. I’ve got a lot of stuff to tell.

Rachel had originally made the decision to write in prison because she was “tired of being scared of dying.” She quickly learned that writing was a way to
live—to live more fully in relationship to others, and in relationship to herself.

James Britton wrote about the powerful uses of expressive writing, "I believe [expressive language] has a very important function. Its function in one sense is to be with. To be with people. To explore the relationship. To extend the togetherness of situations" (1982, p. 97). Certainly, few places create a greater need for "being with people" and "extending the togetherness of situations" than does prison with its cordoned spaces, enforced separations and silences. "Expressive forms of speech capitalize on the fact that both speaker and listener are present; expressive writing simulates that co-presence, the writer invoking the presence of the reader as he [sic] writes, the reader invoking the presence of the writer as he reads" (p. 124). Rachel soon understood not only that her language would help her "to be with people," but also that it would do more than simulate co-presence. Her language would underscore and reinforce the co-presence of the other inmates in ways that would help to ease the isolation of prison life.

Rachel willingly shared what she was learning with the rest of us, and was eager to learn from others. She listened intently to the newest writers, and cheered whenever a new student joined our class. She encouraged her peers to investigate and attempt a wide variety of writing including autobiographies, journals, children's stories and poetry. When I brought in Mary O'Neill's (1989) *Hailstones and Halibut Bones* so that we could experiment with "color poems," Rachel wrote about her favorite color:

Beige

beige beginnings
warm
vanilla bean
the color of the walls
upon which old masters hang
cafe au lait
and lait
and lait
your skin against
my memory
silk stockings
and a big straw hat
delicate and gossamer
soft and simple
new and young
on its way to being
brown
beginnings/warm

Rachel's peers recognized her not only as a talented writer, but also as an active reader. In addition to the latest drafts of her writing, she often brought an assortment of books and magazines to class. We usually made some time before or during class to chat about what she was reading. In conversation, she often quoted a New York Times book review or mentioned an upcoming TV news documentary she'd just read about. She recommended new books to Pat, the classroom teacher who was also in charge of purchasing books for the prison library. Many of Rachel's suggested titles would appear a few weeks later on the library shelves. Her expert opinions about what to read or watch on television or about what part of another woman's poem was particularly "cool," were sought after and taken seriously by those around her. She was a valued member of the writing classroom and contributed in meaningful and personal ways that helped build a sense of community in ways that also promoted the women's literacy development.

As a member of the writing class, Rachel was sensitive to the fact that she spent considerably more time reading and writing than most of the other women. She usually shared only one or two pieces of writing during each class. She didn't want her voice to overpower the others, and often lingered after class to share a few other poems with me alone. By waiting to share some of her work until later, Rachel balanced her own need for audience (to be cared for) with the need of the other women to be heard. In her role as one-caring, she generously silenced her own
voice to "remain present" to the other women in class (Noddings, 1984). This was a very different use of silence from those who thought they had nothing to say; Rachel's silence was a sign of responsive caring, and indicated a high level of receptivity (p. 19) as she listened to the other voices. She actively lived out her role as a one-caring by listening, translating, mentoring, tutoring, and later, directing the play she'd written. Once "scared of dying," Rachel had grabbed hold of writing as a way to save her life; it was now what helped her, quite possibly, to save other lives.

**Rachel Integrates Many Voices to Write her Self**

Rachel is receptive and responsive not only to the other women in the writing class, but also to all that is going on in her world. She constantly looks and listens, and connects her writing to her reading as well as to music, art, dance, and television. Her writing often connects what she observes—people's faces, movements, and conversations—with what she misses—her son, her parents, her grandmother and her friends. She has an uncanny way of including much of her world in her writing: phrases from songs, vivid descriptions of paintings and dances, bits of overheard conversation, references to favorite composers and artists, and images of faces she misses seeing.

"Integrating the voices" is characteristic of the thinking of women at the position of constructed knowledge (Belenky et al., 1986). Women like Rachel "seek to stretch the outer boundaries of their consciousness—by making the unconscious conscious, by consulting and listening to the self, by voicing the unsaid, by listening to others and staying alert to all the currents and undercurrents of life about them, by imagining themselves inside the new poem or person or idea that they want to come to know and understand" (p. 141).
It seems that no matter what she reads, heard, or saw, Rachel always writes her way back to herself. Even in the stark, colorless prison, she finds bold colorful places to go in her writing. In order to find herself, Rachel "makes the unconscious conscious" and integrates the "voices" of her Jewish heritage, her family and her friends. When we talked about her writing during an interview, Rachel told me about her writing, "It takes me out of here, kind of finding freedom out of prison. It's mine. I can write whatever I want. It's new to me. It's exciting... The biggest thing is it takes me outa here."

Rachel Explores her Heritage

Rachel makes connections to her Jewish heritage in some of the first writing she shares with me. As Rachel passionately explores and celebrates her family's cultural background, she identifies her fascination with the Holocaust and her family as an outgrowth of her spirituality. Her heightened spiritual awareness is characteristic of constructivist women who are "seriously preoccupied with the moral or spiritual dimension of their lives" (Belenky et al., 1986, 150). She delights in defining herself as "very Jewish," and recognizes that it stems from her childhood experiences. Rachel tells me:

Writing about my Jewish heritage... I don't know where that came from. It had an impact on me. I was never really religious, but very Jewish. As I got older, I got more spiritual. My Jewishness is very much a part of me, what I like, what I really think. It's me, really me! Grandma and Sunday dinner, not the religion as much as the roots, family, heritage. The roots of my family are all so intertwined. The Jewish heritage is so chaotic. Maybe it's why I like depressing stuff. Survivor-guilt? Watching movies, I remember concentration camps. I've never understood hating people. I think it stems from my life as a child, what I was exposed to. It's more than the religion. It's a part of my life. It's just in me. It's wonderful for me to see this. It's created in me a whole new interest in my past, my heritage, questioning my belief system. I always rebelled against organized religion. I was amazed when it all came out. My grandma's not with me anymore, but she's in me. It makes me feel good. I feel a kind of belonging. It's made me much more aware of Jewish women writers. Now it means something to me, a kinship, Adrienne Rich, Klepfisz.
As she celebrates her heritage, Rachel’s need for a cultural community extends into her reading and writing where she draws upon a group of significant Jewish women, among them her grandmother and published writers. She sees herself as a part of the community she fashions for herself and is free to explore herself, “I realize I have a connection [with my Jewish heritage]. It’s very important. Writing has a way of passing things on. It’s so important.” Just as Julie did, Rachel has discovered that recreating her past, through writing, will enable her to move into the future. As a kinswoman, Rachel creates conversational communities and values the legacy she inherited from her ancestors.

Rachel shares the following piece with me one day after class:

Waltz of the Bones

For an instant the Danube becomes her oasis
amidst ink-washed skies
dissected by silver wire framing a calcimined face
translucent
transported
Feierlich und Gemessen
the hollows of her eyes become the moon
and her bones begin to sway.

Her words chill me. Struck by her use of descriptive phrased like “ink-washed skies” and “calcimined face,” I ask her how she came to write the poem. She was inspired by listening to Mahler’s Symphony No. 1 as well as by reading about victims of the Holocaust. Both music and text provide the stimulus for her powerful writing. The images she paints with her words haunt me, and I re-read the poem several times in the quiet classroom; she reads the poem to the class later that week.

Shortly thereafter, Rachel tells me that she can’t get the faces of the Holocaust victims out of her mind; she has just watched a graphic documentary
about Auschwitz on television. Several weeks later, after a brief visit with her ten-
year-old son Joseph, she connects the two events—the Holocaust and the visit—in a
piece that "voices the unsaid" and allows her to "imagine herself inside the poem":

Mein Kampf

I watched Mein Kampf today
and yesterday Joseph visited me wearing a three hundred fifty dollar suit
he is ten years old
and funny and kind and very wise
he wore a silk (real) tie around his neck
with Bass weejun tassels on his feet....
in Auschwitz
the shoes left behind were piled high and deep and wide
the tiny oxfords held no promise of another ten year old's toes to pinch
the suitcases plundered would never be packed again
the journey being over
the bathhouse a final destination
bewilderment in a woman's eyes
etched forever on the sunrise and sunset of my soul
he laughs and tells me he is half Jewish
how do I begin to tell him about children carried into chaos and confusion
their mothers' arms holding them close
why isn't it something he knows?
what is half Jewish I respond
I have been away from him too long
I try to explain the importance of knaidlach and ma nish ta na
he can not understand
I can not either
three hundred fifty dollar suits he proudly wears to show me
I smile falsely
what does half Jewish mean? I want to scream
I watch two boys walk into freedom........
twins the S.S. kept alive to experiment upon as mice or guinea pigs
Joseph............. they were half Jewish too.

When Rachel first shares this poem with me, she tells me how frustrated she's been
by her son's recent visit and that writing the poem was one way to deal with her
feelings constructively. Unable to voice her frustration in the visiting room, she
chooses to write with great ambivalence about how her son was being raised.

Rachel reflects on the writing of "Mein Kampf" several months later:
This poem is very important to me. I have an eleven-year-old son who I have not had a great deal of contact with. He lives with my family and I talk to him on the phone. And my family does not live in [this state]. I do not get to see him often. And, unfortunately, my life has been one of a lot of drugs, prolonged absences, prolonged incarceration. I'm an addict and up until recently, I have not taken the time to find myself, so to speak. And I have an eleven-year-old son who is growing up really without me. He knows some of me because my family keeps that alive. I know him only through phone calls and two months here, three months there, being out [of prison]. However, he comes to visit me and I wonder really, who, who is he?

His name is Joseph and he came to visit me once a few months ago. And I was struck; I had just watched something on television, about the Holocaust. So, it was very clear in my mind. I can remember the scenes of the children being torn from their mothers' arms and the women being pulled to the showers. And the children's looks, the faces, and the chaos, the horror that was the concentration camp. And this was very much still in my mind and when my son came in.

He is a beautiful boy, and he's very healthy and he was dressed wonderfully. He comes from a very affluent family. My sister is very affluent. He does not need or want for anything. And that's wonderful and I don't begrudge him that. And he's very lucky. And I'm very lucky that he is able to be cared for this way. But I guess the two opposites just kind of came to me at once. And he had on a very, very expensive suit and my values as opposed to my sister's values came into play here. And I don't think I meant to say that she's not doing a good job. I just was struck by the ridiculousness in my mind, at that moment, of a three-hundred dollar suit as opposed to what I had just seen on TV. And I wondered at that moment, was my son aware of this history? And I wrote something called Mein Kampf.

Rachel wants Joseph to understand his Jewish heritage as she works to understand it herself. However, she realizes the impact of her incarceration on Joseph's upbringing; he doesn't really know her or her values. With her comment, "He comes from a very affluent family," she clearly perceives a disconnection from Joseph; she is not a part of his family.

In "Mein Kampf," Rachel holds the effects of her son's separation from her next to "the horror of the concentration camps." As Joseph and the Holocaust victims co-exist in the poem, Rachel discovers the conflict of wanting to care for her son and the fact that she has "been away from him too long." Writing about the Holocaust brings Rachel closer to understanding the loss of her relationship with
Joseph. Not only does she confront their disconnection in the poem, but also, upon later reflection, she identifies her search for herself, "I'm an addict and up until recently, I have not taken the time to find myself." Unknowingly, perhaps, she has written herself into the poem.

Rachel Recreates her Family

Writing about her Jewish heritage leads Rachel to write more about her disconnection from herself and from other significant people in her life, including Joseph. One way that Rachel pursues an understanding of herself is by tracing the interrelationship of five generations of her family. She recreates, on paper, relationships with her great-grandmother, her grandmothers, her father and mother, her sister and her son. In her journal, she knits together memories of her past with questions about the future memories Joseph will have:

Although lifesavers obviously a grandma don't make—they were a big part of Grandma Sara and me—Who will make the tsimmes and chopped liver now? Now that all my Grandmas are gone? black and white diamond shaped linoleum floors with her old tired feet shuffling—lifting covers off of pots—endless spoons to taste—pinches to add—remember the black shoes—stockings rolled around calves and—endless cardigans to wear—dressing up in jewelry from mysterious boxes on Sunday afternoon. I can't imagine my mother keeping rolls of lifesavers in the bottom of her pocketbook for Joseph to dig for on Sat. nights—she never understood me but Joseph thinks she's the only one who understands him. Grandmas are a mystery unto themselves—who will make the tsimmes now that mine are gone?

She witnesses in her journal to the loss of her grandmothers and the probable loss of the "passing on" of significant family traditions to Joseph. Rachel recognizes the irony of her relationship with her mother in light of her mother's relationship to Joseph, "[S]he never understood me but Joseph thinks she's the only one who understands him." She stops short of imagining new traditions that her mother, Joseph's grandmother, will pass on to him.

On other pages of her journal, Rachel explores her relationship with her sister Leslie, the one who is raising Joseph. She recollects happy childhood times:
Leslie and I would pull out boxes & boxes of Grandma Sara’s costume jewelry and drape ourselves with necklaces, bracelets and huge gaudy earrings—we were gorgeous and we’d model for everyone—there was so much jewelry to choose from—it seemed like every Sunday we’d dig deeper and deeper inside grandma’s closet and still find jewels we’d never seen before—it was a railroad flat—hot and dark but I never realized they were poor—I just knew there was laughter and love—lifesavers fished out of grandma’s pocketbooks and the jewels of the Nile to drape around our bodies—

We’d dart in and out of her room—back & forth to the black & white linoleum floor of the kitchen—An old floor with cracks + crevices—years of Grandma standing over the stove checking the flames—stirring the pots—taking periodic spoonfuls and tasting—our lives revolved around food and table conversation

There was always an endless supply of Canada Dry extra dry ginger ale and even now that’s my favorite

No one could cook like my grandmas and I took it for granted that everyone had a grandma and a great grandma to cook for them and smile + approve of everything they did—these were happy days—afternoons of bliss and contentment—Leslie and I would dance our latest ballet steps to the music on the ancient radio in the front room—it was one of those big stand-up radios and I knew that at one when there was no television, my mother had sat at night with her mother + grandmother and listened to programs on that same radio—it was a talkative family and what wasn’t supposed to be heard by my sister + me was whispered in Yiddish in hushed tones—

Rachel witnesses in her journal to the power of her inheritances. Later, in a poem, she wonders about the parts of her that will live on in her son despite their physical separation:

for Joseph

i try to find a part of me
inside you
i see a smile that’s similar
and anger simmering
i do not know your sensitivities or
your weaknesses-
i do not see your tears or hold you close
i watch you in my dreams
and hold my breath waiting
for something familiar and mine
in you-

Rachel's voice, entirely in first person, is loud and clear as she "speaks" to Joseph in the poem. While she identifies personal characteristics of herself—a smile and anger—that she recognizes in him, she also admits how much she does not know about him, "I do not know your sensitivities or your weaknesses." Like Julie's poetry about her children, Rachel's poem has a dialogic quality. She ends the poem with a sense of hope and the possibility of a future as she holds her breath, "waiting for something familiar and mine in you."

Rachel Remembers her Friends

It is often difficult for Rachel to think about her own future, when the future of many of her friends is threatened, or cut short, by early death, drug overdoses or HIV-AIDS. Her sense of her own future is framed by her own sense of grief. However, Rachel comforts herself and recaptures her friendships through her writing, usually in the form of poetry. When Rachel writes about her friends, she is often writing about herself. She told me, "A lot of my poems have messages in them. And some are about stuff outside of myself, friends, drugs, part of me. But I get messages out without really going inside. It comes out through someone or something else [I choose to write about]. It's easier to look at myself that way." It is easier for Rachel, as it was for Julie, to see herself in relation to others.

It is also easier for Rachel to write indirectly about the personally difficult issues of drug addition and HIV-AIDS than it is to write about herself. (She does not have HIV-AIDS, but knows that the lifestyle she has led puts her at great risk for the virus.) She considers her poetry to be message-laden, but somewhat removed from herself because she writes "without really going inside."

In the poetry that Rachel writes about her friends, she continues to create extended conversations for herself. When she writes as if she were speaking directly
a friend, Rachel brings important relationships and a much-needed community
"into" the prison for herself. She recaptures her friendship with Jazzy, a friend who
died of a brain aneurysm, a complication of AIDS:

Jazzy/You were the art on Magnolia St.

Magnolia Street
was all you ever talked about
on
and
on
and
on
you'd go
I often thought of asking you to shut your mouth forever
You could surely talk
and move tornado-like
from yard up to the space I occupied in cell-block fashion
You said I was your blue-eyed soul
in my ear you'd
laugh and hiss and snarl and purr and hum
me stories 'bout times passed and dreams
folded up and stored away under that blue rag
you kept the naps in place with top your head—
Except for Sundays
When church and your family came
and you would give me stories told
100 times to hold onto as
i would try to fathom how you'd talk so much
non-stop and fret and fuss
and yet hot-comb those curls to perfection.
Child, did you ever stop to swallow?
I loved you something fierce for not giving a damn
about what others thought
or shutting up when we couldn't
stand the sound of your voice a minute more
So used to you
we never really heard
you fussin' at a head that ached....
besides our pain was all so commonplace
you ran up from the yard and pulled me close without one word-
I was alarmed
Girl, if you ain't talking then something big
is going away with you today
You left me plans
for us to reggae at the jamaican club
and eat your sweet potato pie
and see my painting hang above your baby's bed
Girl, it looks pretty awful there
i just have to let you know
You were most likely runnin' your mouth
when you hung that up so high
And i could only shake my head and grin
at that piece of palm you "borrowed" from the rev.
on easter sunday
    hangin' over your livin' room couch
Dwight keeps dustin' to keep you satisfied
Course you would have been down on your hands and knees
    snarlin' and fumin'
    about a dustball that we surely couldn't see
No, Jazzy—not even me
I walked into the bathroom
and when i closed the door
and saw that purple robe of yours
still hangin' on its hook
    i dove right in head first and tried to smell you back
    your perfumed soaps and lemon musk cologne
    just there
    not knowing what to do
you didn't run up from the yard
to hug me strong and turn me around and say
"You home now girl, relax"
Instead i introduced me to your man
he said he'd been expecting me
    and we sat down right where that ache
    exploded in your head
Why did you run your mouth so much?
we never really heard about those pains
You should have known that head rag tied
so tight for years with so much tucked away
would surely grow too tight one day

    and i prefer to think
    Those dreams just found a different way
to come from underneath and reach some outstretched hands—

In the poem "Jazzy/You were the art on Magnolia St.," Rachel remembers
Jazzy's qualities that were her favorites: the predictability of her talk, her stories,
er her laughter and dreams, and her "not giving a damn about what others thought."
Yet, as Rachel describes her friend, she also finds herself in their relationship. She
defines herself through Jazzy's responses to her—she was Jazzy's "blue-eyed soul;"
Jazzy was always there to comfort and reassure her.

Even after Jazzy's death in the poem, Rachel continues the conversation,
despairingly, telling Jazzy "I . . . tried to smell you back." Together with Dwight,
she chastises herself for not responding to Jazzy's pain soon enough to save her life.
Rachel ends the poem by looking towards the future, hoping that Jazzy's dreams
have reached some "outstretched hands," perhaps her own.

This kind of writing about important relationships gives Rachel an
opportunity to re-view her life in a way that she considers safe and controlled.

When we talked about her writing, she told me:

I think I learn a lot about myself [when I write]. When I go back and reread
something, I find a deeper meaning than I originally intended. I find out
things I didn't know about myself. When I stop and think about me, I can't
do that. It's hard for me to open up. My writing helps me. It's controlled
still, though. I'm controlled. It gives me a chance to look at things in my life
I wouldn't necessarily look at.

Rachel continues some of the same themes of "Jazzy" in another poem about
a friend who has died. In "Her Body was Found this Morning," memorializes Patty.
Rachel mentions again the "outstretched hands" and the futility of her friend's call
that was never heard:

Her Body was Found this Morning

And I need to know
what makes a blade of grass sustain a wind
that sends hats dancing across parking lot tar
and twirls signs as though they were pinwheels in a baby's hand

How is it

Slim tender green shoots
shiver and shake
bending and swaying
ballerinas stretching their bodies unnaturally low to the ground
yet never breaking in half
What holds on so tightly to tufts of green from below
where we can not see or fathom such strength
in so fragile a green

I need to understand what it is

Patty tried bending and swaying . . . pirouetting in the wind
perhaps because there was no grass to watch outside her window
she was carried helter skelter
cartwheels of despair performed over blacktop
with no outstretched hands close behind
no pinwheel strewn colors to marvel at

no wonder

Screams were never heard over the howling
hurled twirling and twisted into the barely noticed corner of an alley
no more screams
her children sit with silent eyes
no grass outside their window

And I need to know
just how it is

tender emerald shoots bend and sway but never break.

Rachel uses personified images of dance and movement throughout the poem—hats dancing, twirling signs, shoots of grass like ballerinas stretching, bending and swaying—and extends these images into descriptions of her friend—pirouetting in the wind, cartwheels of despair, pinwheel strewn colors and her screams twirling and twisted. In an attempt to answer for herself what it is she needs to know and understand about Patty's death, Rachel writes from the familiar contexts of dance and movement. She juxtaposes the graceful movement of dance with the terrorizing movements of her friend.

Through both poems, Rachel is aware of voices, her own and her friends', sometimes unheard, sometimes silent. In "Her Body was Found this Morning," Rachel's question "How is it" and her statements "And I need to know," and "I need to understand what it is," interrupt the movement of the poem abruptly and remain unanswered. In this poem, unlike the other, Rachel doesn't speak directly to her
friend; Patty's screams are never heard in the poem. Even Patty's children are silent. They "sit with silent eyes," in contrast to their mother's attempts at movement and screaming. Rachel recognizes the intergenerational quality of the despair in Patty's life; like their mother, her children have "no grass outside their window."

It is important for Rachel to share the stories of her friends. When she writes about the deaths of Jazzy and Patty, she shares the writing in class; the writing helps her to bridge two significant communities: her circle of friends outside of prison, and the women in prison. Each community makes the other one more real. Writing also provides a means for others to learn what was important to her, "I like people to see things [in my writing]. I like to make an awareness in others of issues." Her writing is the catalyst for more meaningful conversation than Rachel usually encounters with other inmates. She told me about the significance of her writing and other multiple literacies. Her response to my question about what it would be like not to be able to write in prison, reminded me of Julie's answer:

[If I couldn't write] I'd probably be nuts. In here? I'd lose it! I don't talk to enough people. Very little real conversation really. There's no one to talk to here. I'm tired of jail. Not that I'm better than others, but they're so petty at time... I get stuck with no stimulating conversation. It's hard to relate to other people. I can't imagine not being able to write, read or draw.

Though some of the women in class find it sometimes difficult to understand all of Rachel's figurative language, they all understand the loss of friends and of children; the connections are significant enough for them to join into the conversation. As she cares for others by sharing her writing, listening to their responses, and continuing the conversation, Rachel is also able to take care of herself by writing about her history, about her relationship with friends, and through more intense personal writing that she keeps for herself.
Rachel Writes the Self

At about the same time she writes about Patty and Jazzy, Rachel uses her journal to examine a difficult time in her own life, specifically her twenty-first birthday, nearly two decades ago. Between pages about family memories, Rachel jots the notes, "it was my 21st bday—spent on a locked ward—locked—etc etc." Farther down on the page she scribbles "i could not talk —weight—tears" and then, "endless hours spent on my bed—" These notes appear incomplete and stand alone on the page, unlike most of her other journal writing that fills each page.

The short notes seem to be rehearsals for two lengthier entries that appear several pages later. The first entry fills an entire page:

i've been told that turning 21 years of age is a momentous event i've been told this and i suppose we always oohed and aahed over other people's 21st birthday—we bought special presents and planned surprise parties—But why? Is it because 21 was or is a magical number that automatically makes people adults or separates them from their foolish childish ways—i don't know—when i was a teenager 21 was the age everything became legal—the right to vote to drink—graduating college—it was as though a major celebration was to be had for making it through childhood adolescence the teens—i don't know—i have no sense of those being golden years—I mean 16 was a biggie but 21 was a goal—a milestone—i should have realized if it was that important then those first 21 years would be hell

On the next page, Rachel begins a two-page entry:

things were never easy for me most of all life—i seemed to fail all expectations and defy all the rules—there was to be no celebration or special presents on my turning 21—

Although it is the one birthday of my life i will never forget and i still don't understand why anyone thought i'd want to eat chocolate cake on a locked ward in a locked place with a vacant stare on my face—a medicated mind, words that were caught in my throat and a mouth that wouldn't open—

Aunt Laura's prize homemade mocha chocolate cake cut into hundreds of tiny pieces to insure no contraband was hidden —nowhere to stick candles or make a wish—

And they sat me down at a table and gathered round the table to sing happy birthday—smiles on their faces—chocolate crumbs pressed together to somewhat resemble a cake and tears clinging to my lashes—

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All I can think of as I remember this bit of my 21st year is that mass of crumbs and the fact that I hated chocolate and I wouldn't have eaten it had it been in one piece.

Once again, Rachel recuperates her personal history, but on a different level that is highly focused on her own experience with herself. This kind of writing is private and Rachel confines it to her journal. It is plausible that she needs to find herself first in the context of relationships before she could focus more intently on herself. She talks about her struggle with this kind of writing:

Stuff comes out on paper that was hidden, but it's not intentional. The healing? It just comes when you're not expecting it. There's a part of me that still writes and performs for others. I have a hard time writing just for myself. I'd like to be able to write [for myself]. When I'm at peace and serene, I can write that way without thought of judgment. I don't stop and think. I like when it comes out naturally... I can gauge where I am by my writing. If I'm too aware or concerned about the outcome before I start, I know I'm not in a good place.

Her journal is where Rachel sometimes finds herself able to write about herself without fear of judgment and without concern about the outcome. The journal entries above are clearly written in first person, and like her poetry, are sprinkled with long dashes, pauses, and doubts about what she thinks she knew. Adrienne Rich, a member of Rachel's "self-created" community of writing peers, writes in When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision, "But poems are like dreams; in them you put what you don't know you know" (1979, 40) As much as Rachel doubted what she knew, her poetry and journal entries may be writing about what she doesn't know she knows. Through her writing, she finds a voice, and in that voice, authority (Belenky et al., 1986). Rachel is learning about herself through her writing.

Rachel's journal also serves as the seedbed for thinking that may emerge later in a different form. For example, when she begins the play-writing class, Rachel jots notes in her journal about possible characters. The notes she writes about "Elaine" are clearly autobiographical:
Elaine—Virgo—hitting 40—complex—contradicting—artistic—
sensitive—kind—too giving at times—champion of the underdog,
confused with her outlook on life, people/society in opposition to her previous
lifestyle an addict—been in and out of prison for much of the last ten
years—not a typical street person—intelligent in the process of changing
herself—growing—trying to rehabilitate and arrest her drug use
—problems with co-dependency and self-esteem—creative and neurotic
—trying to get a sense of herself for herself—having been a people-pleaser for
a long time—rebellious—strong—although it’s hard for her to see her
strengths—a survivor caught between her past and her future
—mother/daughter relationship a major factor in her life—one sister
—Jewish upper middle-class upbringing

Through these notes, Rachel is working hard to understand herself better. Later,
she writes down her ideas about a plot for the character, Elaine:

starts with a funeral—sister, daughter, etc., etc. O.D.’d on drugs
—leaving behind son—ex-lovers—family—switches to scene in living room of
parents’ house—sitting shiva—conversation—action that takes place after
her death—thoughts—remembrances—interaction between families
—friend—conflict—love—The dramatic effect of one person in a dysfunctional
family leaving—the web—the power—interplay in family
—how her non-life still held friends family together—love/hate

Rachel eventually sets aside these ideas aside for the time being. She isn’t ready to
write a play about “Elaine,” “I still have lots and lots of ideas. As I get healthier
through my therapy and writing, it’ll be easier to write. I want to write just for me
eventually, but it’s hard for me just yet.”

For Rachel, writing is a way not only to take care of herself and, in the
sharing, to take care of others (Noddings, 1984), but also to re-vision herself, what
Adrienne Rich calls “an act of survival.” In her discussion of the twentieth-century
poets Sylvia Plath and Diane Wakoski, Rich notes that “in the work of both these
poets, it is finally the woman’s sense of herself—embattled, possessed—that gives
the poetry its dynamic charge, its rhythms of struggle, need, will, and female
energy” (36). It is those same rhythms, that same energy and charge that fill the
pages of Rachel’s journal and spills out into her poetry. She writes to connect with
those gone before her; she writes through her need to understand the deaths of her
friend and what she can remember of her twenty-first birthday; she explores and
celebrates the culture she inherited from her family, and grieves the loss of relationship with her son. Through the sharing of her writing and the listening to others, she takes care of others in her writing community. She cares for herself when she “integrates the voices” and “imagines [herself] inside the new poem or person or idea that [she wants] to come to know and understand” (Belenky et al., 140).

**Rachel Reads and Writes at Home and School**

Rachel's sophistication in her use of language made me want to know about her early literacy experiences. From a very early age, she developed habits in both school and home that involved her in reading, writing, and drawing. She told me about her first memories of school:

> Kindergarten—I remember the school. I remember my kindergarten teacher. I loved my teacher! I loved my teacher! Kindergarten was still safe. You went and played, took a nap, had lunch and played. She was a really nice teacher. I remember mainly the art. She was really impressed with my art. I remember reading even more than that! The big joke in my house, when I was five, was that I'd read the Sunday New York Times every week from back to front. It was a big joke! I still love it. I get it delivered here [at the prison].

Rachel's first childhood experiences in school were positive: she loved her teacher, the relaxed classroom environment, and her teacher praised her artistic abilities. That early encouragement continues to sustain Rachel more than thirty years later; at the prison, Rachel often sketches and paints for herself and others.

She suggests that her early reading experiences at school and at home reinforced each other. Again, a reading habit established at age five continues into her adult years. At the prison, Rachel still looks forward to the arrival of the Sunday New York Times each week. She often quotes articles, editorials, and reviews and laughs about still reading the newspaper back to front.
While reading was encouraged and reinforced at home, Rachel doesn't remember much writing. "Writing wasn't really modeled at home. Mom didn't work while we were in school. Dad had a lot of paperwork to do but it was all writing for work." However, Rachel's family made education a priority and gave her a variety of opportunities to explore and develop an appreciation for the arts. She recalled, "I was raised in a big reading family. My parents are big on education, cultural stuff, museums. Drawing lessons I had when I was a little kid, ballet, the whole thing."

Rachel's childhood experiences contribute to her current interest in music, dance, art, and drama. She studies newspaper listings and reviews of art exhibits, museum openings, dance performances, and theatrical debuts. As a visual thinker, she incorporates these interests into her poetry, journal entries, dramatic plays and sketches. John-Steiner (1985), after interviewing artists, photographers, and filmmakers, described "visual thinking" as "the representation of knowledge in the form of structures in motion; it is the study of relationship of these forms and structures; it is the flow of images as pictures, diagrams, explanatory models, orchestrated paints of immense ideas, and simple gestures; it is work with schemes and structures of the mind" (p. 109). Rachel's reliance on artistic images is evident in her work; she often illustrates her own writing and submits pen and ink sketches to our literary magazine for publication. Quotes from musicians and artists are often scratched into the margins of her own writing. She connects not only to the arts, but feels an affiliation with those men and women who create the painting, the dance, the song and the drama.

After the death of composer Leonard Bernstein, Rachel sketched an intense portrait of Bernstein at work and wrote a lengthy piece entitled, "You Love is your Life." The poem was laced with lines from many of the songs in West Side Story, one of her favorite Bernstein works. In her journal, Rachel penned diagonally across the top of a page, "The night Sarah Vaughan died." She told me, "So many have
died—Sammy Davis Jr., Sarah Vaughan, Martha Graham, Leonard Bernstein. I
grew up with all of them and their music. It's [their dying is] a sign of my life, my
getting older."

Rachel measures her own life against the lives of the prominent artists whom
she considers to be her teachers and mentors; her rich childhood background is fully
intertwined with her writing and self-expression. Her family's influence is also
apparent when she places a high value on education. Rachel enthusiastically
teaches and mentors other inmates; she advocates and promotes educational
opportunities for those around her.

Despite her family's encouragement and interest in education, Rachel's
memories of later elementary school were, unlike Julie's, sketchy except for some
teacher's names:

I don't remember anything about second grade, but in third and fourth grade
I had the same teacher both years: Mrs. Blair. I loved her. She was a really
good teacher, but I don't remember any specifics. I remember the teachers
and some of the kids. Fifth grade was Mrs. Wilson. Sixth grade—I don't
know. I blocked out a lot. Very little comes through; my life is really a big
blob.

There is no sense of community in what Rachel remembers, and only a few
teachers are memorable enough to have a name. Rachel had some difficult
experiences with her peers later in school:

In school, I remember having to memorize poems and recite them. I dreaded
that, getting up in front of the class. I felt insecure and like everyone was
making fun of me. I remember one Memorial Day, I had to give a speech.
Maybe it was the Gettysburg Address. I had to memorize stuff . . .

Getting up in front of her classmates was difficult, but achievable, for Rachel.
Even though she could memorize and recite long passages of others' words, Rachel
felt just as inadequate and self-conscious as Julie who struggled to perform even
inadequately at school.

Rachel recalled the writing she did for school:
When I was growing up, I wrote for school. My mother tells me I wrote poems in high school. She can remember two of them almost by heart. I can remember the drawing, but the writing wasn’t a big part of my life. Now, I keep paper by my bed so if I have a thought at night, I can write it down. I want to learn more now.

In Junior High, I don’t . . . I know I did do book reports. Seventh and eighth grade, I remember doing papers.

In high school, my senior year, I remember doing a leitmotif project in English literature, a term paper on Hesse, Siddhartha, Dameon, etc. I know we did the classics: MacBeth . . . [and other] Shakespeare . . . Mr. Davis [the teacher] . . . nothing jumps out. It’s probably because I’d just like to forget about all that part of my life.

Like the consuming, self-initiated work she is now doing, Rachel’s writing for school—papers, book reports, projects and term papers on English literature and the classics—was usually related to her reading. However, she suggests that the school reading of her childhood was not self-selected. For Rachel, that kind of writing wasn’t “a big part” of her life; school writing was always for someone else. In contrast, now in prison, she feels an urgency to write that sometimes awakes her at night. Her need “to learn more now” supplies an endless motivation to write in prison. As disconnected from her own personal needs as her school writing might have been, she appropriated the reading-writing connection as her own and brought it into her adult life.

During her junior high and high school years, Rachel extended connections with her writing into current events. She remembers writing “protest stuff,” in reaction to the world around her but the writing was apparently not for school. Here is also where she traces her involvement with drugs, behavior that eventually brought her to prison:

I was very sensitive to issues of the day in the sixties. The six o’clock news—I wrote a poem about that and the Vietnam War. I know I wrote a lot of protest stuff. I didn’t write the way I do now, but my whole life I’ve had a problem expressing myself. That probably is that control. I really don’t know. I think, over the years, I got so experienced at playing roles. When am I Rachel and when am I people-pleasing? I’m blunt sometimes now. I overdo it. They might think I’m a bitch. Growing up, I never got validated.
I just stopped. Everything I did was in reaction to something. Now I'm me, at thirty-seven, no longer worried that someone won't approve.

Sometimes I still seek that approval and acceptance and I fight both ends of myself. Things I don't like about myself—now I have to let go and be me. It's hard. I don't understand when people say I'm "together"—I'm not! Inside I'm a basket case! I'd act one way, acceptable, with destructive stuff inside. At age eight I was underweight, then overweight. Even clinging to a few relationships—then to the drugs. Now I don't want to lean on anyone else. I want to be able to write and not be judgmental. I wish I could just write. I don't have that freedom out. "Get out of the way of your words," was the suggestion I got from one publisher. "Stop obsessing, Rachel," I say. I get in my own way with my life, too.

Rachel draws several comparisons between her writing and how she lives her life: she identifies lifelong problems with self-expression and control. She contrasts being herself with "playing roles" and "people-pleasing," activities she clearly connects to never being validated as she was growing up. In her teens, she wrote about current events as a way to protest and react to something; she held more personal writing in abeyance. Now, she sees the writing she does in prison as a divergence from her earlier difficulty expressing herself; she understands that her writing is a way to herself, but worries about getting in her own way in both her writing and her life.

Rachel also sees similarities between her willingness to take risks in her writing and in her life:

I'd like to try more essays. I'd like to learn a little bit of everything. I need to push and try other kinds of writing. I stick to what's familiar and safe. It's another indication of my life. You don't know what you could do if you don't try. I need to take risks. I need to say, "It's not good, Rachel. It could be better. Everything's not always good or bad." I need to be able to accept that. I have a hard time with that. There's no chance [in my writing]. I never had the spontaneity to make a mistake and learn from it. It's bruised me. I stay safe. You just can't do that.

Even though Rachel doesn't make explicit connections between her later drug use and her school experiences, she does describe lifelong issues of risk-taking, control, self-expression, and validation. She recounts few, if any, opportunities in school to use reading and writing to express herself; she felt somewhat disconnected
and insecure. However, her family's support of reading and the arts provided out-of-school opportunities for self-expression. She wrote poetry to express her sensitivities to current issues covered on the six o'clock news. She even used her multiple literacies to create a leitmotif (a theme that carries through a musical drama) for a project in high school. These represent her attempts to bridge the "real world" and school, to bring together her home and school literacies.

Now, as an adult in prison, she makes connections between her writing and reading, music, art, dance and drama as ways to discover and express herself, to take risks, to create communities for herself and network with others. None of these were acknowledged functions of her multiple literacies in school. In prison, she takes parts of both her school and home experiences—a reading-writing connection (even if it was teacher-directed and structured) and her family's encouragement of reading and the arts—and combines them with her own personal needs for connection and self-understanding, to craft a more meaningful way to take care of herself and others.

**Rachel Struggles for Balance**

Rachel struggles to find a balance between caring for others and caring for herself, between connection and separation. She spends many hours each week planning, teaching classes, and tutoring Julie, but she also realizes her need for solitude, to take care of herself.

She connects with herself and others through language, music, art, dance and drama; she speaks in a "unique and authentic voice" and "jumps outside the frame" of the prison system to "create her own frame" (Belenky et al., 1986, 134). The *Women's Ways of Knowing* researchers describe such women in the fifth
epistemological position, that of constructed knowing, as “articulate and reflective people” who:

noticed what was going on with others and cared about the lives of people about them. They were intensely self-conscious, in the best sense of the word—aware of their own thought, their judgments, their moods and desires. Each concerned herself with issues of inclusion and exclusion, separation and connection; each struggled to find a balance of extremes in her life. Each was ambitious and fighting to find her own voice—her own way of expressing what she knew and cared about. Each wanted her voice and actions to make a difference to other people and in the world. (133)

Rachel’s work with the other women is important, yet “balancing the extremes” is difficult for her; she knows that she needs to work on the personal issues that brought her to prison just as her peer students do. Noddings describes the ethical self, the natural state of one-caring, as “an active relation between my actual self and a vision of my ideal self as one-caring and cared-for. It is born of the fundamental recognition of relatedness; that which connects me naturally to the other, reconnects me through the other to myself” (1984, p. 49). Rachel connects to others through her literacies, which in turn, allows her to “reconnect” to herself. However, she is aware of the need for a balance between solitude and meeting the needs of others. She writes in her journal, largely in the third person, about her feelings:

writing about me from their point of view—motivated by fear—

i can’t put my finger on it but Rachel is off a little—there’s something indefinable—distant—She only gives but so much—she seems to remain somewhat distant at times—as if she’s detached from everything and everyone around her—

She’s o.k.—she’s funny and smiling and cheerful alot of the time but she’s different—it’s cause she’s jewish and thinks she’s better—thinks she’s right all the time. Plus she’s a nigger lover—with a son that’s half black and friends all colors and backgrounds. She’s real sensitive too—can’t say words like nigger and can’t talk about the way people really are in front of her cuz she gets an attitude—she’s a pain in the ass with that liberal attitude and i suppose its because she’s jewish—it’s too bad she got all mixed up with niggers
Rachel writes about herself from another's perspective to help identify her positive qualities—funny, smiling, and cheerful—as well as those qualities others perceive as less than desirable or simply don't understand: she puts limits on her giving, and remains distant and detached; she's liberal and sensitive. Noddings (1984) confirms that "conflict and guilt are inescapable risks of caring" (p. 18)

In this journal entry, Rachel uses her language creatively to "write through" the demands of caring that conflict with her own needs. She also worries about passing judgment on the women she seeks to help when she writes in her journal:

it's harder to notice something good when all i see is ugliness i tend to distance myself and worry about isolating and passing judgment but i will not take part in pettiness and ignorance—

i wish for us to find strength from one another and overlook the things we don't agree on but there is less to smile about and more to overlook—i seem to be walking faster and farther on the treadmill than the other women who walk and it makes them uneasy and i'm tempted to lie about the distance i go in order to be accepted—but why should i lie about my gains. i can be happy for theirs—why not for mine? i will no longer adapt or depend on anyone's acceptance of me but my own—it's loud—i can't think—i don't want to hear the conversation beneath me—i can't escape it—i wish i could at least live comfortably with it—

Rachel refocuses on the "ethical ideal" as she reasserts the needs for community with the other women. She identifies the need for all the women, including herself, to find strength from each other. She is momentarily tempted to lie to the others about her own achievements, but resolves to consider no one else's acceptance but her own.

Rachel finds solace in her part-time work in the prison library, a place she can retreat to comfortably. She writes in her journal:

books hold my soul....the library is my refuge...this is not work, this is quiet...respect.....words i can't get enough of...hide and seek from the noise, the attitudes...the bullshit

And at the bottom of the page, she quotes the words of song lyricist Irving Berlin:
Rachel gives herself permission to "re-create" herself in the quiet company of books and language; the library is where she can "balance and honor the needs of the self with the needs of others" (Belenky et al., 1986, p. 151).

**Rachel Speaks Up**

Rachel dedicates herself to improving others' lives by actively putting people and their needs in touch with each other. Belenky and her colleagues assert that constructivist women "strive to translate their moral commitments into action, both out of a conviction that 'one must act' and out of a feeling of responsibility to the larger community in which they live" (1986, p. 150). In addition to teaching and mentoring in the prison, Rachel creates opportunities for the women to reach out collectively to touch troubled lives beyond the razor wire and cement block walls.

As a peer tutor, Rachel encourages Julie to send her writing out to be published. She cheers Julie on when her poem about being sexually abused as a child is published in a newsletter for abuse victims. Having found her own voice and its far-reaching power, Rachel serves as a mentor to other writers in the prison when she asks them to consider sharing their work. When she volunteers to help organize a benefit for a local women's crisis center, she asks inmates to submit their writing to a singer who wants the women's "real words" for a song she will perform at the event. A poem written by Pat, an inmate who was a battered woman, is chosen; Rachel, like a proud mother, offers Pat heartfelt congratulations.
To further encourage the development of the women’s voices, Rachel teaches a course about women’s journal and diary traditions. When she includes her students’ writing as texts for the course alongside well-known published diaries, she helps them realize that their voices are just as powerful and important as the voices of Anne Frank, Anais Nin and others.

Rachel networks with people all over the country by writing to them. She participates in a graduate seminar I am taking; she keeps up with readings and exchanges weekly one-page responses with the other students. When I share “Mein Kampf” with my seminar class, Rachel gives her permission for the poem to be read at an educational conference in a nearby state. As a result of the reading, Rachel receives a letter from a fifth grade teacher who encourages her to correspond with an elderly Jewish woman, a Holocaust survivor, in a nearby nursing home. Rachel and the woman begin writing to each other weekly. Before long, after Rachel and her students read Anne Frank’s *Diary of a Young Girl*, she has her inmate students write to her new friend at the nursing home. The women experience the power of writing as a way to enrich the lives of others.

Rachel also speaks up when she sees injustice. She often brings her concerns and questions about prison policy, as well as her own creative solutions, to the attention of the prison administrator. When the Hispanic inmates and others can’t understand the inmate manual of regulations, Rachel proposes the filming of a videotaped orientation. With the superintendent’s support, Rachel films a series of interviews with significant prison personnel, that clearly delineates the institution’s rules, regulations and program offerings (counseling, groups, and educational programs). The video is shown routinely to new inmates.

Rachel advocates for expanded program offerings in the prison, including English as a Second Language classes, an AIDS support group, and an “Arts in Prison” program. She directs and produces a “Reader’s Theater” performance of the
play she wrote about a teenage boy's decision to move beyond his mother's drug addiction; the production involves dozens of women and weeks of rehearsals. It is a tremendous challenge and a great success for the participants. Rachel gives most of the credit for the play's success to the other women, "It [the play] was important for all the women here. It [the success] wasn't just me. All the women stuck together from January through April. We all had our moments. I have to pat myself on the back. I didn't give in. It's amazing; I didn't give up." The play wins a "First Place" award from the reputed national writing association, PEN American Center, and brings attention to "breaking the cycle" of substance abuse.

Other social causes like AIDS education, violence prevention, and the fight for social justice are also important to Rachel. Often, she first explores the concern through poetry as a way not only to focus her own thinking but also to challenge others' thinking. After she reads a newspaper account of the death of a young boy in an urban area, she writes the following poem and shares it in class:

Aye Bendito

They argue about how many bullets were spent
and right versus wrong
Hector...tell them
what does it matter
if no one ever saw you paint that mural of libertad in storefront space
upon
your turf
or heard you love your brother over telephone wires spitting static
through
the
air
your tears drowning in the blood spilled over the curbs of Boston streets.
This...they see
twisted bravura...their words
your epitaph
Ah si,
machismo pulled the trigger first
Yo comprendo Hector
you wanted to die
pero

181
what does it change
if they don't want to know why
you painted billboards of hope above your turf
and then you pull the trigger first.

Often this kind of writing brings about stirring conversation among the
class. At other times, Rachel's words will leave the prison when she sends
her work out to be considered for publication. Her primary intention is always to
educate, to raise others' awareness of critical social issues.

Rachel challenges the other inmates to make a difference in the world with
hands-on activities that include the creation of a hand-made queen-sized quilt to be
raffled at the local YWCA. The proceeds will benefit the state's AIDS Foundation.
She also helps organize and draws posters for the prison's first Walk-a-thon to raise
money for the local homeless shelter and soup kitchen. Pledges are sought through
letters the women write and send to local churches. The women are amazed when
they raise nearly $150.00. Rachel teaches the women that they can demonstrate
their caring and have a positive impact on others' lives even from their vantage
point in prison.

Rachel uses language to discover what is important to her. She incorporates
her love for the arts in her exploration of her self and her world. She also creates
many opportunities to share her love of language with those around her. As a one-
caring, Rachel works hard to achieve a balance between the needs of those around
her and her own needs. She allows herself to be cared for when she takes the time
to write about people and relationships that are important to her, and when she
receives the response of her readers. Moreover, she aspires "to work that
contributes to the empowerment and improvement in the quality of life of others"
(Belenky et al., 1986, p. 152). In Rachel's story of teaching, mentorship, and
advocacy is the promise of literacy for thousands of inmates across our nation.

When asked "Why do I write?" Rachel writes:
I write because I have a love for words
words that tumble, fall, play touch football and hide and seek with each other
There are words that have wrapped around me and kept me sane.
I write to keep myself sane and stand back and enjoy my words.
I write to find the truth of my life and let my words play hide and seek on a
crowded
schoolground looking for my own.
I write to feel what i can't express out loud or to try to slow myself down and
think
instead of always responding.
I write because i do not cry
I write because it's hard to remember and i love fine point black flair pens
against good
white paper—
I enjoy the curve of a letter and the flow of a sentence
CHAPTER SIX

RE-VISIONING THE PRISON CLASSROOM

Conclusions of the Study

We need to expand our vision of literacy for women and men in our nation's prisons: literacy can enable caring. Caring can enable and promote further literacy development. Rachel is not unique. There are thousands of women (and men) who hold within them the potential to make a significant impact on the educational needs of those in prison. Julie also does not stand alone. There are thousands like her who need and want the opportunity to participate in prison education programs that take into account their learning histories, their multiple literacies, and their need to care and be cared for. Such programs can offer these individuals opportunities to learn about themselves and their worlds in the meaningful and caring contexts of their own lives.

Student-centered, participatory education allows for socially contextualized and meaningful learning for women in prison. Such programs, including "process" classrooms, peer tutoring, and inmate-taught courses, honor the women's experience and allow them to hear their own voices, often for the first time. As women discover or recover their voices, they can also meet their need to care for others. Some learn to care for themselves before, or simultaneously to, learning to care for others.

Julie's and Rachel's stories offer us insight into the literate lives of women in prison. Their early experiences of literacy in the home and school underscore the need to bridge personal and academic literacies. Their experiences in the writing
classroom, with each other, and individually, add to our knowledge of the personal functions of literacies, especially writing.

When Julie joined the prison classroom, including the writing class, her previous school and home experiences made it almost impossible for her to speak up about her difficulties with reading and writing. She felt ashamed and embarrassed. Not only did she see herself as illiterate, but also the prison itself identified her as educationally deficient. However, as part of the writing community, she learned that she could use her writing to meet her own needs. Rachel, a peer mentor, helped Julie to understand the power and the potential of her own language.

Julie's primary need was for a sense of connection to those she cared for most, her children. She wrote through her grief about her daughter's death, and confronted her own abusive behavior towards her children. By writing about her children first, Julie found her own voice, and was soon able to expand her writing to meet other needs: to work towards recovery from substance abuse, to recover and mend relationships with other significant people, including her mother, and to expand her communication to others outside of prison. All the while, Julie discovered her "relational self" as she wrote her way to herself through important relationships. Even when the prison made it impossible for Julie to continue in school full-time, she continued to work on her reading and writing "on her own time." The prison system sent Julie a conflicting message about the value of an education. But her self-sponsored reading and writing was enough to sustain her and her dream of earning a GED certificate. For the first time, Julie's literacies gave her a sense of control over her life and the hope of a more positive future.

Julie is now out of prison, having served her two year sentence. She is about to be reunited with her two youngest children, and is nervous about her parenting skills. She will attend adult education classes at a community-based learning center that offers a comprehensive GED and job skills program. Her childhood dream to
become a computer assembler has been rekindled. She sometimes still feels fragile, and needs a great deal of reassurance about re-entering the classroom. But she still finds solace and hope in the pages of her journal and in the company of characters in the books she reads.

Similarly, Rachel’s need to care while she was in prison was also enhanced by her literacies. Although her experiences with literacy both in school and at home were different from Julie’s, she also found it hard to believe, at first, that she was a talented writer. Just as Julie had done, Rachel explored herself in writing first through relationships with significant “others”—her son, her family, and her friends. She listened to many voices and incorporated music, art, drama and dance into her writing. She took care of herself in the deeply personal writing she did and in the response of audiences, both in and out of prison, soon understood the power of her own voice. Rachel balanced her need to care for others with her need to be cared for. As a mentoring member of the writing class and as a peer tutor, she worked to help other women, including Julie, find the power in their voices. Not only did she work to bring about changes that improved the lives of those around her, but also she helped them to understand that they could make a positive impact on the lives of others, including those beyond the razor wire.

Like Julie, Rachel is also out of prison now. Upon her release, she attended a semester of classes as a part-time university student. But when she received funding through a private grant, she conducted research about juveniles in detention facilities. She facilitated a class whereby the participants of her study could “tell their own stories” through an investigation of the arts—writing, reading, drawing, music and photography. Now, as a street counselor, she works with individuals affected by substance abuse and HIV-AIDS, in an attempt to get them into treatment. She plans to resume university classes, and will probably enroll in a Women’s Studies program for non-traditional students. She speaks throughout New
England on substance abuse and corrections for women. Rachel still keeps a journal, but finds little time for other writing. The play she wrote and produced in the prison, will soon debut off-Broadway.

Julie, Rachel and others at the prison connected with each other, their children, family and friends, and with themselves in a class where they were encouraged to write for their own needs. A skill-centered curriculum could not have met each woman's individual need to care and be cared for.

**Punishment and Rehabilitation**

There are many, however, who challenge the development of such student-centered programs in prisons. The conflicting paradigms of punishment and rehabilitation—the two major philosophies in the field of corrections—continue to dominate the debate about correctional education. Those who heartily endorse the *punishment paradigm* view the main purpose of prisons to punish the criminal and deter him/her from further criminal activity, and to deter others from committing the same crime. Security and control of inmates is of primary concern. Supporters of the *rehabilitative or education paradigm*, believe that inmate behavior, often a result of society's failures, can be changed for the better. For those who hold this view, education of inmates—moral, cognitive, and humanistic—holds the most hope for effective prisoner rehabilitation (Newman et al., 1993).

Today, these two paradigms conflict when those more concerned with punishment, security and control of inmates consider prison education programs as nothing more than the pampering or coddling of inmates, or a way to secure their discipline and obedience. Prison teachers who are employees of the Department of Corrections are often caught between the two paradigms; as employees of "the system," they are primarily bound to the security of the prison and the control of the
inmates, while as educators, they usually believe in the promise of rehabilitation and the preparation of the inmates for a better life after prison.

Literacy education in prison is viewed as a management tool (for the convenience of the institution) by some in the field of corrections. It can be used "to enhance supervision and security in the correctional setting" and as "a powerful public relations tool" according to the American Correctional Association's brochure Literacy: A Concept for All Seasons (1989, p. 6-7). As a prison literacy volunteer, I was offended to learn that the ACA (a professional organization primarily for correctional officers and administrators) views the primary benefits of inmate literacy to be increased inmate usefulness in more complex jobs within the prison, increased levels of supervision and security, and the decreased burden on the correctional staff while inmates are in class (p. 5-7). The benefits to the prison itself are presented as far more significant than any educational benefits to the inmate student. Sections titled "Selling Offender Literacy & Job Training to Corrections and the Community" and "Selling Literacy to Administrators" are indicative of the teacher's political struggle to justify inmate education to the system, taxpayers and community members (p. 1, 5).

Others have a different vision of correctional education. Prison educator Austin MacCormick identified the benefits of the socialization of inmates as citizens in miniature communities within the prison in the early 1930's (Werner, 1990). MacCormick advocated rehabilitation programs that allowed for self-government by inmates. The direct instruction that he promoted included literacy instruction as well as other adult basic education programs which the inmates helped to plan. MacCormick (1931) explained his views about prisoner education as follows:

The end result we hope for from all the types of education we offer the prisoner is social education: the socialization of the individual. Our hope is that the man [sic] whom we educate to better handling of the fundamental intellectual processes, to great occupational skill, to better care of his body, to
broad understanding of the world he lives in, may not only stop committing antisocial acts but may also fit into the social scheme understandingly and willingly. Much of our present system of criminal justice sets a low aim in that it is willing to have the criminal conform to the social order without understanding of it: the main point is that he conform. It is the aim of education to bring about conformity with understanding. (p. 6-7)

Prison educator David Werner agrees with MacCormick about the social responsibility of prison education. In his book Correctional Education: Theory and Practice (1990), Werner calls for a theory of prison education that realizes its limitations and possibilities. He points out that prison education should be separate from the punishment process of the prison and available to all inmates.

"Incarceration is punishment enough. To punish a prisoner by not allowing him or her the chance for an education is to punish all of society when that person, poorly educated, commits additional crimes upon release" (p. 154-155).

However, Werner also argues against a philosophy of education as rehabilitation, citing that "to accept the myth implicit in rehabilitation is to ignore the reality that most prisoners come from environments which are breeding grounds for criminality" (p. 155). The term rehabilitation incorrectly assumes that the inmate can be returned to a previous state of habilitation. Werner finds the term "correctional" objectionable since it implies the inmate can be corrected or fixed. Prison education, according to Werner, is a process in which the inmate should participate, not a process done to him or her. Werner calls for prison education programs to go beyond the offering of skills training, to meet the range of social and moral needs of prisoners (p. 156).

Werner sees the single goal of prison education as individual empowerment of the inmate. Such personal empowerment includes "the opportunity to develop individual intellectual, moral, and psychological potential" (1990, p. 156). Implicit in his theory is the incorporation of education that is meaningful as well as personally and socially relevant to the adult student. "With the creation of a student-
empowering education which is moral, critical, and social in its context and
to make the transition to informed and active citizens" (p. 161).

Certainly, literacy plays a significant role in student-empowering education.
As inmate students read and write about their worlds, both behind the walls and
beyond, they can gain or regain control over their lives. This view of education is
reminiscent of Paulo Freire's view of literacy and education as transformative and
liberating (Shor and Freire, 1987). As I encouraged the women in my prison writing
class to write for their own needs and purposes, they most often wrote to meet their
needs to care and be cared for. Their socially-contextualized writing enabled them
to care more effectively for others and for themselves.

However, liberating inmates and encouraging their self-sufficiency can be
seen as subversive and dangerous by the prison's gatekeepers who are responsible
for maintaining a secure and safe environment and for perpetuating a dependency
on the part of the inmate. As inmate students (and their teachers) learn together,
they recognize and understand the "dominant ideologies" that govern not only the
prison but also society-at-large. Liberatory education can breed not only student
resistance, but also teacher discontent. Without opportunities to creatively and
positively challenge those ideologies, students can become frustrated, outspoken,
and even unruly. As a result, the education program may be compromised by the
administration for the sake of maintaining security.

The prison teacher can be caught in the precarious position of empowering
inmates within an oppressive prison system. Where does his or her allegiance
lie—with the inmate or with the system? The teacher's ethical responsibility and
goal to educate students may be seen by those in power as in direct conflict with the
prison's explicit and primary goal of punishment. The "conflict between prison
administrators and educators often creates slippage which seriously undermines
self-directed learning and development of curiosity [on the part of the inmates]" (Goldin & Thomas, 1984, p. 124). The teacher's personal struggle with the ethics of teaching in a prison setting can be overwhelming and lead to burn out.

In some prison systems, finding a solution for the dilemma—the dichotomy between the goals of punishment and education—has been attempted by separating the prison educator from "the system" through the process of privatization and the extensive use of volunteers, as previously discussed in Chapter One. However, a prison education program that incorporates social responsibility, and opportunities for personal action both within the prison and beyond, can direct the inmates' energies in empowering and positive ways, and, at the same time, allow the prison educator to work effectively.

What is prison for? We can consider it to be a way to keep society safe by incarcerating and punishing criminals for their errant behavior. But we can also consider it to be a bastion for rehabilitation—a place where women and men (the overwhelming majority of whom will return to society) can develop a positive sense of themselves in relationship to others, and as learners, workers, and citizens who can contribute effectively to the quality of lives for themselves and others. Belenky et al. (c. 91) write:

> We believe that it is particularly vital that poor, subordinated, and marginalized people everywhere claim and develop the powers of mind because the intellectual requirements for participation in the social and economic institutions of our era are increasing rapidly while the gap in educational attainments between the rich and poor also grows at an accelerating rate. (p. 14)

Many in prison are marginalized. Only when we can envision prison as a place for rehabilitation, can we then envision a future with fewer prisons and fewer prisoners.

A Paradigm of Caring is Needed

The paradigms of punishment and rehabilitation (education) meet head-on when program providers, employees or volunteers, try to work within an oppressive
prison environment. The problematic issues of providing prison literacy programs can be addressed most effectively when administrators, correctional officers, and program providers work and communicate cooperatively, respect each other and focus on the inmate. Those who believe in the rehabilitative potential of incarceration see the inmate as someone worth caring about. "The rehabilitative ideal demands that caring about inmates be the guiding principle of the corrections process" (Hamm, 1988, p. 149).

The "paradigm of caring" (Newman et al., 1993, p. 42) in the prison setting is of particular importance in this study of women writing in prison. I found that as I cared for my students and empowered them to write for their own genuine purposes, they used their writing extensively as a way to rehabilitate themselves, and to care for themselves and others. The women experienced caring on many different levels.

Noddings' ethic of care encompasses the relationship between the one-caring and the cared-for. In my prison writing class, the women often first experienced themselves in a caring relationship as I listened to their stories, responded to their journals and encouraged their language. I refused to correct their grammar or spelling and focused on the message of their words; I wouldn't write directly on their papers. I respected what little space they had that was their own. Adrienne Rich (1979) writes, "[I]n order to write I have to believe that there is someone willing to collaborate subjectively, as opposed to a grading machine out to get me for mistakes in spelling and grammar" (p. 64).

Once heard, the women were eager to be heard again, and soon learned to listen to each other as we began to read our work aloud in class. Each reader received handfuls of written responses from her peers. Over time, as they listened and responded, the women became trusted caregivers to each other. "For young adults trying to write seriously for the first time in their lives, the question 'Whom
can I trust?" must be an underlying boundary to be crossed before real writing can occur" (Rich, 1979, p. 64).

Many of the inmate writers also learned self-trust as they wrote for themselves in journals and poetry. They redirected the energy that they created between themselves, turned inwardly and wrote to heal themselves. Their writing was a way to capture, in time and words, the process of their healing from past abuses. In this way, a woman became both the care-giver and cared-for, and fulfilled both roles in the caring relationship.

Most women wrote to sustain their roles in caring relationships that extended outside of prison, to their children, their partners, their family and friends. As their writing habits developed and they continued to get positive feedback on their writing in the classroom or in their cells, they often wrote more frequently to those on the outside.

And finally, the women found that their writing and other literacies (including art, drama, needlework) provided them a way to reach out and extend their community of caring. The women connected with those in need outside of prison: they lived out their dreams to help babies with AIDS, to read to those who couldn't read themselves, and to raise money for those who were hungry.

Julie, Rachel, and the other women in the prison writing class demonstrate that care and justice can be served together (as Carol Gilligan calls for) in a prison setting that allows for student-centered, socially contextualized learning. While justice is being served through incarceration, there is no need to inflict further punishment by keeping the inmates out of an education system that provides what some consider to be their best chance against later reincarceration. Educational programs that support the inmates' needs to care and be cared for, as well as process classrooms and programs that use inmate teachers and peer tutors should be encouraged and supported in correctional institutions.
The promise of literacy education for adults is "a very demanding matter of realistically conceiving the student where he or she is, and at the same time never losing sight of where he or she can be" (Rich, 1979, p. 66). The challenge of "never losing sight" of where the inmate student could be is exaggerated in a system that defines punishment as its primary purpose and defines literacy only with nearsighted, school-based measures. "A fundamental belief in the students is more important than anything else" (p. 66); especially in a setting where rehabilitation holds the greatest promise for the inmate's successful reintegration into the world outside of prison.

**What Other Questions Do We Need to Answer?**

Rachel's and Julie's stories give us a glimpse into their literate lives. But what are the literate experiences of other adult populations? How do men in prison experience literacy? How do those enrolled in adult education, second language learners, and other marginalized populations, or even those who resist formal education programs experience themselves as literate beings? How could we more fully evaluate adult literacies, taking into account the rich contexts of students' lives?

This study leads us to question the purpose and quality of prison education programs. What is the real purpose of prison education—to house and contain the prisoner, or to rehabilitate the inmate and open her or him to a world of possibility? What more can be learned from prison education programs that encourage the development of inmates as tutors and teachers? In addition, how do adult education programs in other settings meet women's and men's needs to care for others, and to care for themselves? And how could we better address the remedial education needs of adults not only in prison, but in a variety of settings?
Moreover, how can we more effectively bridge the personal and academic literacies of our younger, school-aged students, especially, but not limited to, those who come from homes where reading and writing and other literacies are not modeled? Can bridge those literacies before it is too late for yet another generation? How willing are we to have our students read and write for their own purposes?

Julie and Rachel have shown us that writing, when created and offered for personal and purposeful reasons, can help to fulfill one’s need to care and be cared for. It is my hope that this study points us not only toward more questions, but also toward more inclusive conversations with other marginalized learners, with educators and administrators. Perhaps then we can begin to hear each other’s voices and care enough about each other to expand our vision for a literate and caring world.
APPENDIX A

Learning about Legislation

Researcher Becomes Detective

To better understand our country's commitment to adult literacy, I decided to trace pertinent legislation. The U.S. government, often in collaboration with labor and education lobbyists, has regularly passed legislation to address adult illiteracy in our country. A quick glance at the great number of government initiatives and bills passed might convince a casual passerby that our nation is taking its responsibility seriously. Upon closer examination of the recent history (organization, funding and ongoing support) of the adult literacy legislation, however, I found the government's commitment to be questionable.

My legislative journey was dizzying and at times intimidating. Following the process of proposing, passing, and amending a bill, and its subsequent funding authorizations, appropriations, and expenditures was circuitous but enlightening. Without extensive exploration and verification, American citizens are kept at a distance from the legislative process by Washington's bureaucratic "doublespeak." I gathered what I now believe to be up-to-date and accurate information from a variety of knowledgeable sources, including administrators of many government education programs.

A Government's Response: The Adult Education Act

The Adult Education Act of 1966 (or Title III) was the first time the federal government ever got involved with adult education for reasons other than employment training. Adult education had formerly been linked to the Economic Opportunity Act (EOA) of 1964. The 1966 legislation was originally an amendment
to the EOA (Rose, 1992), but appeared as an amendment to the Elementary and Secondary Act of 1965. This Act formally transferred adult education to the Office of Education. Adult education was finally to be considered a part of the family of the nation’s educational system, albeit an embarrassing cousin.

The purpose of the Adult Education Act was to “encourage and expand basic education programs for adults to enable them to overcome English language limitations, to improve their basic education for occupational training and more profitable employment, and to become more productive and responsible citizens” (quoted by Rose, 1992). The Act’s focus on “occupational training” and “profitable employment” still tightly linked the legislation to our nation’s labor force. The linked concepts of employability and responsible citizenship may have provided the fertile ground for later legislation that promoted literacy development in our nation’s prisons.

Yet, right from the start, financial support for the legislation was inadequate. Successive presidents influenced the nation’s literacy efforts, some more positively than others. In 1973, the Nixon administration acknowledged our nation’s adult illiteracy problem by launching a “Right to Read” campaign. The campaign was all but abandoned six years later, its director considering the effort to be a failure. Yet another literacy initiative was announced in 1983 by the Reagan administration. A one-time allocation of a mere $360,000 was sought in new funding to “wipe out” illiteracy by funding college work-study grants for students working as literacy instructors. But without continued federal funding, the program soon fell apart (Kozol, 1985). An assortment of unfocused campaigns and initiatives did little more than pay lip service to the needs of illiterate adults.

By 1985, the government was spending only $100 million a year on adult reading and writing programs, compared to the estimated $5 billion required, according to the head of the National Advisory Council on Adult Education (Kelley, 1992).
Indeed, total federal funding for adult education was remarkably insignificant when compared to our government's other expenditures:

In fiscal year 1986, the federal budget for Education was $18 billion, of which about $1.1 billion was for all types of adult basic education. For the same year, the budgets for other federal departments were as follows: Labor, $24 billion; Agriculture, $59 billion; Health and Human Services, $143 billion; Treasury, $176 billion; and Defense, $286 billion (U. S. Executive Office, 1986).

The government's reticence to take its own charge seriously takes on a political flavor in light of the success of literacy campaigns in Third World non-capitalist countries like Cuba and Brazil. UNESCO (United Nations' Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization) sponsored some of the most successful literacy projects in these developing countries, including Cuba's literacy effort, ongoing since the early 1960's, to advance the "political consolidation of the people" (Kozol, 1985, p. 97). These campaigns, as well as Paulo Freire's work (1984) in Brazil starting in the early 1960s, clearly linked literacy to personal freedom and political empowerment. The goal of these literacy campaigns was the liberation of the poor and oppressed. Adult students were encouraged, in their struggle to gain facility with language, to reflect on the reasons for their economic and political status. Freire's literacy campaign resulted in "a remarkable proliferation of resistance groups, politicized communities, and critical consciousness of an unprecedented nature in the newly literate adults" (Kozol, 1985, p. 96). Freire's ideology, challenged by Brazilian right-wing reaction, resulted in his eventual arrest and imprisonment. The United States, seeing UNESCO's work as "too political," disregarded the literacy efforts of its neighbors to the south, and withdrew from the organization in 1984. We must question the political and nationalistic agenda of our country when it refuses to learn from other countries' successes (Kozol, 1985).

Reagan's response to our nation's illiterate population, as well as George Bush's a few years later, was to push for individual and corporate voluntarism to
promote adult literacy. Literacy Volunteers of America (LVA), Laubach Literacy Action and other citizen action groups across the nation were encouraged to take up the cause. Barbara Bush's sound bites and public appearances on behalf of intergenerational literacy helped us to put faces to the nameless Americans who were learning to read or write. Television commercials to promote literacy featured the First Lady reading to a child on her lap and newly-literate adults who had "come out of the closet" to share their personal stories. The campaign raised public awareness of the nation's illiteracy problem and invited citizens to marshal for the cause by coming forward to tutor, or to be tutored. Voluntarism, on the part of individuals and "big business," was proposed to be the answer, but some thought further legislation and funding was necessary.

The Crime Control Act

One piece of legislation that claimed to address the literacy needs of prisoners was the Crime Control Act of 1990. It legislated the first mandatory functional literacy requirements for federal (not state or local) inmates and by virtue of its goal to "control crime," recognized the link between illiteracy and crime. The bill required that each inmate be provided with "an adequate opportunity to achieve functional literacy" which was established as "an eighth grade equivalence in reading and mathematics on a nationally recognized test" or "functional competency or literacy on a nationally recognized criterion-referenced test" (U. S. 101st Congress, 1990). The legislation appeared long overdue since the Federal Bureau of Prisons had originally introduced mandatory literacy classes in federal institutions through the 6th grade level in 1982, and had already raised its required inmate literacy standard to 8th grade in 1986. These standards were amended again by the Bureau in 1991, raising the level to the 12th grade (Business Council for Effective Literacy, 1991).
However well-intentioned it was, the belated Crime Control Act of 1990 still included no funding provision for the prison literacy efforts it mandated. As a rookie in the investigation and understanding of federal legislation, I wanted to verify this confusing, if not disconcerting, information and phoned the Federal Bureau of Prisons. My findings were confirmed by FBP Education Specialist Paola Nesmith. She spoke about the Crime Control Act, "We were told, through the law, what to do, not how to do it . . . we were told to do the best we could [without funding]" (personal communication, January 13, 1994). Again, I understood that the government's stated intention and actual investment were not the same.

While the needs of illiterate adults in prison continued to be unmet, presidential literacy initiatives concerning the general adult population continued to proliferate in the 90's. President Bush and the nation's governors adopted as its strategy the "AMERICA 2000" goals in 1990. Among the six National Education Goals was that "every adult American will be literate and possess the skills necessary to compete in a world economy" (U.S. Department of Education, 1991). Reminiscent of the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, when literacy was seen as closely related to job training and commerce, the government limited the context of adult literacy to the international marketplace.

**The National Literacy Act**

Finally, in 1991, the need for a more cohesive national effort on behalf of literacy was addressed in the National Literacy Act, Public Law 102-73. This legislation defines literacy more comprehensively as "an individual's ability to read, write, and speak in English, and compute and solve problems at levels of proficiency necessary to function on the job and in society, to achieve one's goals, and develop one's knowledge and potential" (U.S. 102nd Congress, 1991). Seen by many as a major advance over prior legislative definitions, this is the first definition of literacy.
in which the government not only recognizes, but also focuses on, the individual's goals, development and potential. At last, the multiple functions and contexts of political, personal, and family literacy were acknowledged in legislation. Congress expressed its intent in the Committee Report accompanying the Act:

The National Literacy Act of 1991 is a comprehensive approach for improving the literacy and basic skill levels of adults by coordinating, integrating, and investing in adult and family literacy programs at the federal, state, and local levels. The legislation provides for research and quality program delivery... The nation's literacy problems are closely associated with poverty and pose major threats to the economic well-being of the United States. Our future competitiveness and an individual's active participation in the democratic process are severely hampered without an all-out attack on these problems (cited in Business Council for Effective Literacy, 1991, p. 1, italics added).

This seminal legislation provides for the creation of a National Institute for Literacy which will "provide a national focal point for research, technical assistance and research dissemination, policy analysis, and program evaluation in the area of literacy" (U. S. 102nd Congress, 1991). Congress intends for the Institute to implement strategic planning, research and coordination of adult and family literacy programs at federal, state and local levels, acting as a national clearinghouse for literacy resources. The Act also includes provisions, or titles, for the creation of state resource centers, a National Workforce Literacy Assistance Collaborative, family literacy programs, book distribution programs for families and functional literacy programs in state prisons and jails. A presidentially-appointed representative from each of the following groups participates on the National Institute Board: adult literacy students, literacy providers, literacy researchers, state and local government, businesses and organized labor.

Money was authorized, in the tens of millions, to fund many of the titles included in the National Literacy Act, but actual House and Senate recommended appropriations were considerably less, sometimes zero (BCEL, 1991). For example, $15 million a year was authorized for Fiscal Years 1992 through 1995 for Title I,
which provided for the creation of the National Literacy Institute. (p. 9) Actual appropriation for Title I, for the fifteen month period from July 1991 to September 1992, however, was $4.8 million, all but $25,000 of which was expended. (S. Abbott, personal communication, January 25, 1994) Again, authorization, appropriation and expenditure did not represent the same dollar amount; the government’s overall commitment to literacy, as demonstrated in its financial backing, was questionable.

Also, it took more than a year after the passage of the National Literacy Act for President Bush to identify and appoint and for Congress to confirm the appointments to the National Institute (for Literacy) Board. Badi Foster, Ph.D., was elected Chairman of the Board by early 1993. By early summer of that year, the Institute’s Board was still negotiating its management by the Interagency Management Group called for in the Act (Foster, 1993).

Arguing against the bureaucratic redtape and for the urgency of the Institute’s organization, Foster addressed a gathering of the Literacy Volunteers of Connecticut that I attended:

There is not one social policy issue that we confront [as Americans] that does not have a literacy dimension. Unless you confront the literacy dimension, you’re not going to solve those issues—child and family, economic competitiveness and job retraining, criminal justice, the environment, housing and urban development, health care . . . (1993).

Foster called for ways to link literacy to each of these issues. Yet when Foster visited in Washington, D.C. with the very legislators who helped to pass the National Literacy Act, he was stunned by how many thought the Institute was concerned only with teaching children to read. He reported that the fiscal 1993 budget for the National Literacy Institute was only $5 million as opposed to the $15 million authorized by Congress. As I listened to Foster speak, I couldn’t help but be puzzled, confused, and angry. I asked myself, how committed are our elected officials? The wheels of progress were moving entirely too slowly for me and as an
active prison literacy volunteer, I especially wanted to know more about our commitment to the education of prisoners.

As I struggled to understand the legislative working of our federal government, I traced more carefully the legislation which specifically deals with literacy programs for incarcerated individuals. I learned that House Bill 751, the bill that became Public Law 102-73 (the National Literacy Act), would have required the establishment of at least one mandatory correctional literacy program in each state. (Note: This is different from the Crime Control Act of 1990 that mandated programs in federal institutions). When passed as the National Literacy Act, such programs were no longer mandated. The Act was amended by Public Law 102-103 in August of 1991. What began as "Mandated Literacy Programs for Prisoners," became "Functional Literacy and Life Skills Programs for State and Local Prisoners." Perhaps because of input from the Correctional Education Association, which opposes mandated education for prisoners primarily because of limited state funding, this new amendment did not mandate literacy programs, but did provide for the establishment of demonstration projects. The purpose of such projects is to "provide resources, materials, technical assistance, inservice training, and other forms of professional development to help others replicate successful literacy programs" (U.S. Department of Education, 1993).

Christopher Koch, an administrator of the prison demonstration projects from the Office of Correctional Education, U.S. Department of Education reported that the total federal appropriation for the functional literacy and life skills (demonstration) programs for prisoners was $10 million in 1992, $15 million for 1993, $20 million for 1994, and $25 million for 1995. I remembered that authorizations, appropriations and expenditures usually descended in value, so I asked about the expenditures. He explained that the Department had spent nearly all of the money appropriated, taking into account the lag time between
appropriation and the funding of grants to applicants. In Fiscal Year 1993, eleven demonstration projects for functional literacy in prisons and jails were fully funded for two years for a total of $5 million. The life skills program fully funded eighteen projects, and a nineteenth partially, on a three-year continuing grant beginning in FY 1994, for a total of $4.91 million. "We spend every penny we can!" Koch told me proudly (personal communication, January 14, 1994).

This legislation did have a requirement: those state prisons and jails seeking federal grants for demonstration projects would have to mandate inmate participation. "Each person incarcerated in the system, jail, or detention center who is not functionally literate, except a person who is serving a life sentence without possibility of parole, is terminally ill, or is under a sentence of death must participate" (U.S. Department of Education, 1993). In other words, the programs themselves weren't mandated, but once established and federally funded, the inmates' attendance to the programs was mandated. I wondered if those states or institutions who aren't willing to mandate education (including the state where I conducted this study), might consider themselves ineligible for such funding. Koch explained that applicants are told, if funded, to provide documentation of inmates' attendance, refusal to participate, and the action taken by the institution to encourage and motivate participation. With such documentation, all states and institutions, including those opposed to mandated education, are eligible to apply for funds. However, I had to ask many questions to learn this "hidden" information; I wondered how many others, besides the state where I conducted my study, had stopped short of such questioning, assuming ineligibility.

Eligibility for federal funding is one of several issues that contribute to the debate in the field of corrections about whether prisoners should be required to attend education classes. According to Alice Tracy of the Correctional Education Association headquarters, only sixteen states currently mandate education for its
inmates (personal communication, January 26, 1994). Some correctional educators are opposed to mandated inmate education because they only want students who are motivated and cooperative. They worry that coercing prisoners to participate in programs would not only raise security issues (always the primary concern in prisons) but might also compromise education for those who are motivated to attend.

Also, funding for mandated inmate education in state institutions is problematic in many states where austerity has been the budgeting norm in recent years. Tracy reports, "The National Literacy Act's original intention was to mandate education for prisons nationwide. But the CEA's position was, 'It's not feasible—we, the states, just don't have the money to do that.' It [the original legislation] got watered down. That's where I got fuzzy about what happened... Demonstration projects came to be... There's still disagreement among correctional educators about whether education should be mandated" (personal communication, January 25, 1994). The proposed legislation that originally required education for all inmates has become a system of competitive bidding for a few federal grants and is representative of what I consider to be the government's questionable commitment to adult literacy for all.


Foster, B. (1993, March). Keynote presentation at meeting of Literacy Volunteers of Connecticut, Hartford, CT.


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