

*Witness to Reconciliation*

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January 29, 2017

This morning I want to tell you about a young woman I met a few months ago who I'll call Jessie. To meet her I drove 25 miles south through beautiful farmland that begins to rise and fall as it nears the river. The drive refreshes my spirits—no wonder people love their lives in the small towns of Allegan County.

But the place where I met Jessie isn't beautiful or comfortable, because she was living in the Allegan County Jail. She was one of a writing circle that I facilitated through the late summer and autumn. Every Monday afternoon, we pull plastic chairs into a circle in the middle of the large, white, echoing room where the women spend both waking and sleeping hours. They've had other classes, but never before a writing "class" and the first day, their faces are wary. What is coming at them now?

I begin the way I begin every new group—by telling them that their words can be strong and beautiful, that everyone is born with creative genius, and that writing as an art form belongs to everyone, regardless of education, income, or class. They begin to look interested. I tell them that I'm not the teacher, that I will write along with them and we will learn from each other. I tell them I will bring prompts to help them get started. I tell them my job is to keep the circle safe.

I see relief flicker on some faces. This isn't English class. No red pencils. no grades, no evaluations. We're going to read to each other and tell each other simply what we like and remember from the writing. That's all.

Every time I facilitate a writing group, it's in the same way, using the same practices. Every time, the same things happen. People go from anxiety to pleasure, their eyes get bright and they laugh and sometimes cry. They form deep bonds with people they know next to nothing about. Walking into the jail that first Monday I had no assurance that this circle would be like the others. I expected they might be unable to trust me or each other. I wondered whether there would be disruptions or if any of them would seem scary. After all, they're criminals.

Instead of those things I feared, I found gratitude and welcome. The women were supportive of each other and of me—thanking each other especially for writing the hard, true things. Yes, each one has broken the law. I don't know any of those details unless they tell me their stories. What I do know is that they are whole people with lives that extend far beyond their months, sometimes years, behind bars. I know they are mothers and grandmothers and wives and sisters. And I have learned that every woman I've met so far has experienced sexual abuse or domestic violence as a child and as an adult, and that every one struggles with addiction. They face these tough circumstances with courage and often surprising hope and faith.

Now I want to get back to Jessie. One day our prompt was a smell—the smell of vinegar. I noticed how perfectly Jesse traced her creative process with her words, and she gave me permission to share this writing with you. As you listen, notice how she moves from her physical and mental moment to the prompt, to memory, to description, to reflection, and finally, to the core of her heart on that day. She begins right where she is:

*As I sit in this circle with my feet propped up in a blue plastic chair, all I can focus on is how much pain I'm in, trying to think positive....Stuck inside my head falling further and further away from reality.*

*Then I get passed a jar filled with liquid. I was instructed to smell it. It caught me by surprise—the smell so strong.*

*Turned my stomach upside down, reminded me of the time when I was fifteen years old sitting all by myself in my little room with two bottles of wine that my neighbor and I stole from her dad's wedding. Ugh! The awful taste it had going down. Although it was worth it afterwards—the buzz, feeling numb, no more pain, no more darkness. Filled with warm fuzzy feelings, smiling from ear to ear. Oh the greatness I felt not to be stuck inside my dark soul; to feel at peace for once was like everlasting, never wanting to come out of that state of mind, thinking this was all it takes to be happy.*

*However, little did I know the next morning I was gonna feel so bad. My head pounding and pounding, to hear a whisper made me want to die. If only I had known the road ahead of me, the road of master distraction, of continuing to live in the darkness I was striving to come out of.*

*Twenty-seven years old and here I sit, still suffering from a disease I thought I would never get. Addiction.*

The pain Jesse mentioned was due to her advanced pregnancy, and she has since given birth to a healthy baby, her fourth. She is now in residential treatment for her addiction, and all four kids are with her. She has many obstacles to a healthy, stable life for herself and her children. Lots of practical problem-solving to do. Still, she is one of several women who said writing circle was their favorite class. Over and over, during an evaluation of our time together, the women mentioned the freedom they find in writing. So we are calling ourselves Freedom Writers.

There's more I could tell you—about the difficulties incarcerated women face, about studies that confirm the value of writing programs for prisoners, about my surprise at finding myself compelled by this population—but we'd be here all afternoon. So I'll end by giving God thanks for the opportunity to begin this work, and to you all for being God's agents in bringing it about, because it was here last year during the season of reconciliation that I first heard about Sue Fleming's work in the Allegan Jail and began the conversation that led to my involvement; and just recently our consistory has taken Freedom Writers under its wing, as a ministry of Hope Church.

I have many hopes for the future of Freedom Writers, and that, too, is a conversation for another day. Today I just want to invite you to celebrate with me the moments when voices emerge out of silence—voices of whole, creative women who deserve to recognize the strength and beauty of their voices, and whose voices we need to hear. We are not complete without them.