

SOARING OVER THE WALL



**a volunteer's collection
of prison freedom stories
by Kathy Park**

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A Volunteer's Collection of Prison Freedom Stories

by Kathy Park

*a special limited edition
published by the author*

This book is dedicated to everyone who has ever lived in prison

Soaring Over the Wall: A Volunteer's Collection of Prison Freedom Stories
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CONTENTS

Acknowledgments

Author's Note

Introduction

1 From Bitter to Sweet

Terry's Office

Paula's Garden

Alicia: Emerging From her Shell

Kyos, the Captain and the Rainbow

2 Making Something Out of Nothing

Sylvia's Enchiladas

A Circle Foot Rub – *excerpts from my prison journal*

"On My Way"

3 Turning It On Its Head

Wrapping a Black Belt Around Your Enemy

The Bullshit Detector

4 Strutting My Stuff

Body, Breath and Belly Signs

Betty and her Boyfriend Painting

Jazmin and her Bra

Reclaiming Fertile Ground – *excerpts from my prison journal*

5 Freedom Comes From Letting Go

Pat's Other Hand

Body Language

Holding Back – *excerpts from my prison journal*

6 The Prison Guard Within

A Moat Filled with Piranha

Sisyphus – *excerpts from my prison journal*

7 Please (Don't) Touch

Road Dogs

A Million Reasons Not to Cry

Volunteer Orientation – *excerpts from my prison journal*

The Power of a Gentle Touch

8 Letting in a Breeze

You Don't Mean Love Your Enemies?
You Are Not Your Feelings
Going to the Beach

9 A Rock and a Hard Place

Lee Manacled to a Hospital Bed – *excerpts from my prison journal*
How to Get Through the Barnyard
Margarita and her Girlfriend

10 Seize the Day

Bringing Flowers to Prison
Liberating Food
Betty's Graduation
Somebody to Love

11 Celebrations of Freedom

The Names Quilt
The Story of the Minicamp
A Council on Racism and a Multicultural Festival

12 A Song of Home

Empty Space
A Prison of My Own Making

Epilogue

Appendix

Bibliography

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I also thank those who discouraged me from writing this book, fearing that writing about positive work in a prison could jeopardize its ongoing future; you, too, have helped by challenging me to deepen my resolve and clarify my intention.

Thanks to the many people who volunteered their time and hearts to work in the prison holistic health program this book describes. Thanks to the prison staff who allowed us to come inside the gates. Thanks to my co-director for taking over the program after I left. I know it wasn't easy. Thanks to the doctor who "god-mothered" and supervised the program. Without you, none of this would have been possible.

Thanks to all my teachers, in bodywork, Aikido, art and life.

Thanks to my husband Henry Woolbert for joining me in the prison work; for many after-prison debriefings; for your willingness to jump into the midst of a bunch of wild, powerful and angry women in order to help them (and yourself) find their creative souls; and for believing in me each and every day.

And thanks to the circle of incarcerated women who supported and inspired me, and gave me the courage to question everything I thought I knew about freedom.

KP
March, 2000
Jaroso, CO

Author's Note

This book has had a long gestation, with periods of dormancy and a couple bouts of false labor. It definitely has had a life of its own. When I first volunteered in the prison, I wrote obsessively in my journal, noting the chronology of events, capturing anecdotes, venting frustrations and celebrating the victories of the holistic health program I founded and directed there. I sensed from the first that a book of stories might want to be born from these notes. As the years went on and the program grew, my journal entries faltered. Gaps widened in the chronology. Stories were lost. I simply could not keep up.

Now I write from quite a distance in time and location. I am living a very different life than when the hub of my life was all about volunteering in prison. Nevertheless, this book keeps calling. Images inspired by my work with the women keep showing up in my art, examples of which I have included with each chapter. I am still very involved with the general field of holistic health, both as a lifestyle and as a teacher of the martial art of Aikido. Often, with my students or any other interested audience, prison stories come tumbling out like a rivulet swollen by the spring thaw. Sometimes a memory will pop out and I will grab for pencil and paper. Questions and insights about the meaning of freedom and incarceration arrive daily. I believe these stories want to be told.

After considerable debate and soul-searching, and for the sake of privacy and protection, I have decided to not give the exact location or name of the prison I worked in or the name of the program I founded. I have decided also to change or obscure the names of those I worked with, except when they have given me their consent to use their full names.

In order to aid the reader, I have included an appendix to explain some of the holistic health practices and techniques described in this book, as well as a bibliography for further reading.

Introduction

In 1990, I was invited by a prison doctor to teach two stress management workshops to a group of long-term inmates in a federal women's prison.

The doctor and I met in a *dojo* while attending Aikido class. Terry was a small-boned woman with a big smile, a mop of curly hair and the quickness of a hummingbird. She had passed up far more lucrative jobs practicing medicine on the "outside" in favor of accepting a tough, demanding, far-from-glamorous position as medical director in a large women's prison. The women adored her, and Terry knew well how much her consistent presence, good medicine and quiet advocacy meant to them.

Responding to frequent requests from the women for classes in stress management and holistic health, Terry was seeking a suitable volunteer from the pool of martial artists and bodyworkers present in our *dojo*, or training hall. She first asked our teacher if he would be willing to volunteer in prison, but because he was involved in other projects at the time, he declined. Since I had been his apprentice for two years in advanced bodywork, he was in the habit of referring teaching opportunities to me. He introduced me to Terry.

At the time my life was full with training and teaching Aikido, the Japanese martial art of peaceful reconciliation. I also maintained a small bodywork practice and was involved in another long apprenticeship training with yet another master bodyworker. Underlying all these activities was the ground of my marriage and my lifework as an artist. Even so, I grabbed at the chance to teach in a prison. I could not have known how that initial "Yes" was to change the course of my life.

It took months to plow through the red tape of convincing the prison administration that stress management workshops for the women were both desirable and non-threatening. Although prisons are in the official business of "corrections," there seems to be a periodic shift of administrative policy from the rehabilitation model to the punishment model. Terry and I hoped to appeal to both sides by arguing that stress management skills would make the women better citizens not only upon release back into society, but also while still incarcerated, thus serving as a "passive security device." While we succeeded with this argument, we bumped the next step. On my résumé, we made the mistake of mentioning that I had a black belt. The thought that the women would be learning a martial art caused such a horrified reaction from the prison staff that on the second run-through of my credentials, that fact was played down. In addition, I had to be finger printed, have an FBI background check and take a urinalysis test.

I remember the first day Terry took me into the prison. I had been issued a volunteer's pass, my pockets had been emptied and my person scrutinized by the metal detector. I was about to pass through the double set of locked doors that led into the prison compound. As I heard the swoosh of the air lock in back of me, I remember being very confused by the sight of physical beauty in the prison grounds. Instead of what I expected to see – stained concrete, iron bars, a high-tech dungeon – I was looking at a sweep of green lawn, trees and flowerbeds. There was a college campus-like layout of buildings and pathways. I started to think, "This may be a prison, but it can't be that bad." Yet all I had to do was turn in a circle to see the high razor wire fence. Or close my eyes and listen to the jangle of keys, the

heavy tread of polished black shoes, the garble of walkie-talkies. Or tune into my subtle senses to get the mix of feelings in the air and underfoot: dominance, submission, frustration, resentment, abuse, control, racism, depression, despair.

As I walked alongside Terry on a tour of the prison, I began to understand just how important a hopeful, helpful, caring person was in the midst of all this denial, deadness, and dysfunction. Prisoners and staff alike called out hellos, how-ya-doin's, as if just seeing Terry made their days. As they recognized her, I watched unhappy masks melt into friendly grins, hostile eyes soften, rigid faces loosen, and defiant attitudes relax. When they looked at me, however, I got the feeling that they were NOT going to automatically give me the benefit of the doubt. They carefully and warily scrutinized me, sizing me up. Was I for real? Was I another fake do-gooder with a hidden agenda? Could I be trusted? I realized I was being run through a bullshit detector, the first of many. I prayed I would pass the test.

Being a basically shy person, I had to work at not getting too claustrophobic or paranoid under this intense scrutiny. It suddenly occurred to me that I had hardly been breathing, so I took in a bellyful of air and felt my body begin to relax. It became easier to feel my feet on the ground, to look back into some of their faces with curiosity and openness, and to see that many of the women were not that different from me.

As we walked around the prison, Terry talked about the many problems that come with life in prison: the chronic stress of confinement, overcrowding and lack of privacy; mazes of bureaucratic red tape; limited medical services; lack of creative outlets or training in real-life skills; the menace of racism and violence; the difficulty in communicating with friends and family; and the bitter frustration of being separated from their children and having to "parent" from a distance. Terry told me that from the viewpoint of medical services, these "multiple stressors" often led to chronic medical problems, over-dependence on medication, substance abuse, depression, obesity, insomnia, a high rate of on-the-job injuries, and fighting.

She also pointed out that prison staff as well suffered from working in a prison environment, as evidenced by poor health, underlying frustration, short fuses, and dysfunctional behavior that was often taken home to their families. Since funding and staffing for medical services were usually at a minimum, prison staff had come to expect band-aid solutions at best, which of course only exacerbated the problems for prisoners and staff alike.

With the urging of a core group of long-term inmates who were her patients, Terry hoped to foster a new holistic strategy for physical, mental and spiritual health. She hoped that such a holistic approach would benefit those who worked in prison as well as those who lived in it. The two stress management workshops I had agreed to lead were the beginning of making that vision real.

As we approached the chapel building where I would be conducting my first workshop, Terry briefed me on the group of women I would be meeting that day. They were about twenty, racially diverse, long-term inmates, meaning that all of them had already served about ten years and were looking at the probability of serving many more. This particular prison administered all levels of security, including maximum. The women who would comprise my group – women convicted of white-collar crimes, drug running, murder, political terrorism, and hijacking – were all maximum security.

I gulped another breath. "Don't worry," Terry said cheerfully. "They're seasoned veterans. They're leaders in this community. They've all been here long enough to be very motivated to make their lives as enjoyable and productive as possible. They'll love you and what you have to teach."

She was right. What I didn't expect was that I would fall in love with them. (Nor did I know until much later how much I would learn from them.) By the end of that first day, I realized that coming to prison for only two workshops was not going to cut it. Rearranging my entire life so that I could come here for the indefinite future was more like it.

As the stories in this chronicle will illustrate, what was born out of those two initial stress management workshops was the creation of a volunteer program of diverse and comprehensive holistic health practices unique to the prison system. At its heyday while I was director, the program was supported by two private grants, as well as many individual contributions of funds, supplies and services. Comprised of numerous volunteer teachers and facilitators, the program offered the women weekly classes and groups in meditation, yoga, conflict resolution, intuition training, somatic education, parenting skills, stress management, self-expression through voice and theater, and creativity through arts and crafts. We were even able to offer individual therapeutic bodywork and massage, despite prohibitions on touch. In addition, the program featured special workshops and events such as journal writing for incest survivors, drumming, storytelling, dream work, women's spirituality, and multiculturalism and diversity. The holistic health program we designed for the prison staff included classes in relaxation techniques, somatic education, conflict resolution, meditation, team building, parenting skills and preventive health care.

With the consent of the prison bureaucracy, we were also able to supplement the program with an extensive holistic health lending library of books, audiotapes and videos put together by donations from publishers, community libraries and individuals.

Within a few months, the anecdotal evidence of the program's success, from small triumphs to radical improvements in health and well-being, was undeniable. Some of the women in the long-term stress group were able to stop smoking, a very difficult act of self-discipline in an environment where smoking was ubiquitous. Some women were able to break through debilitating depression; others were able to wean themselves from over-dependence on medication for chronic pain. An insomniac learned techniques to relax enough to get some consistent sleep. Another woman learned to bring her high blood pressure down into the normal range. Yet another woman with chronic migraines learned to identify the symptoms that led up to her headaches and curtail them before they overpowered her.

Because the program was independent from the prison administration or prison funding, the women felt more safety in confiding in us without fear of having their trust betrayed. For many, just having a safe place to go was in itself a big stress reducer and a step towards greater health. In addition, as their physical health improved, many of the women turned to creative and artistic expression as a way to nourish their souls. In fact, the mutually beneficial relationship between health and creative expression was a cornerstone of the holistic health program.

Over time, we saw that such personal gains led to changes in relationships, both within the prison community and with loved ones on the outside. Disputes were resolved more peacefully and a few old grudges were reconciled. Some long overdue thanks, acknowledgments and gestures of forgiveness were offered. By being supported to take better care of themselves and to feel better about who they were, the women were more able to give to others.

Prison staff involved with the program learned how to reduce conflict and tension both on the individual level and as co-workers, making for a healthier work environment and better service to the inmates. Volunteers took home with them the knowledge and satisfaction that their work helped cut through the loneliness, isolation and despair of the women inside. Over time, the work also gave volunteers fresh perspectives on their own problems, serving to inform, heal and inspire not only them, but also their families and communities.

These same gains in health and well-being were also carried out of the prison when graduates of the holistic health program were released. Successful re-integration back into society is hardly a forgone conclusion for newly released prisoners, to which high recidivism rates attest. One intention of the program was that the women be better able to handle the new stressors of parole, half-way houses, finding a job, coping with family, standing up to the pressure of friends from the past, and catching up to the rapid changes in the “free” world.

After four years of volunteer work, I was ready to pass the baton to my co-director, Penny. Along with my husband Henry, who had by this time joined me in the prison work, we set our “release dates” and let everyone know of our plans to move to the country to be artists full-time. Before our departure we took several months to work with closure and farewells with the women inside, while I gradually shifted over the tasks and responsibilities of running the program to Penny.

Despite the draconian atmosphere existing in most prisons today, the holistic health program managed to survive several more years, albeit with a lower profile. A model program and a shining example of the benefits of rehabilitation rather than punishment, it touched and enriched the lives of countless prisoners, staff, volunteers and their families. May it live on in spirit and serve to inspire the creation of similar programs in prisons and jails nationwide.

I have given you a brief history and an overview of my work in the prison, but I have not yet taken you “inside.” You have not yet met these women, felt their power and pain, heard their stories. You have not seen yourself in their eyes. I hope you will.

May these stories inspire you to inquire about prisons, the ones made of concrete and razor wire, and the ones we construct in our souls. May they give you courage to ask about freedom. May they serve to unlock doors, open minds, take down barriers, and soar over the walls.

Chapter 1

From Bitter to Sweet

*“Deep down inside of me, I’ve got a fight going on
Deep down inside of me, I’ve got a fight going on
Part of me wants to sing about the light
Part of me wants to cry, cry, cry.”*

Adele Getty



“Mother and Child”

mahogany wood, 12” tall, 1993

photograph by the artist

This carving was one of several that the women held while in Terry’s office, especially when they missed their children.

Terry's Office

Terry's office was a sanctuary in the middle of prison. Unlike most doctor's offices I have ever seen, it was decorated with anti-war posters, colorful masks made by the women prisoners, calendars with pictures of children from all over the world, wooden sculptures of women and horses, and reminders to breathe. A bumper sticker on the wall advised "Practice Random Kindness and Senseless Acts of Beauty." The bookcase was jammed with books on holistic health and women's literature, plus rows and rows of cassette tapes and "walkman" headsets, all part of the holistic health lending library. Although the top of her desk was covered with papers and medical files, and her desk drawers were in disarray, Terry's office nonetheless exuded the peacefulness of a safe haven.

Getting an appointment with Terry or any of the other prison doctors was not easy. Like most everything else in prison, it required two things: endless standing in line and concocting the right mixture of patience and persistence. The medical services building was always busy and crowded.

But at last, when the door to her office was shut tight, and the noise from the waiting room was muffled, and her patient began to speak about her troubles, Terry gave her full attention. She listened with the ears of her heart. Some days, every one of her patients cried, a little or a lot. They spoke of aches and pains of the body, mind, and soul. They cried for their children, *los niños*. They cried because they were mothers torn from their families and they felt helpless, powerless, frustrated, and guilty. Some days, the doctor cried too. Sometimes she encouraged them to pick up one of the woodcarvings she collected, to hold and draw solace from it. This was all part of her medicine.

After the tears had dried, after a little smile had returned and mascara had been touched up, there was time for a hug. Terry knew instinctively that hugs were essential to her good medicine, and so did her patients. But both understood that this kind of touching had to be hidden from view.

When both were confident that a certain cool decorum had been re-attached, shielding them from the unforgiving scrutiny outside, the door was opened. Terry would call for her next patient and the women would pass in the hall, one needing the solace of the office, the other restored, ready to continue the task of putting one foot in front of the other.

Paula's Garden

When Paula first came to the creativity class, she had a down-turned mouth and dull eyes, half hidden by long blonde bangs. She always sat in the same spot and never talked with anyone. The other women would be chattering and fussing over the art and craft supplies, the Latinas sitting together, the women in the back working with clay, and roomies or buddies sharing that particular bond that comes from spending a lot of time together doing time. But Paula kept to herself, back slumped, head bent down over her work.

For her first project, she meticulously drew a comic book for her son with her son's favorite character going through all sorts of adventures – Mr. Wiggly I think it was. Then she found some colorful yarn and wove herself a new watchband to

replace the black plastic one, carefully severing its buckle and loops and re-attaching them to her new one. As I made my way around the class, I would look over her shoulder and offer encouragement. She did not need ideas or motivation. She seemed not to want interaction. I was content to stroke her back or suggest that she sit straighter so as to cause less muscle strain.

One day she showed me a book of collage images she had created which told the story of her arrest, trial and sentencing. The words and images were taken from newspapers and magazines, juxtaposed in such a way as to convey the irony and bitterness she felt about the injustice that had been done to her. To my eye, the work was very strong in composition and concept, and it spoke directly of her pain, rage and frustration. As she showed it to me and saw that I was getting it, her eyes watered. With trembling voice she began to talk about what she was going through. After a while she stopped speaking and we embraced. I felt as if we had come through a portal.

The next class she made another Mr. Wiggly for her son, this time in clay. The attention she gave not only to details but also to craftsmanship was impressive. When it successfully emerged from the firing, she beamed with pride. But a few weeks later she called me over to say that her husband had written. He had received the package she sent, but had asked what that clay sculpture was supposed to be. She looked at me with a glint of mischief and laughed, "It was smashed to smithereens. Oh well, I guess I'll just make another."

Then one day Paula grabbed me as soon as I walked into class, eyes aglow and cheeks pink with excitement, saying, "I have something to show you." Piled on the same spot where she always sat were large rolled-up tubes of paper and several gardening books with "post-its" sticking out of the pages. "I entered a prison contest to design a garden for the entrance to the new gym, and I won!" she exclaimed.

First she unfurled a pen and ink map of the garden drawn to scale, with curving pathways, benches, plant groupings of large variety and pebble banks with every single pebble drawn in full detail. The second roll of paper showed the same garden in less detail but in full color. As she unfurled it, she explained, "All the plants are drought-tolerant and native wherever possible. I've considered color combinations, differing heights, needs for sun or shade, continuous blooming through the seasons, and plant compatibility." Pointing out each plant, she reached for her garden books to show me their color photographs and scientific names.

Finally, with much pride and satisfaction in her voice and body, she looked me straight in the eye and said, "When my design was reviewed by the contest judges, they dropped their jaws on the ground! They told me they had never seen such a professional, complete, well-documented design presentation!"

She gave me a big grin and grabbed me in a big hug. "I'm so grateful for this creativity class! I'm so grateful to have my creative soul back in my life again."

The change in Paula over these few weeks was remarkable. It was as if she had decided to spit out her bitterness and nourish what was sweet and bright and hopeful inside, once again. She eventually was released from prison and reunited with her husband and son. I lost track of her case and battle with the courts (as I did with most of the women). I could only hope that she kept joy alive in her inner garden. Her prison garden outside the new gym was landscaped, planted and cared for according to her plans, down to each pebble, succulent and bloom.

Alicia: Emerging From her Shell

The first time Alicia came to the long-term stress group, she seemed terrified just to sit there. While the other women filled the small chapel room with exuberant gesticulations, exclamations and asides, Alicia shrank into the corner, taking up as little space as possible. Talking, sharing or participating seemed out of the question, and we made no demands of her. She was like a turtle making herself as small as possible inside her shell.

When I brought one of my bodywork teachers into prison to do a workshop, I was surprised and pleased that Alicia signed up. In the afternoon while there was a demonstration of how to move our bodies with more ease and efficiency, several of the women spread out on the floor to rest and enjoy the quiet and peace. (Napping happened often in workshops of any length, and we teachers learned to accept it. We had heard many stories of how noisy, chaotic and crazy the living units were. The women told us that they got busted for sitting or lying down on the grass. We figured that if they took a catnap in one of our workshops, we need not take it personally. They knew what they needed.)

A friend of Alicia's came over to me and mentioned that Alicia was complaining of a bad headache. "Would you be willing to cradle her head for a while?" she asked.

"Yes, absolutely," I answered. I went over to where Alicia was lying on her stomach, softly placed my hand on her low back, and asked her, "Would you like it if I held your head?"

Despite my efforts to be quiet and gentle, I startled her. Her body jumped and contracted at my touch. It took several moments for her to register who I was and what I had asked. At last she decided, "Yes, that would be OK."

(I was to be constantly reminded how jumpy the women felt around touching. I learned to approach them with caution and always ask for permission. When I first asked Terry why the prison prohibited touch, she answered simply, "Sex." Oh. Shows you how naïve I was. When I probed further, she explained that she or I could touch the women and vice versa – the give and take of therapeutic touch – but they could not touch each other. The only touching which the guards seemed to condone was limited to the women fixing each other's hair. The women took full advantage: the more braids, the more complex the design, the more tiny and intricate the weaving, and the more time it took, the better.)

I asked Alicia to lie comfortably on her back and eased my hands under her head, simply cradling it. What happened next startled me. One moment Alicia was dozing off, relaxing her head into my hands, and in the next, her whole body stiffened. Her brows scrunched up, her eyes bulged open with fright and she drew in a sharp breath. She looked at me as if to say, "Where am I? What's happening? Who are you?" After a frozen moment, I smiled and said, "Hello. I'm still here. I'm just holding your head."

Gradually she relaxed again. She closed her eyes, let her neck go and allowed her head to get heavy in my hands. Then the whole thing happened again. Her body stiffened and her eyes bulged. She sharply inhaled and looked at me without recognition. This time, I was ready for it and stayed relaxed myself. "Hello, Alicia," I said quietly. "I'm still here holding your head. It's OK. You can let go

again.” This pattern repeated several times, gradually losing its dramatic contrasts. After a while, I returned Alicia’s head to the floor and went on to work with someone else.

A couple weeks later, Alicia went to the doctor’s office and had a good cry, something she hadn’t done in a long time. As her tears subsided, Alicia remembered an event in another prison that had been terrifying and humiliating, a memory she had suppressed for most of her many years of incarceration. She had been held down and strip-searched by a number of guards and left in a basement for several days and nights with no relief from the constant glare of artificial light.

Now, perhaps because she had found a safe haven in Terry’s office and some support through the holistic program, she was strong enough to remember and to let the long healing process begin.

Very soon after these events, everyone noticed a difference in Alicia. She spoke. She shared. She participated in different exercises. She let her feelings show. She began to laugh a little and let a twinkle light her eye. She began to allow a wiggle to return to her walk. (As a bodyworker constantly working with frozen shoulders, stiff necks, immobile ribcages, and tight pelvises, I always rejoiced when someone got their wiggle back.)

Although still cautious about being touched, she began to allow it, accept it, enjoy it, reciprocate it. Not only that, but her chronic pain subsided and she began to need less medication. She slept better. Her nightmares retreated. Her energy returned. She was no longer a turtle hiding in her shell. She was more like a mischievous pixie.

Kyos, the Captain and the Rainbow

Kyos fasted and prayed for three days before she brought her incest survivors’ writing workshop and healing ritual into prison. She brought in a big drum, a Navajo blanket, four ears of corn and a Sioux rattle. A couple of the Native American prisoners brought sage to smudge the twenty women participating and to bless the chapel space where the workshop was to take place.

I sat on the floor just inside the door and made sure every woman had paper and pen. I introduced Kyos and thanked her for being willing to volunteer.

After a long period of drumming, Kyos instructed, “Make a list of words describing every wrong and injury that has been done to you since birth. Write exactly what comes to your mind. Don’t question or doubt it. You have three minutes to write.”

After she called time, she told us to write on top of the page, “I am a survivor of all of this.” She asked for volunteers to read what they had written. Everyone listened with rapt attention as woman after woman read from her list: “Stupid.” “Ugly.” “No good.” “Too much.” “Not enough.” “Bitch.” “Abused.” “Forced.” “Cold.” “I am a survivor of all of this.”

She had us do more timed writings on anger, fear and pleasure. Finally she had us write down all the things we do to heal ourselves. After each segment of writing, she asked us to read aloud if we so chose. Many women opted to read each time, while others were silent for the whole workshop. Women spoke of seeing their parents pull guns on each other, of bruises black and blue from being hit with a

baseball bat, and of finding desperate solace in memorizing the wallpaper. Tears were few and rationed, but the feelings were deep and intense.

During the workshop, Terry had positioned herself just outside the door in the hallway so she could catch up on a stack of medical charts. Several times I was aware that she was intercepting inmates or prison staff as they came into the chapel for one thing or another. I remember chuckling to myself that we had intuitively placed ourselves in guard positions relative to the door. Our protective dog natures were not going to allow this workshop to be disturbed.

At one point I became aware that there was a man in coat and tie looking in through the chapel door window, but I didn't get a good look at his face. I could hear Terry talking to him for quite a while. I figured she was handling it, so I brought my attention back to the workshop.

But later when Terry and I were driving back home, I found out that the man looking in the window had been the captain, head of all security in the prison. He and the doctor had had quite a conversation. This is roughly what they had said:

"What's going on today in the chapel?" the captain asked.

"This is Kyos, a Native American healer leading a writing workshop for incest survivors."

"Incest? Oh, that's just the latest hysterical fad. These women are always looking for a scapegoat to pin their problems on so they don't have to deal with them. Besides, incest happens in other countries and it's not a problem there. What's more, the statistics on incest are all out of whack."

"Yes," Terry coolly replied. "They ARE out of whack. In fact it's been shown that they're way too low. Many more women are incest survivors than is commonly believed. Plus, as a doctor, I have to say that traumatic events in the past really DO have a lot to do with present behavior and problems. Take Vietnam vets for example and post traumatic stress syndrome. It's been over twenty years and some of these guys are still having a hell of a time coping."

"Those guys? They were bums before they went!"

"Well, um, what about that rich businessman up in Seattle who was so stressed out that when he heard a strange sound in the night, he got up and shot his washing machine?"

"Oh that? That's normal. I do that."

End of conversation.

Terry and I wondered if (a) the captain was simply uninformed; (b) he was in deep denial; (c) he was a perpetrator himself; or (d) maybe, he too was a survivor.

Early one rainy morning a couple weeks later, Terry and I were walking from the parking lot to the prison guardhouse when we noticed that the captain had spotted us and seemed to be waiting for us. Immediately I felt paranoid. I was carrying a large box of acrylic paints for the creativity class and was not sure if I had the necessary material safety data sheets in the box. I suspected that the paperwork had been left at home. Meanwhile, as it was now clear that the captain was definitely waiting for us, there was nothing to do but take a deep breath and keep walking as calmly as possible.

Imagine our surprise when the captain looked at us and asked, "Did you see the rainbow this morning? It landed right in the prison. Wow! It surely was beautiful."

Chapter 2

Making Something Out of Nothing

*“Whatever you can do, or dream you can, begin it.
Boldness has genius, power and magic in it.”*

Goethe



“The Seeker”

walnut wood, 29” tall, 1995

photograph by Charles Bleak

I met more genuine spiritual seekers of all stripes and persuasions inside the prison than outside. The women were hungry, appreciative and genuine in their commitment to the search. They knew that there’s nothing to lose and no bets left to hedge.

Sylvia's Enchiladas

On my fortieth birthday, the women in my long-term stress group gave me a surprise party. They got Terry to stall in her office until we were at least ten minutes late. One of the group members met us outside the chapel and launched into a long involved story about her court case, which made us another fifteen minutes late. Since by this time I was getting used to not having any control over matters of timing in the prison, I didn't think much of it.

When I walked into the chapel, the lights were dimmed. I couldn't really see what was happening until I noticed candles glowing in the darkness. Candles stuck into cakes! As my eyes got used to the light, I noticed a computer-generated banner hung from the ceiling saying "Happy Birthday Cathy" and the table laden with food. Everyone was laughing and clapping and exclaiming "Happy Birthday" and encouraging me to blow out the candles.

Only trouble was, I couldn't blow out the candles no matter how hard I blew. The women urged, "Come on, Kathy. You're always telling US to breathe. Let's see YOU really breathe!" Rising to the challenge, I blew and blew, but every time I got them out, they came back on. Then I realized – trick candles.

Just then the smoke alarm went off. We screamed with panicked laughter. Somebody grabbed the candles from the cake and snuffed them out. Another threw extra clothes over the punch and the food while someone else hid the cakes. We filed outside the chapel as quickly as possible, smoke alarm blaring. Just as quickly, the guards showed up, faces glowering as they spoke into their walkie-talkies.

Feeling nervous and paranoid, I looked to Terry for my cues, but she was laughing. In fact, we were all laughing. Guards filed in and out of the chapel and the smoke alarm was turned off. They spoke with Terry, and seemingly satisfied with her explanation, they left, the last one shaking his head and fighting off a smile.

With the coast clear, we all marched back inside, still laughing and telling the story to each other over and over as if we all hadn't been there. At last we settled down enough to realize that the next thing to do was to eat!

Sylvia began to serve everyone up. She announced, "We have fruit punch, fruit salad, guacamole, gorp, vegetarian enchiladas AND chicken enchiladas, and two kinds of cake – banana nut AND chocolate chip. What would you like, Kathy?"

Well, since it was my birthday, I said I'd take a little of everything, and so did most everyone else. Everything was delicious, but the enchiladas were especially good. I asked who made them.

Sylvia hemmed and hawed, "Well, err, I made them."

"Sylvia, these are really good. How did you make them? Did you make them in the prison kitchen?"

"Oh, no, not there," she laughed.

"Well, did you make them in kitchens back in your units?"

"No, no, we don't HAVE kitchens in our units," she laughed and so did everyone else.

"Well, do you have microwaves in your rooms?"

"AIEEEE, no!" she squealed.

"Sylvia, how did you make these? I really want to know. They're really good and I'd like the recipe," I said firmly.

Sylvia waited until the squeals and giggles died down, and finally said, "OK, I'll tell you how I made the enchiladas." She paused and quietly said, "I ironed them."

It took a few moments for me to gather my jaw up off the ground. Choking, I asked, "You did what?"

"I ironed them," she repeated a bit more defiantly.

Here followed another long pause while I tried to let this image sink in. Dumbfounded, I implored, "Sylvia, please explain this to me."

With obvious pride, she took the floor and gave me the following recipe, known as *chiliqueños*:

"You go the commissary and buy Doritos corn chips, canned chicken (if you want it), cheese and salsa. If you have friends who work in the kitchen, you ask them to 'acquire' some garlic, cilantro and avocado. You make sure you get all this in two plastic bags. Then, when you're home, you take one plastic bag and smooth it out flat. Take half the Doritos and crunch them, not too fine, into a square on the plastic. Upon this you sprinkle layers of chicken, diced or grated cheese, salsa, garlic, cilantro and whatever else you have. Cover this assembly with the other half of the crunched up Doritos in the same as manner as before. Then cover the whole thing with the other plastic bag and a damp towel. And now, at a low temperature, you must iron them for a long, long time until they're done."

May a book of prison recipes be written by these inventive women.

A Circle Foot Rub – excerpts from my prison journal

. . . Somewhere in the weather report for the long-term stress group I picked up on feet. [A "weather report" was a check-in technique I used in my stress groups for getting a feel for the mood and energy level of the group. We would go around the circle giving brief descriptions of our "interior weather" in the moment.] Rachel mentioned she almost broke her foot last weekend and Jamie also complained about a sore foot. I got the idea to do a circle foot rub. We began by each putting our right foot in the lap of the woman to our right. I asked the women to attend to their own comfort by noticing their breath and posture and by making any necessary adjustments. We rubbed our hands together to generate heat, feeling the ball of energy between our palms. Then we simply held the top and bottom of our partner's foot, feeling the texture of ridge, bone, callous, and soft sole. I led them through a few massage techniques and then asked the women to each teach us something different to do with this foot. Ann spoke right up with a suggestion to massage the toes. Jamie was very instructive about useful pressure points. Annie, a shy Native American, suggested kissing the foot (a pretty brash suggestion for her!!).

What a picture we made! After a while we finished with the right foot by simply holding it again. Then in our break we laid down or stood up to rest our backs and feel the difference in our sides and especially our feet. Then we put our left feet into the laps of our partners to the left. And we went through a similar procedure.

Rita was cracking up across the circle about how weird this was. How crazy I was. But clearly she loved it.

After finishing the left foot we again stood to feel the difference, then laid down or stretched our backs. Then I asked them to stand and go into the “T” stance, shifting their weight forward and back in such a way that the knees went over the feet, the arms swung freely and the pelvis powered the movement. This inspired a review of the centering practice of being pushed by a partner and feeling how solid the “T” stance is from front or back, but not so good from the sides or when being spun. Similarly, the horse or “sumo” stance with legs very wide and knees bent is great for a side push, but very unstable from the front or back.

In the next exercise we purposefully pushed each other off center and practiced returning home to center. Pretty soon the women were catching on to the metaphor of pushes and pulls - that the physical pushes and pulls we were working with could also signify push/pulls that were emotional or verbal. As we added this dimension to the exercise, I encouraged them to pay attention to how exactly they went off center. Was it with a feisty edge to it? Did it feel more like a victim? Was it spaced out?

When Alicia interjected that under certain circumstances and under severe pressure, escaping into outer space might be exactly the right thing to do for survival’s sake, I knew she was making an important point and I wanted to support her. I said that I have noticed that many women who have suffered severe early abuse learned as children to do whatever worked to minimize the pain and to survive. Often, that meant “splitting off” - leaving the body behind so that the spirit could safely observe from a distance. As a survival strategy for those early traumatic circumstances, it made good sense. But when this strategy becomes a habit, it is often inappropriate and counter-productive. It’s also hard to recognize and difficult to heal later on as an adult.

Whenever I mention abuse, the bottom drops out. It’s as if you could cut their memories with a knife. . .

“On My Way”

Many of the women in the holistic health program had never kept a journal before. I remember on the first day I came to prison to meet with the long-term inmates, I brought in paper and colored pencils, magic markers, pens and pencils. I asked the women to draw a self-portrait, not of what they actually *looked* like, but rather what they *felt* like inside. They looked at me blankly for a moment and protested, “But I can’t draw.” I reassured them that this was not about grades or comparison or accuracy. “Take a deep breath and feel what it feels like to be you right now. Let yourself be drawn to whatever colors you want and try not to think too much about it. Just let it happen.”

Although to most this must have sounded pretty weird, they bravely plunged in. In a few moments the room was silent with concentration, each woman in her own private world. The portraits were revealing as only “primitive,” uncensored, un-schooled work can be. I remember one woman had chosen the palest colors – pale yellow, pale blue, light gray. Her figure was small, floating, with nothing at all inside the outlines, almost invisible. Another woman’s portrait was chopped into segments with jagged red lines. Her heart was made of tears. Her head was full of flying bugs. Her hands were cut off from her body.

Much later, perhaps a year into the program, I asked these same women to make another self-portrait and we compared them with the original portraits. The differences were astonishing. The woman who had drawn the invisible portrait had now chosen a few vibrant colors to depict her insides and the whole figure took up much more space. The woman who had drawn the dismembered portrait now drew a whole figure. Her heart still had tears, but it also glowed pink. Her hands were small, but they were attached.

Keeping a journal became a big part of the holistic program – drawing; writing prose, poetry and dreams; writing with the non-dominant hand; writing to vent anger; writing to forgive; writing vows to oneself. We were lucky to have some very prominent writers give workshops and readings at the prison, including author and storyteller Clarissa Pinkola Estés and Native American poet Chrystos. Just as the self-portraits described above changed in intensity, color, texture and meaning, so the writings gained in confidence as each woman found her voice.

Because it was practically impossible to keep a journal in their units and be assured that cellmates or guards would respect their privacy, many of the women gave their journals to the holistic program for safekeeping. Much of their writing has ended up with me. I hope they will not mind if some of their journal entries, poems and letters are printed here, anonymously, of course:

“Today is my first day in meditation, stress and creativity groups. In meditation I learned how to notice my body. All the muscles. The pull on my body by gravity. . .”

“I’ve never written in a journal before, so this is a new experience for me. I’d like to start by accessing my goals and ambitions for my time here. I want to improve my understanding of diversely cultured people. I oftentimes find myself frustrated and sometimes confused with the actions or words of others. I want to be more accepting of those who are not like me. I sometimes find that I want to change people to fit my tastes, and I know that that isn’t right. . .”

“Today is my second stress class. I still haven’t heard from my boyfriend yet. It kind of bothers me. It’s not like him to go this long without a visit or a card. I’m sure he’s involved with another woman. But what can I do about it? NOTHING. That’s right, don’t worry about things you have no control over.”

“This week has been wonderful!!! Truly I have been satisfied. It is not often that I can say such a thing. Most of the time I am complaining but not this week. I believe I have felt every emotion there is to feel. I have been extremely happy, sad, melancholy and so forth. The main thing is that I have just rolled with punches. It was nice to feel simply. . .OK.”

“I have noticed changes, because now it’s much easier for me to sleep at night. I don’t turn and toss all night. It has also helped me to control my temper because when I kind of get mad at somebody, I just breathe in and out and I feel better.”

“. . . I believe that the roots of our problems, my problems, are found in alienation. Our group provides the opportunity to reach into our human/woman essence. This process, I believe, opens our hearts and minds to a genuine and profound healing. By helping another, one helps the self. By helping the self, one helps another. It's an ongoing cycle.”

“Eleven more months until I go home.”

“I have been in prison for 14 years, and I would like very much to say the help that has come to me through the stress group sessions is the first time in all the years I feel completely within myself, but not alone.”

“. . . though I'm immersed in this world of deception, cruelty, and women's inhumanity to women, I will not give up my faith in the natural goodness of humankind. It is due to deprivation, exploitation, loneliness, frustration, etc. . . that all these negative traits flourish. Humans are good by nature and given the right conditions and a natural environment, all will return to its natural order and harmony would reign amongst all.”

“I vow to hold a space for myself and for others. I vow to keep returning to that space. I vow to recognize my fear in everything I say, do and think. I vow to let it go. I vow not to be severe with myself. Gently reminding my being when there is a need to change a thought, a behavior, an attitude. I vow to become like the nucleus of an atom that holds space for electrons that move around it. I vow to be me. To know me. To love.”

“A seed which is not watered and kept from the light withers.”

“Dear Kathy, by the time you read this letter I'll be gone from this place. I would like to thank you so much for everything you have taught me this past year. You have given so much of yourself to all of us . . . You have taught me that it is okay to show your feelings and to let go of all the things that I have been keeping inside of me all these years, and you know what? I am not afraid to let people know about me, about the inner me that had been hidden all these years before the program. I was always thankful that on Fridays I could get away from those walls and fences and have some peace to myself. . . You know Kathy, one of the things that stays on my mind and I can still picture it, if I just close my eyes. That time when you told us about your piece of art of the birth of the child, that you weren't allowed to put on display because 'they' thought it was too much? And then you started to talk about you wanting to have a child and you have not been able to? Well, I have the same problem of not being able to have any more children, but twelve years ago was my choice and I had my tubes tied. Now at this time in my life, I love one man so much that I wish with all my heart I was able to give him a child, especially when he has never had one of his own. I know the pain you feel inside, because it is the same pain I feel inside of me. But I never give up hope and I dream a lot and I believe in my dreams and it helps me. You see you never give up your dreams. Imagine what you want for

tomorrow, feel it and sense it. You have to dare the impossible because deep down inside you know it can be done. Be unafraid, but not foolish. Have courage and balance it with strength. Be confident in who you are and don't be afraid to grow. Above all know what your inner spirit desires. Listen to your hopes and dreams, to the unseen element inside of you, to the sounds that are beyond hearing and know no boundaries and that walk hand in hand with you through your life. Never give up your dreams for they were meant to come true and feel if you keep this in mind, you'll see that one day I will see your piece of art displayed in the biggest and most famous galleries around the world and I will say, 'You see the artist on that piece? She was my teacher.' So at the same time you will make me feel famous too. And when you least expect it the Lord will send you that little child that you want so much. . ."

"Where am I going?
I don't know
How will I get there?
I'm not certain
All I know is that
I'm on my way."

Chapter 3

Turning It On Its Head

“Life shrinks or expands according to one’s courage.”

Anais Nin



walnut wood, 24" tall, 1999

“Grrrrl”

photograph by David Guerrero

The women in prison had a salty mix of defiant, brusquely confident, prove-it-to-me, invulnerable, tough and edgy bravado. In fact, the prison was full of uppity women. The generation of my great aunts saw uppity women imprisoned in sanatoriums, diagnosed with hysteria, or subjected to experimental female circumcisions in order to bring them under control. Now we lock them up and coerce them to work in prison factories.

Wrapping a Black Belt Around Your Enemy

Sadie was what the prisoners termed “short and shitty,” meaning her time was getting short and her anxiety about being released into the “free world” was making her feel and act shitty. It’s a time when the pressure is too much to bear, when something cracks and breaks, and self-sabotage kicks in. A woman may find herself with a major offense, secluded in the SHU (Segregated Housing Unit), having blown her chance to get out. Sadie was so tight I was afraid she would grind her molars down to the gum.

Sadie hid herself behind a layer of toughness and black shades. Her hair had a partial buzz cut with shaved geometric designs. Her “don’t-mess-with-me” attitude extended out about twenty feet in all directions.

She showed up one day to the stress group while I had a guest instructor and signaled that she needed to talk. We sat in the stairwell within hearing range of the workshop. She was shaking and very pale. Her tough attitude was nowhere in sight.

“Kathy,” she confided, looking down at her hands, “I came within a heartbeat of blowing it big time, and if it hadn’t been for my roomy, I’d be in the SHU right now.”

When she said she was sure her father would have killed her too, I started to guess how she had almost blown it.

Sadie and I both studied the martial arts. While I was familiar with Karate and the non-fighting art of Aikido, Sadie had learned a form of Thai kick boxing from her father, a well-known martial artist in his time. We had talked a few times about our backgrounds and the martial art code.

Most martial arts, whether they are fighting or non-fighting forms, have at their core strict ethical rules and constraints passed down from teacher to student, which spell out when and where you may use your skill. Sadie had almost crossed the line. Far worse than the reaction of the prison authorities was the possibility of her father’s disappointment in her loss of self-control, in her transgression of the code, in HER.

“What happened, exactly?” I asked.

“Me and my roomy were waiting in line for food services to open,” she replied.

(Waiting in lines for food services, for the laundry, the phone, the shower, the commissary, the clinic, for EVERYTHING was a very sore point for most of the women in prison, especially when it was combined with overcrowded conditions. This was further exacerbated by the common practice of butting in line, an irritation that had ignited many fights, grudges, feuds, name-calls and racial slurs.)

“Someone butted in front of us,” Sadie continued. “She was real rude. I tried to ask her nice and calm not to do that, but she said something ugly and nasty.

“Right then and there,” Sadie said, her eyes darting left and right, “I could almost feel the impact of my fist on her face. In my mind it was already done. But just as fast, I realized I’d already crossed the line. I’d broken the code. I’d lost my cool. Worst of all, my father had already turned his back.”

She looked at me with utter anguish. “If it hadn’t been for my roomy stepping in, I would have hit her. How can I possibly trust myself now?”

I sat and thought for a while. When I realized what I needed to say to her, I chuckled.

“Sadie,” I said. “You’ll probably think I’m crazy to tell you this. But in your mind you need to wrap a black belt around the woman who butted in front of you. You need to bow to her like you would another black belt, and thank her for what she is teaching you.”

Sadie drew back and looked at me with wide eyes. I could see her struggling with a thousand “But, but, but . . .”

I took advantage of her confusion and added, “And it would probably be a good idea for you to thank, at least in your mind, everyone who butts in line or irritates you in any way from now on until you get out of here, and maybe even after that as well. Because they are teaching you about discipline, composure, the ability to pick your battles and not sweat the small stuff.”

Slowly she began to nod and smile. Then, looking at me with that familiar glint of defiance in her eyes, Sadie said, “That would turn it on its head, wouldn’t it?”

The Bullshit Detector

Prison is an ideal hothouse for growing a bullshit detector. If you don’t already have one, you are forced to grow one quickly. Just as I had passed through the prisoners’ bullshit detector on my first day working in prison, I learned that as a volunteer, I, too, had to have my own detector, fully operable at all times.

I suppose the urge to con is a natural consequence of living in prison. The more I worked inside and realized that it could very well be me who was doing time, the more I was sure that, as a prisoner, I would have tried a few cons myself. Small favors can go a long way in a place like that.

I imagine the rationale would go like this: “Hmm, someone nice actually showed up in this place, someone who listens and treats me decent for once. Maybe they would help me with this special favor or cut me some slack or bend the rules a little. It’s sure worth asking. You never know when one might work, and lord knows I could use a break.”

The trouble was that any collusion with this line of thought was forbidden territory for a volunteer. If we had succumbed to this temptation, our status, not to mention that of the whole program, could have been jeopardized.

I never got hit up for anything I’d consider major, like bringing in drugs or money. Being known for the holistic health program, the requests I turned down were tamer, such as, “Could you bring in a Bach flower remedy or some peppermint tea?” The old timers, knowing a good thing when they saw it, weren’t about to try any major con or allow anyone else to put the program into jeopardy. But little favors? Well, that’s another story.

One of the stranger requests I received was in a bodywork consultation. A woman who had agreed to take a lie detector test for her case asked me if I could teach her how to beat the machine. She wanted to learn how to mask the truth by short-circuiting any involuntary responses that might register on the machine. I guess she figured that I would know a special way to control the breath or heartbeat or galvanic skin response.

I had to laugh and tell her, "I'm sorry, but this is way over my head. I can teach you a basic meditation practice that will help you stay calm, but, call it what you will, I can't teach you how to lie." She looked away in disgust.

Another woman who was a self-trained psychic was so smitten with me that she would frequently appear, unwelcome, in my dreams. It felt as if she were following me home and watching everything I did. I realized I needed to be clearer about my boundaries. I called her aside after group one day and said, "Just because you have the ability 'read' other people's energy doesn't give you the right to cruise into their personal spaces. If you're truly interested in honing your psychic skills then you also need to practice being more considerate, respectful and polite. You need to learn how to mind your own energetic business. I've made a commitment to be here every Friday and you'll have to be satisfied to see me then."

After this the woman sulked and brooded. But after a short time, she began to use the feedback to develop a better sense of the right time and place to use her psychic skills.

An older woman who had done a lot of time told me a puzzling story in a bodywork session. Before prison she had had an experience that made her "see the light" about her heroin addiction and drug dealing. Her recently killed sister had appeared to her in a waking dream and told her that it was time to "cut that shit out."

"It scared the shit out of me," she told me. "And I cleaned up right after that. It totally changed my life."

There was a pause while I absorbed this information. Then I asked her, "Then how come you're in prison?"

"Oh," she answered, looking out the window, "I got caught robbing a bank." Hmmm, I thought to myself.

As my bullshit detector grew more refined with use, I was harder to suck in. But I can't say I was ever immune. None of us were. Sometimes other volunteers, being of cooler demeanor and more wary of identifying too closely with the women, were able to help me see through my blind spots. Sometimes I was able to lend my perspective to their shortsightedness. But maintaining a detached position never worked well for me. The very nature of my work and of sharing myself as an artist called for getting very close with the women.

There was also the issue of re-directing our outward-facing bullshit detectors to the voices of deception within. We all had defenses, fears, anxieties. We had memories of trauma, betrayal and abuse. Invoking larger societal issues of racism, poverty, class or politics could quickly erode trust. Too often we would convince ourselves with compelling rationales that it was too dangerous, too hard to trust.

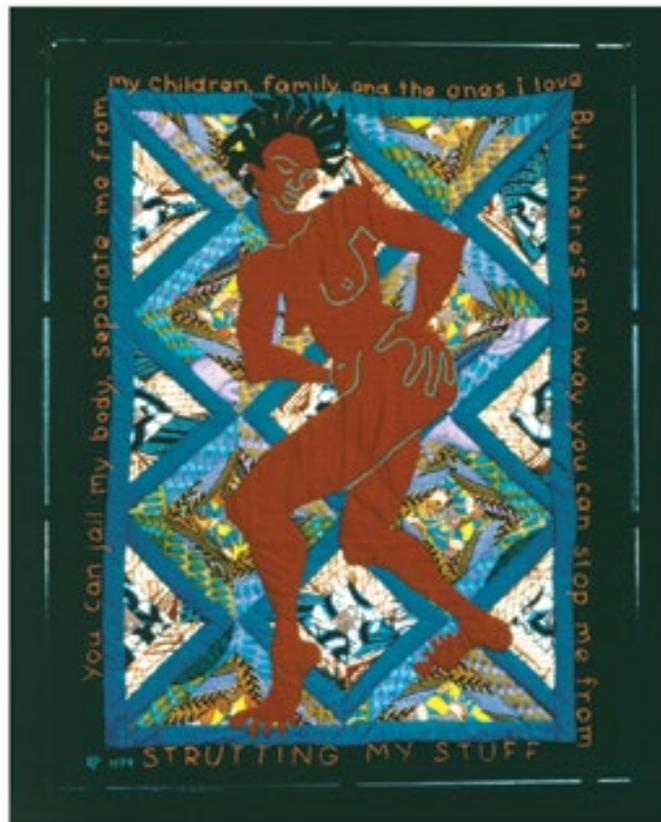
It was not long in my work at the prison before we came to see that this issue of building trust and making a safe space within the stress groups was an especially formidable task. Once, when I brought up the necessity of confidentiality, the women laughed and said that calling something confidential would be the quickest way to spread it all over the compound. To trust and be trustworthy required great courage.

Chapter 4

Strutting My Stuff

*"We need to put our hearts together
Set up a rhythm and combination
And if we put our hearts together
We'll set a rhythm that'll shake creation."*

Bruce Cockburn



“Strutting My Stuff”

machine pieced, hand appliquéd, embroidered, and quilted cotton
36" by 27", 1994

photograph by Charles Bleak

This quilt is a composite portrait of several of the women in the long-term stress group. My poem embroidered around the edge reads: “You can jail my body, separate me from my children, family, and the ones I love, but there’s no way you can stop me from strutting my stuff.”

Body, Breath and Belly Sighs

One day in stress management group we began an exploration of breathing. We played with different breath patterns. We consciously restricted our breathing to only chest breaths or only belly breaths, feeling how the ribs moved, finding our floating ribs, tracing the ribs from sternum to spine. We tried to feel the movement of the diaphragm. We held our breaths after taking a full inhalation, quieting ourselves and turning our attention inward to see if we could hear or feel our heartbeats. Then we held our breaths after letting go of an exhalation, pausing as long as we could, feeling emptiness and waiting for the next breath to happen to us. With each change in the pattern of the breath, we mapped and felt the corresponding change in our state of mind, how our bodies felt, how the world looked to us, how we appeared to each other. We discovered that high rapid chest breaths made us feel light-headed, “breathy,” excitable, hysterical and ungrounded. Deflating our chests while breathing with shallow, almost imperceptible breaths led us to feeling depressed, panicked, numb, barely alive, desperate. Some women spoke of feeling like they could never get enough air. Others spoke of how scary it was to exhale everything and then wait on empty for the next breath. Some women left the room to go have a cigarette.

All this breathing got us talking about corsets, girdles and bras and how all those devices bind and inhibit our bodies, force them into different shapes and prevent them from natural movement. We recalled how Victorian women were prone to fainting and were viewed as delicate. We wondered how the whole idea of the weaker sex came about. We agreed that, in contrast, un-corseted women were often seen as coarse, gross, unrefined. We talked about how we women are programmed and conditioned to be at odds with our bodies. Even with variations from culture to culture, we have learned to corset ourselves, to cut ourselves off from our breath and therefore our depth, our power, and the home that is our bodies.

We began to work with deeper breaths, ones that included movement in both the chest and belly. We laid down with one hand resting on the chest and the other on the belly and played with breaths that made one hand move first, and then the other. We discovered that if all this deep breathing started to make us feel light-headed, it could easily be remedied by exhaling and then pausing, waiting as long as possible without straining until the next inhalation happened. We made “ah” sounds on the exhalation. We sighed. We changed positions, breathing on our sides or breathing while lying on our stomachs. Then slowly, very slowly, we made our way to standing, noticing how our breathing changed. Could we begin to move around the room and still be conscious of our breaths? It was not as easy as it sounds. It helped if, when we walked around, we kept one hand on our bellies to help remind us to send the breath way down there. We noticed how calm we felt, calm and powerful at the same time. Connected to the earth. Aware of our surroundings. We wondered how many odd looks we would get if we walked out of the building into the prison compound with our hands on our bellies, sighing.

Betty and her Boyfriend Painting

In the old days this prison used to be “co-correctional,” meaning the inmate population was composed of men as well as women. The women explained to me that they were allowed to have a “walkie,” a special friend of the opposite sex with whom they could hold hands while walking around the track. That was supposed to have been the extent of it. Somehow this rule did not deter the men and women from getting together in more intimate ways. (And not surprisingly, there were several pregnancies from those times.)

“One time during a prison renovation,” Betty told me one day, “my boyfriend and another woman and I were assigned to a painting crew. We had to paint an office space with an inner and outer room. It was easy enough to arrange for the other woman to paint the outer room while my boyfriend and I painted the inner, but not so easy to conceal what we were doing.”

She paused, looked down, and seemed to be blushing. “So,” she giggled, “we made everything sound like painting, like this:”

“Could you put some more paint on my brush, please? It’s gotten a little dry.”

“Oh, you missed a spot over here.”

“Here?”

“No, not there. A little higher. A little more to the right. Yes, that’s it, right there.”

“Hmmm, nice job.”

Jazmin and her Bra

One day Jazmin was walking across the prison compound on her way to the stress management group. She was minding her own business, walking free in her body, hips swaying, arms swinging, dreadlocks bouncing and breasts jiggling.

A guard stopped her and started in about how it’s against prison rules to not be wearing a bra. He took out his notebook in order to give her a “shot” – prison lingo for getting an incident report.

But Jazmin coolly untucked her shirt and pulled it up just enough to expose her bare brown waist, around which a black bra was fastened.

Looking the guard in the eye and cocking her weight on one hip, she said, “but I AM wearing a bra.”

“Reclaiming Fertile Ground” – excerpts from my prison journal

(Lynne volunteered for three years at the prison, first as a guest instructor, then taking over the beginning stress management group along with fellow volunteer, Rebecca. Lynne’s expertise in Body-Mind Centering© and her playful spirit were widely enjoyed by the women.)

Lynne is here doing her “Reclaiming Fertile Ground” workshop. There’s a good feeling in the group. Jazmin is telling about making a menstruation book for

her daughter welcoming her to being a woman, with words of wisdom from her elders. Paula is asking for pages from the "Anatomy Coloring Book" so she can learn where her plumbing is.

I'm getting blown out by the Spanish word for womb – matriz – matrix, the world, the mother. What a beautiful concept.

"Reclaiming our very cells, which have received so much negativity, is what will restore our health," Lynne is saying. "If our organs have been removed, the shadow or energy of them always remains with us."

I'm choosing to sit back from the group and write and watch. I'm admiring how well Lynne thinks on her feet, what a natural teacher she is. What a joy it is to have the words translated into Spanish and feel the Latina women's delight in being so honored.

Yesterday was a good and bad day. Good with the women and hard, bad with the prison itself. The captain came down hard on us because of finding contraband art supplies in the creativity class. Now he tells us. He also canceled the meditation and stress groups because of fog line. I feel bad for the women who have morning classes and miss them due to the fog.

("Fog line" was a prison procedure for dealing with morning fog. When the fog was too thick to see across the compound, all regular movement was restricted. Women were escorted in large groups to their workplaces in the prison factories, but not to any other special events, such as the holistic health program.)

Back to Lynne's workshop. She's inspired the women to dance from their ovaries, breasts, wombs. Now they're walking from their breasts, leading from their breasts. Now they're alternating with walking ashamed and hiding their breasts. I can see everyone's steps become smaller, slower. As the shame level rises, the eyes go down. Not feeling so good about ourselves, wanting to be invisible. Then returning to leading with their breasts, even touching them. So much comes up around this issue. Betty's silicone implants, Paula's lumpectomy. . .

The women are saying how hysterectomies are done casually and frequently at women's prisons. They are saying how important it is to have as much information as possible about our bodies. How important it is to claim the scars that have happened to us. How we sit here with our own experience, the experience of our families, the accumulation of years of negative conditioning. Part of the healing is to let those experiences and pain have room to be expressed and then let them go.

Maria is speaking of paying attention to herself, feeling less self-conscious than the last workshop. Jazmin is saying there's less stuff for her around her breasts and it's good dancing to the music. Paula is telling a story about a friend's first period, not understanding that the cardboard is not meant to be inside along with the tampon. Tara is speaking of her gratefulness to her body, happy to be a woman, happy to be here with all of us. Sylvia, about to get her period, is saying how the movement has helped her to get through her achy-ness, how dancing is her therapy. Now they are all speaking of how loved ones close to us have lost breasts or wombs. So much cancer. Julia is speaking about cancer in her mother and her death, her own cervical cancer. How she healed herself and checks her breasts and ovaries. How she wakes up to feeling her body, claiming her own body.

Lynne is saying how different it is to touch with love rather than fear, when touching our breasts, for example. Lee is speaking of realizing that although she's

an intelligent person, she's only just recently learning how important it is to know her body. She is realizing how ignorant she has been about her body.

Sara is speaking of cancer in her body, how she found a lump in her breast, and how, even though she's heavy, she loves herself, especially when she's dancing.

Susannah is going home next week to her five kids and the task of finalizing her divorce. She is saying how she's getting something unexpected from this workshop – the comfort of being with others who are learning what they don't know about their bodies. Felt so good to dance and let go and relax.

Nora is speaking about the fear in touching herself – how she's been conditioned to touch herself with fear or not touch herself at all.

Marla is shy and feels this is difficult and speaks little because of it. Feels better than when she came, however.

Anita speaks of the difference touching herself ten years ago – wouldn't dare.

Jazmin says men don't go through this, this speaking of ourselves as chicken parts.

Josefina is speaking of how hard it is to like her breasts or be touched or touch her own breasts.

Betty has much negativity in her ovaries, breasts, uterus. All eight of her sisters and her Mom died of breast or uterine cancer. She's gone through breast surgery herself, also pre-cancer in her cervix, also her tubes tied. She's wanting to have her uterus, etc, taken out. The legacy of her family. If she's with her man, her breasts are positive. If not, they're negative. How she blocks them, makes herself hard to them. She's going home soon. It's hard to talk about her Mom's death. Very hard. But she's more able to talk about it in the last 6-7 months. . .

"Things don't heal by being buried," Lynne is saying. "We've been the burying ground for lots of toxic waste in this culture."

Paula says the monk – a Buddhist monk who regularly comes to the prison - said one wouldn't let garbage sit around in our kitchens. It's the same with our minds and bodies.

Tara is speaking of the importance of becoming friends with the past. It makes a happy future possible. . .

Angela says she likes to touch herself and has been reprimanded all her life, especially here. She spoke of compassion for all of us who've lost loved ones through disease. Lots of her family have had breast cancer. She took care of everyone who died. Has always had a big body.

Betty is speaking about helping midwife Nancy's baby here in prison.

Sara gave birth to her boy all by herself when she lived in Mexico. She even wrapped the cord with thread and took scissors and cut it herself. She had never done it before. The baby was born weighing two and a half pounds at seven months. She kept it for two weeks, feeding it with a cotton ball soaked in milk or a small spoon until it developed diarrhea. Then she took him to the hospital where he was kept in an incubator until he weighed seven pounds. He's now the tallest and smartest of her children. What a victory story.

Chapter 5

Freedom Comes From Letting Go

*“Freedom, won’t you give us freedom
Freedom, won’t you give us freedom
Freedom comes from not hanging on
You got to let go, let go
Freedom comes from not hanging on
You got to let go, let go.”*

Shari Bernstein



“Freedom”

maple wood, 14" tall, 1990

photograph by Jan E. Watson

This little figure was carved right at the beginning of my work in the prison, and, like several other carvings, found its way to Terry’s office where the women handled it frequently. They appreciated the strength in her robust body and the power in her reaching hands.

Pat's Other Hand

One day in creativity class, I brought in two special books: *The Power of Your Other Hand*, by Lucia Cappachione, and *Writing Down the Bones*, by Natalie Goldberg. Exercises in the first book encourage the reader to contact her inner child, wise teacher and healer by writing with her non-dominant hand. The second book helps the reader/writer to free up expression through uncensored, timed-writing exercises on specific subjects. Both practices have been very helpful in my work, and I sensed that they could be powerful tools for the women in prison. They certainly were for Pat.

Pat was new to the class and the holistic program, and she was throwing herself into it full tilt. She had offered herself as a guinea pig for movement exercises twice earlier that day. When I gave the creativity class their writing assignments, she dove right in. I asked the women to first write with their dominant hands for ten minutes without a break and with as little censoring as possible, starting each phrase with "I remember" and then writing down whatever came into their minds. Then I asked them to switch pens and pencils to their non-dominant hands and to write for ten minutes beginning with the phrase "I don't remember." When time was up, I asked if anyone would be willing to share what they had written.

Pat raised her hand hesitantly and said, "Writing with my non-dominant hand was strange and puzzling." When I asked her how so, she replied, "My words seemed so dark and morbid. How could they be mine?"

I said, "Sometimes it's surprising what the other hand has to say. Writing this way can help us access other voices inside us, those that have been buried, doubted or banished. It gives them a chance to speak."

Although still hesitant, she seemed to really want to read. With a little encouragement, she began, "I don't remember my childhood," and then burst into tears.

Crying in prison was very tricky business. The crier risked having her tears seen as a sign of weakness, bringing on the vultures or opportunistic comforters. Crying in front of everyone in class was a very brave act for Pat, being the new kid on the block. I tried my best to buffer her by making a lot of space for her to have her feelings without being criticized or saved, and by being on the lookout for anyone who could not, or would not, handle or respect her tears. To my relief, most of the women became still and attentive. I heard a few of them take some deep breaths.

Eventually Pat collected herself enough to continue reading. She spoke of receiving no solace from her mother, father or siblings. She spoke of a loneliness and deep sadness such as only a miserable child can feel. Most of the women listened quietly, eyes lowered. I wondered how much the bleak truth of her words spoke about their childhoods, too.

Halfway through her reading, Pat's words shifted. Her voice strengthened and the color in her face brightened. She said she had made a deal with herself as a young girl. She called it "an agreement on the soul level."

"I'll always be with you," she read. "I'll never leave you. I'll always hold your hand and help you."

You could have heard a pin drop when she finished reading. I was close to crying. So were many of the women. I don't know if Pat realized the power of what she had written. I think she was a bit stunned too. I thanked her for her courage, for her simple, beautiful words, and for her tears.

Body Language

One of the first ideas from my martial art background that I wanted to get across to the women was about being grounded and centered. Since I like to work with opposites, I first asked the women in my stress group to take a posture that felt rigid, uptight and top-heavy. I asked them to take a wide stance, lock their knees back and thrust their pelvises forward. Then I asked them to hold their bellies tight, cross their arms in front of their chests, close their hearts, jut their jaws, harden their eyes, and cap it off with a "don't-mess-with-me" attitude. I asked them to breathe as little as possible. As they looked around the room, the women began to giggle and laugh in recognition. One woman exclaimed, "But this is what the guards look like!"

I asked them to maintain this rigid posture and showed a few of them how easily they could be tipped over if nudged in the right direction. They were surprised. They knew there was something ridiculous about the pose, but they had still assumed it was powerful and stable.

After relaxing for a moment, I asked the women to stand with feet about shoulder width apart and knees slightly bent. I asked them to soften their eyes, jaws, bellies and hearts. I directed their attention down to the center of their bodies, the center of gravity below the navel and midway between belly and low back. I asked them to feel gravity pulling on them and to let the bottom of the pelvic floor - the area of the reproductive organs and sphincters - relax. I suggested they feel the space in back of them as strongly as they felt the space in front, as if they had eyes in the back of their heads. I reminded them to feel their breath as it moved throughout their bodies and to imagine being connected to the core of the earth. When I pushed on a few of them in the same way I had before, this time the women were able to absorb my push with little or no effect on their balance. After a few moments, we looked around the room and talked about what we saw.

The women said they saw ease, openness and a strength that was soft. They saw love in each other's eyes and they felt a sense of connection with everyone in the room. Most important, they said they saw no fear.

As their ability to ground and center themselves became easier and more habitual, the women began to appreciate how these techniques could help them work *with* rather than *against* stress, conflict, fear, frustration, hopelessness, anger, dis-ease or pain. They saw the ineffectiveness of their former strategies. They saw the limits of avoiding conflict, how they get stuck in ignoring or obsessing about pain, the danger of projecting frustration or walling off hopelessness. As their ability increased to work with rather than against whatever life brought them, they began to come forward with insightful questions:

"How can I be strong and still stay open and connected to my heart?"

"How can I stay centered when I'm being harassed by the guards?"

"How can I redirect my energy from despair and impotence to hope, vision and positive feelings?"

Holding Back – excerpts from my prison journal

Today in stress management group, I noticed that the “weather report” was not yielding much information or juice. I thought of a quote from a little book called Illuminations: “You too withhold the very things you complain are missing from the world.” Hmmm. Provocative comment. So I shared it and asked that we go around the circle again and share something we know we are holding back from the group.

Suddenly everyone sat up and paid attention. I started by saying that I hold back music. There’s a lot more music inside of me but I get shy and blocked and hold it back. Helen spoke right up and said she holds back her anger and hostility and tries to keep it outside the group or keep it to herself. She doesn’t want to make anyone upset or mad in the group. Sylvia shared that she holds back the fact that sometimes she doesn’t want anything to do with ANYONE, the problem being that often those are the same times that everyone wants to hang out with her or wants something from her. “Then I start being gnarly and snarly until I realize, or my friends point out to me, that I need to take my anti-gorilla pills. Besides,” she said, “I’m PMSing.”

Natasha shared that she cannot tell the truth in the group, because if she did it would start a war. “No one tells the truth, inside or outside,” she said. “Everyone has their masks on.” A couple of women started to take offense at both Natasha’s comment and the sharp way she delivered it. Intervening, I said, “This is Natasha’s truth, that she cannot tell the truth.” That seemed to calm everybody down.

Betty shared that she holds back her joy and happiness because she is getting out soon and going home. She holds back her joy so she won’t feel guilty by making all her prison friends more unhappy because they are staying and she is going. Sylvia, Jazmin and others reassured her that they love hearing about her going home. It makes their hearts feel open and happy. It gives them hope. They certainly don’t intend to stay in prison forever. Betty was quite surprised and pleased to hear how much everyone wanted her to share exactly what she felt she needed to hold back.

Jazmin shared that she feels herself to be quite selfish in the group. She comes to get more than to give. For me it was an irony. Jazmin’s mere presence is so giving.

When I asked Josefina if there was anything she was holding back, she replied that everyone has their own reality and we need to respect each other. It seemed to me she was playing it safe by speaking abstractly, but I decided not to push it. Later I asked if anyone had any specific issues they wanted help with, and Josefina began to speak about the pain in her shoulder. She said the orthopedist couldn’t help her anymore. When I asked what it felt like, she replied, “The pain feels like winter, like being frost bitten, a cold pain.” She went on to say that dealing with it occupies a lot of her attention and she knows that’s where she spends a lot of time. “But,” she said, “I am sorry to speak about it because I don’t want to make everyone else feel my pain.”

Puzzled, I replied that I didn’t feel her pain in the sense that she’s not causing me pain. She went on to say that she works hard to take responsibility for herself and her pain and she feels responsible for how everyone else takes it. And that

that's quite a burden. At this comment, she leaned her hurt shoulder way down toward the floor, laughing a little.

Oh Josefina, I said to myself. I gently pointed out to her that there are people who are trained to be with other people in pain without taking it on. I have that training. I told her that I heard in her words her sense of responsibility, her integrity. I also heard that she was not asking for help. But, I thought to myself, what a story this woman must have to tell. It's so classic, how we link asking for help to weakness, vulnerability, failure and defeat while stoicism is linked to strength, independence, not needing, not owing. How convinced we are that there is no strength in vulnerability.

Julia spoke up in her choppy English, saying that we all have the power to heal, to speak our "true." Although I missed a lot of what she said, I somehow sensed her eloquence anyway. She is such an advocate of the light and of healing.

Somewhere in here Natasha took offense at something, I'm not sure what. Maybe it just got too light for her and she felt she had to re-introduce the dark. But Julia dealt with it without missing a beat. "I no want to make fight with you 'Tasha," she calmly said. Natasha backed off and her anger dissipated.

Oh Natasha. Maybe you give us all these tests, these feisty jabs, just to see if you'll be jumped on or not.

Chapter 6

The Prison Guard Within

*“We can rise with the fire of freedom
Truth is the fire that will burn our chains
We can stop the fire of destruction
Healing is the fire running through our veins.”*

Starhawk



lignum vitae wood, 6" tall, 1990

“Compression”

photograph by Jan E. Watson

Lignum vitae is the hardest and densest wood I've ever carved. It doesn't float. The wood seems to lend itself to extreme compaction and compression of the figure, and in my first year of work in the prison, I was learning about extreme compression of the spirit.

A Moat Filled with Piranha

One day in stress management group we talked about metaphors. Since some of the women didn't know what the word meant, I gave them simple examples, like the fog creeping in on cat feet, or a train of thought. Then I thought of an article I had recently read by Deena Metzger in which she explores the metaphor of each person being a nation state and the concept of personal disarmament. I remembered a list of provocative questions Deena had asked in her article:

What is your domestic policy? Foreign policy? Form of government? Seat of government?

Does everyone have the right to vote?

Do you have slaves? Prisons? An internal intelligence organization?

What is your defense system? What's in your arsenal? Would you consider unilaterally disarming without any assurance that anyone else would?

And on and on.

When I finished reading this formidable list, I encouraged all of us to look inside and see what came up in response to these questions. There was a long silence while most of us studied the floor. Finally one woman broke the ice by saying, "I have a moat around me filled with piranha."

Many women then spoke of how difficult it was to control their tempers, how quick they were to spark into anger, how tenaciously they held on to grudges. They admitted to passing on damaging gossip and committing character assassinations every day. When the prison is overcrowded; when things get really tight; when they're triple bunked in tiny rooms with open toilets and lockers stored out in the hall; and when the prison guards and staff tighten the rules and come down hard on infractions they previously overlooked: this is when it is especially difficult to avoid clashes, confrontations, fights, name-calling, shunning and general, all-around nastiness.

Sheila, a long-timer, said, "I've had to work really hard to be clear about my airspace. I've realized the hard way that it's best to retreat and go be alone when I feel my gnarly side come up."

Many women nodded in agreement.

"I'm the air traffic controller of my airspace. I'm the only one who gives permission to land. And I have surface to air missiles," she added with a glint.

We talked about how hard we can be on ourselves – relentless, demanding, unforgiving, cruel. We acknowledged ruefully how the inner tyrant comes up when we're pushing ourselves. I told them that while doing bodywork I have often observed and felt a hyper-vigilance deeply imbedded in the musculature of almost everyone I have worked on (including most prison staff). In hyper-vigilance, the body perceives danger or the threat of danger from every direction and in every moment. In order to apprehend that danger, the body is held in a state of constant tension, fear, wariness and a good dose of paranoia. It is literally "on-guard" – guarding against tears, against striking out or losing it or being perceived as weak and easy prey. The shields are always up at full power. No wonder the core feels depleted.

Many of the women, especially those who identified themselves as political prisoners (despite the official stance that the United States has NO political

prisoners), were deeply sobered and silenced when they realized the extent to which they embodied the same authoritarian, hierarchical, anti-democratic and dominating forms of government inside themselves that they so bitterly complained about on the outside. They began to appreciate how the challenges of changing the outer forms were interlinked to changing what went on inside us. One reflected the other.

Sisyphus – excerpts from my prison journal

. . . The creativity group finally got going after some confusion about where we were supposed to meet. Plus lots of women were late because the call-out was screwed up once again.

[The “call-out” was the daily printout of names and ID numbers showing where each woman was supposed to be at what time. If your name was not on the daily call-out for attending any of the holistic classes even if you were a member of that class, you could not go. Oftentimes, the call-out was not compiled, posted or dispersed throughout the prison in time, and other times the computer was down.]

We were crowded and discombobulated in the craft room.. Plus, it finally became clear to me that some women were clearly not interested in (1) moving their bodies, (2) trying anything new, or (3) listening to anything I say. What am I doing here? . . .

. . . Prison – two days last week and two again this week. I hated prison last Friday. Why does it all have to be so hard? The bureaucracy, the stupid shit about the new building, whether it’ll have the rooms we need, what it will be called. Terry tells me this is how governments are run. I shudder to think of the Pentagon. . . I came home ranting to Henry, taking a long walk as I cursed and sputtered until I finally got it out of my system. . .

. . . The Warden and Associate Warden came cruising by both Henry’s and my classes yesterday with a definite vibe of “What do you think you’re doing?”. . . I found myself getting defensive and apologetic and flustered. Yuck. Henry got a similar treatment. I guess when they’re under pressure from their superiors, they start to question everything, including the holistic health program, even though it’s not costing them a dime. We get no appreciation when they’re uptight. We’ve even gotten flack for sitting in a circle, as if that’s evidence that we’re really a witches’ coven. Maria told me she heard from some other inmates that they think my quilt hanging in the holistic room is a picture of the devil. . .

We’re living in times of such polarities – backlash, repression and fear as well as beauty, opportunity and understanding. I’m starting to feel more and more identified with the women. Hard to keep my balance and remember the humanity of the staff. . .

Right now I am feeling really pissed off at the creativity group. GOD DAMN IT. Such . . .childishness. Like I'm their . . .mother. I can't stand it. Cleaning up after all these irresponsible children pretending to be adults. . .I've got to take more charge. I cut them too much slack. Henry is too laid back. People walked off leaving full palettes of paints, playing stupid and dumb and unconscious and senile and irresponsible, figuring the mother hens in us would just step in and take care of everything. It's not right. . .I feel my inner dictator coming up hot and heavy. I want to punish people. I want to make them all wrong. I feel tramped on. . .

*. . .I feel sick today. I know my face shows it. My eyes feel really split. I know the women see it. I have to make it all OK even if I'm afraid. I take care of myself when I remember to breathe, to palm my eyes, stretch my back, and touch myself gently. I am worthy of self-protection. Strong legs, soft heart, clear mind.
[written with my non-dominant hand.]*

Chapter 7

Please (Don't) Touch

*“O Great Spirit
Earth, sun, sky and sea
You are inside
And all around me.”*

source unknown



“Metta – Goddess of Lovingkindness”

lignum vitae wood, 21” tall, 1996

photograph by the artist

This piece was commissioned by Terry who wanted a carving to put in her prison office of a strong, gentle woman who would never burn out. The carving “told” me how to place the hands – one beaming energy from the heart and the other gathering energy at the belly. I did not know until I stumbled across an old *National Geographic* magazine, that this same “*mudra*” is held by dancing figures carved in granite at the ancient Buddhist temple of Angor Wat in Cambodia.

The “*Metta*” meditation is a prayer: “May I be happy. May I be peaceful. May I be filled with love. May you be happy. May you be peaceful. May you be filled with love. May we all be happy. May we all be peaceful. May we all be filled with love.”

Road Dogs

We in the holistic health program were very happy to find out that we were not the only such program in a prison setting. For a time we had an older brother in the psychology department of a men's prison. The three of us, Terry, Penny (who was by then co-director), and I felt lucky to be able to visit and teach a guest workshop there.

I remember being extremely anxious about visiting a men's prison. Terry was not apprehensive, having practiced medicine in a men's prison before coming to the women's prison. If Penny was fazed, she did not show it. I tend to wear my worries and fears on my face, in cold, clammy hands and feet, and a cracking voice. All three of us were quite used to the procedure of going through the gate – paperwork, identity checks, badges, emptying your pockets, going through the metal detector, etc. So far, it was not that different. Our hosts were very down-to-earth people, very easy to be with and very reassuring. But how was it going to feel to be women teaching body-oriented practices in a prison full of several hundred men?

I remember being amazed at how big some of their muscles were. Some of the biceps I saw were easily as big as my thighs. And the tattoos! Tattoos all over, even teardrops tattooed below the eyes. (I later learned that each teardrop signified each time they were sent to prison.)

There was some friendly "cruising," and some not so friendly. I felt the need to put up my shields. I wished I felt more comfortable with my body. I struggled to remember my own practice, the very same thing I would be teaching: breathe, feel the sensations in my body, balance myself within the field of energy surrounding me, invoke some steadying quality to organize myself around. Try not to cave in and get intimidated.

Penny and I had a loose plan. We would trade back and forth with teaching meditation and centering practices, bodywork techniques, intuition training, exercises to study conflict resolution, etc. We thought we would be working with a group of thirty. Surprise! Seventy-five men signed up, including a large Spanish-speaking contingent, which meant we would need to slow down and pace our explanations so that the translator could keep up.

We got off to a bumpy start. It was hard to find my voice, hard to coordinate teaching styles with Penny, and, frankly, overwhelming to be in the company of so many men with such intense energy focused on us. It went a lot better after lunch, after we each had time to catch up to ourselves.

Although it was obvious that these men had acquired a lot of savvy about body language, I wanted to give them an experience of "energy language" operating at a deeper and less visible level than physical gesture. I wanted to show the men how powerfully they could be affected by subtle shifts in the quality of someone else's attention and focus toward them. So I invented an exercise in which we made circles of six or seven, with one guy standing in the middle. His job was to concentrate on staying in his center, doing the basic centering practice we had just taught them - breathing, feeling gravity and balancing the energy field - no matter what happened. I directed the other guys through a series of shifts in attention without radically changing their posture or gesture. First I asked them to also practice being centered, paying attention to no one but themselves. Then I asked

them to space out and let their attention wander all over the room or outside or into the past or future. Next I asked them to “cruise” the man in the middle, to look him up and down with a streetwise, hostile, judging attitude. Last, I asked the men to mentally annihilate the man in the middle. Then we took time to discuss how each shift of attention felt and how strong energy language can be. We saw what a challenge it was for the man in the middle to stay centered and not lose himself in reacting, no matter what kind of attention he was receiving.

Other memories: the stunned expression of a big African American man when Penny knocked him off balance with a soft touch. How inspired he became to really listen to what she was saying about standing and moving in a centered way.

I remember one man after I worked on his shoulder and upper back. He had a deep pain he had been carrying and working with for fifteen years. In another prison he had been roughed up by the guards - “stomped on” is how he put it. He had hated those guards for years. But since being exposed to the teachings of the holistic program there at the men’s prison, he had taken big steps toward working with forgiveness. He was willing to let this incident go into the past. He had it all pretty well worked out but was missing the physical connection.

During one of the breaks he had been talking with Terry. As soon as I was free, she signaled me over and asked me to work with him. I asked him to lie on the floor on his back and bend his knees so his feet were flat on the ground. I slipped my hands under his left shoulder blade and let my thoughts and nervousness go so that my hands could take over. I found the tender spot and gently supported it, asking him to breathe into it, imagine it opening up, warming up, coming into present time. He was so ready to make this connection that just calling his attention to the stuck spot was enough to release and transform it. Afterwards, he was radiant.

Later, when the group re-convened, I remember showing the men a bodywork technique that involved holding your partner’s head. I called for a volunteer (no shortage here) and asked him to lie on his back with his head towards me. I cradled his head in the basket of my hands that were resting on the floor. I explained that giving over the weight of one’s head can be deeply calming and soothing.

But when I finished my demonstration and asked the men to partner up, I saw a lot of embarrassment, fear and shyness. Had I gone into forbidden territory? Was I asking them to be too intimate? What if no one followed me? I was so relieved to see the first man grab a partner and begin the exercise. I saw what a huge risk it was for them to be gentle with each other, to actually support one another and allow themselves to be supported, especially in public.

I taught them a trust-building exercise in which one person stood straight with arms folded over their chest in the center of a tightly packed circle. Everyone in the circle had their hands ready to catch the center person as he fell, and send him back to the middle of the circle. We started slow and easy, but as the circle of support got more organized and focused, and as the man in the middle began to let go and really trust that he would be caught, everyone loosened up and began to really toss the center person back and forth.

In one group where I was part of the supporting circle, the man getting tossed in the middle kept saying, “Hey guys, toss me back towards that perfume!”

Then another circle invited me to come into the center. Oh, oh, now I have to practice what I preach! Could I let myself trust that these men would care for me, not let me down (literally), not be too rough and not take advantage of an opportunity

to cop a feel? I knew the answer when I realized I was squealing with glee, feeling so healed to be playing with a group of men I could trust.

I remember once when Penny handed the baton to me, I drew a complete blank as to what to do. I walked out the center of the large room, seventy-five men watching as they sat along the walls, and I sang a chant I knew:

“Oh Great Spirit
Earth, wind, fire and sea
You are inside
and all around me.”

I began to speak extemporaneously about a painful moment several years ago when I realized that not only did I really need to work on myself, but that I was worth working on. In that moment I saw that there was enough basic goodness in me to invest in, develop, nurture, teach and support. I told the men that this realization had been a turning point in my life, and I fervently hoped that each one of them would find their turning point, if they hadn't already. Looking into their open faces, I believed down to my toes that that same basic goodness was true about each and every one of them.

After returning home, I was awed by the fact that these men had touched me as deeply as the women had. Secretly, I had not thought they could. I took a good look at my own prejudices and fears about men. I was surprised to realize how much I learned from them and how much hope they hold out for the world. What a thing it is to smell hope, to see men cry and bear hug each other and slip Kleenex to each other on the sly.

They taught me a prison term that describes that camaraderie, that deep tie: “road dog” - a brother or sister you trust enough to cover your back.

A Million Reasons Not to Cry

Almost every time I did bodywork in prison, I worked on stiff necks and frozen shoulders. Necks were stiff not just along the spine, but also around the throat, under the chin, along the jaw and deep into the muscular attachments of the collarbone, all linked to stiffening of the entire rib cage. I sensed that the hyper-vigilance, constant stress and wariness demanded by surviving prison life were but the superficial layer on top of years of suppressed feelings, words, yells, tears.

I was constantly reminded in my bodywork practice of the tough reality of suppressed tears in prison – that it's flat out dangerous to cry, in public or private. The evidence shows on your face. Everyone can see. Few can afford to be sympathetic:

“Is she losing it?”

“Is she suicidal?”

“Will she shoot up?”

“Is she just being a drama queen?”

“I don't want to see her crying because that makes me feel that much closer to my own pain, and I don't want to feel that.”

“If I start crying, I'll never stop. I won't do any good. It never has. I'll just feel worse. Everyone will come up and make a big fuss. I don't want them to do that. (And I DO want them to do that.)”

"I shouldn't cry. I don't have it half as bad as she does."

"I'll ruin my makeup."

"I'll be put in the hole."

"People will know I'm in pain."

"I'll blow my cover. I'll lose my cool. I'll be vulnerable."

Oh so very dangerous to let those tears come out. So, in a way, I rejoiced when I saw tears. It was an act of great courage for the women to begin to show who they really were and what they were really feeling; to let people in on their secrets; to learn to ask for help, support and understanding; and to undertake the hard work of cracking open their armor and learning to live in a more flexible, more permeable container.

Jazmin cried with loud anguish because her elderly mother on fixed income had to take care of Jaz's five kids while Jaz finished her prison time, impotent to help.

Maria, thinking about home, let exactly two tears leak out before she tightened the faucet and sealed the rest inside.

Eva cried in secret as she gazed out the window during a movement exercise in the long-term stress group. Anita and I told Eva that hearing her cry and seeing her longing gaze had put us in touch with our own pain and sadness. And also she had looked so beautiful. Eva was confused as to how to return to the group from the depth of her private reverie. It was as if part of her were saying, "Please don't look at me too closely when I return. Please don't mention that I was crying." At the same time, another part was pleading, "Please see me, please speak to me, please touch me." As the group shared what had come up during our movement exercise, Eva said, "I didn't want to cry, but my body wanted to. Who do I listen to, my mind or my body?"

Such a great question.

Volunteer Orientation: excerpts from my prison journal

I am sitting in my first volunteer orientation in one of the prison's staff conference rooms. It is the first night of bombing Baghdad in the Persian Gulf War. The person giving the orientation is a nervous man, dressed in his guard uniform. He's pacing back and forth, jumping around from topic to topic. I can see President Bush and maps of Iraq on a TV screen, but the sound has been turned off. The guard is rattling off facts and figures:

"Inmates are staying longer in prison because of longer sentences and mandatory minimums, and that's why there's a population crunch.

"The average stay is seven years.

"Currently there are 887 women. Roughly a third are black, a third white and a third Hispanic.

"This is an administrative prison, accommodating all levels of security.

"There's a medicine man for the American Indians.

"Women are more docile and more easily managed than men, who are more aggressive.

"Information is strictly on a "need to know" basis. No one can give out official information or else we'd be liable for suit.

“You’re not allowed to accept any gifts or favors. If you are arrested for any offense, you must report to your sponsors . . .”

I look around the room. Most people here at the orientation seem to be connected to the prison ministry. I am younger than most. I feel lonely.

“Keep it professional,” the guard is saying. “Keep your personal life separate, private. Keep your boundaries distinct. Be willing to say NO. Put limits to your responsibility. Avoid grandiosity. Don’t discuss your personal affairs. Read body language. The staff takes care of censorship of mail. There’s lots of pressure on the inside – frustration, anger, and pain.”

He keeps pacing like a caged lion, coffee cup glued to his hand. His voice, his diatribe, sound like a dull drone.

“Avoid any physical contact with inmates. We recommend you keep a distance of four feet. This is for your own safety . . .”

I notice the doodle I’m drawing in my journal has started to tear through to the desk. I’m thinking, “How can we NOT touch each other? How can we be talking about this craziness when people are dying in a war?”

“The prison was made for 300,” he drones on. “There are regular counts in the rooms, several each day and night, plus census counts.

“Here’s what to dial in case of emergency. Please understand that we have a policy of not dealing with hostages, period, in the federal system. If you’re in trouble, take the phone off the hook, or dial 222. Inmates are aware of this . . .”

He is opening a box full of contraband that has been confiscated in the prison, showing and explaining each item to us. There is a ballpoint pen that has been rigged up to be a tattooing pen. There’s a nasty looking piece of wood with several rows of thumbtacks carefully taped on, business side out. He explains that women like to scar each other’s faces. He holds up a garrote and a homemade shiv or knife made from a file. He shows us handkerchiefs and T-shirts with elaborate designs drawn with a pen, supposedly evidence of gangs. After each item, the guard leans towards us and confides, “And a WOMAN made this.”

He passes the items among us for our examination. I am struck by the ingenuity, cleverness and patient artistry of each creation. If only this creativity could be redirected. “And a woman made this,” indeed.

It is time for a break. Most folks head up to the coffee, donuts and TV to watch the war. I step outside on the porch for some air and to let some steam come out my ears. I try to sort what I’ve heard into two piles: information and recommendations that seem valid and useful, and that by which I cannot abide, like the rule of not touching. My work is BASED on touching. I’m ranting to myself when I overhear two Christian volunteers also on the porch, one saying to the other, “I always hug them too.”

I smile. Maybe I’m not so alone.

The Power of a Gentle Touch

Henry and I had had a long day working in the prison. We were waiting for Terry to get through a large stack of medical files and to make sense of her desk, always her final task at the end of each long day. Suddenly we heard a commotion down the hall and footsteps striding down the corridor towards the open office door.

Looking up, we saw the captain's face peer into the room and hesitate when he saw Henry and me.

As the captain stared at us, we could hear down the corridor the tightly controlled voices of several guards and the high-pitched hysterical voice of a woman yelling obscenities and snapping, "Get your hands off me! Leave me alone! You're hurting me! My lawyer's gonna hear about this!"

The captain addressed himself to Terry. "Doc, we're moving an inmate from SHU into the small room down the hall so we can do a suicide watch."

She looked up briefly from her charts and nodded. Looking at both of us one more time, the captain spun on his heel and left.

Henry and I glanced at each other, surprised that, despite being volunteers, we were apparently being allowed to stay and witness what was happening down the hall.

Terry dove deep into her charts as if she were pulling up an insulating wall around herself. But there was no way Henry or I could ignore the woman's yells, the scuffling of feet, the unfolding drama of securing a very uncooperative prisoner into the suicide watch room.

I couldn't resist looking and did so as unobtrusively as possible through the door jam for the next forty-five minutes. There were six or seven guards, mostly white and male, wearing helmets with plastic face shields, heavy boots and dark blue uniforms. The female inmate was a thin, haggard African American, wearing rubber sandals and dressed in the one-piece orange jumpsuit that SHU (Segregated Housing Unit) inmates wear. She was being released from her wrist shackles and locked into a small room normally used by medical staff as a quiet room for inmates. It was equipped with a mattress and pillow on a single bed frame and open blinds on the window. One guard held a video camera to the window in order to record the process of transferring the inmate into the room. It was mainly into this camera that the prisoner addressed her grievances.

As soon as the guards succeeded in locking the door behind her, the woman pulled the blinds closed on the window. Realizing that the room was not properly prepared for a suicide watch, the guards became upset. Now they couldn't see what she was doing, much less video her. Behind the closed blinds, we could all hear the woman unleash her fury inside the room. There were screams of anger, the thump of the pillow slamming against the door and the sickening sound of her body hitting the wall. The guards had to hustle to unlock the door and secure the room. They barged in, removed the blinds and dragged the mattress outside while pillow feathers floated down the hall.

Once the door was locked again, the guards removed their heavy equipment and began to go back to their duties, leaving one white female guard with the video camera to take the first post of the suicide watch. The captain and another officer returned briefly to check on the situation. They paused before turning to leave, listening to the inmate yelling and shrieking. We heard one joke to the other, "I'll bet this woman won't last another hour before she tires out and quits."

For a long time we listened to the woman venting her anger, frustration and grief, her voice sometimes rising in strength, sometimes tiring and fading. For a while, the female guard lectured her tediously about how she had brought all this trouble on herself. I felt glad when there was finally a lull between them.

Suddenly there was the sound of glass breaking. The prisoner had smashed the ceiling light fixture. The guard began talking fast through the door, ordering her to stop or she'd hurt herself. She radioed for help. Soon the back door opened to another barrage of guards busily replacing their helmets and face guards and fishing for the key. Standing in a huddle, they discussed who would seize and control which arm and which leg and who would put the soft restraints on her wrists. When they were sufficiently organized, the door to the room was opened. The guards dashed inside and the woman screamed anew. Someone yelled for a broom while the others angrily chastised the woman. One guard emerged into the hallway with a disgusted look on his face because the woman had spat on him.

As soon as we heard someone say that the woman was cut and bleeding. Terry was up from her desk, fishing for bandages and antiseptic and halfway down the hall. Being a small woman, she was overshadowed by the big, burly guards. But somehow her quiet voice cut through the chaos. "Have you been cut and hurt? Could I see? Could I clean it up and put a bandage on it?"

The woman answered, "Yes, please." Thank you."

All the guards backed off and watched. We breathed in a moment of peace.

Bandaged, the woman was once again locked in the room, but most of the guards hovered around to make sure nothing else would happen. Terry returned to her charts. Then we heard the front door to the hallway open and saw a small blond female guard walking to the room. She said something quietly to the guards and then addressed the woman directly, introducing herself and calling her by her first name.

"Yvonne, I need you to listen to me. I need your help and cooperation. I heard you got cut and I'm concerned there might still be some broken glass in there. Have you got your flip-flops on? I want to make sure you don't cut your feet."

The guard paused for a moment. "Yvonne, I want to open the door and make sure you're OK, but I need you to agree that you'll help me and cooperate. I want to take you back to SHU and I want you to go quietly. What do you think?"

We heard the woman urgently say, "I don't want any of them men guards to rough handle me."

The blond guard responded, "If you cooperate with me and stay quiet, I promise I won't let any of the men guards touch you."

There was a pause, and then we heard a quiet, "OK."

The blond guard opened the door, handed the prisoner a fresh pair of flip-flops, took her arm by the elbow and, without any words, escorted her out the back door.

Henry and I looked at each other with tears in our eyes and Terry looked up from her last chart. We had witnessed something with far more impact than brute force: the power of a gentle touch.

Chapter 8

Letting in a Breeze

*“the door is locked and this window will not open though it does yield light.
the breeze plays with limbs and leaves i cannot touch.
my eyes reach through this glass pane:
I wait.”*

one of the women prisoners



“Black Madonna”

desert ironwood, 11” tall, 1996

photograph by Charles Bleak

Many images of the ancient Goddess, like the Black Madonna, have survived the domination of patriarchal religions, giving solace and refuge as they remind us of deeper and older ways of knowing. The cracking and wrinkling of desert ironwood, which grows very slowly and densely in order to survive the harshness of the desert, lends itself to the cracking and wrinkling of an old wise face.

You Don't Mean Love Your Enemies

One day in stress group we talked about the purposes and practical uses of meditation, especially in prison. Stress reduction, we all agreed, was a major benefit of meditation practice.

Sheila asked, "Is it really a good way to clean karma?"

There were several nods, but Josefina looked puzzled. "You mean thinking positive thoughts? Is that cleaning karma?"

"I think it's more than that," I began to explain. "It also means being willing to complete unfinished business with people and situations you know you are holding on to and carrying forward in your life. It means looking honestly at the negative repercussions that are created. It might also mean forgiving somebody, letting someone go."

Natasha burst out in her thick accent, "You mean loving your enemy? That's crazy, impossible. Love NEVER works. I'll NEVER forgive those ASSHOLES!"

In my four years working in the prison, there was always someone like Natasha in stress group, someone ready to take offense and bristling for a fight, someone with a permanent scowl twisting her once pretty face. After initially reacting defensively to 'Tasha's disruptive and prickly persona, I now felt that working with her could be enjoyable and very instructive to me. Most of the time she had such a head of steam that I could see and hear her coming from way around the bend. All I had to do was get out of her way and validate her point of view. With no one to fight or push against, she would sputter and stall. That was the opportune moment to give her a gentle nudge.

Right then she was hotly adamant. "It's IMPOSSIBLE to forgive ANYONE who is an ASSHOLE! I don't care if they're guards, fellow prisoners or co-defendants!"

I said, "Fine. But is there any way you can move just a little ways towards neutral?"

She shook her head and said nothing.

I went on, hoping to find a crack. "In some meditation traditions, we sit down and light a candle as a way of sending a small blessing to someone we dislike, or have trouble with, or regard as an enemy. It's not an easy thing to do, but it can be very powerful. You have to be honest with yourself and not forgive someone when it's not true, but be willing to keep working with it."

Natasha still shook her head and would not look at me.

I decided to temper my point. "One could light the candle and then blow it out right away."

A little smile crept over her face.

You Are Not Your Feelings

During a time when there were many transfers to other prisons, I sat listening to a woman who was angry about having to return to a prison where she had already spent two and a half years. This woman, who had adopted the Native American religion while in prison, said, "There are only two good sacred spots within that compound. One is by an old tree, the other by the library. I dread going back there.

It's impossible to get grounded there. It's a bad place, full of energy drains."

A lot of women in the group resonated. They told me they had heard that this time about seventy-five women were being shipped out.

"How do they actually ship you?" I asked.

Carla began. "The women either go en masse on a plane, all handcuffed and shackled, or they are shipped singly or in small groups."

Sylvia continued. "It's called being 'hopskotchd.' They take you all over the country in small planes where you spend nights and even months in county jails where you're treated with contempt. They 'forget' your medications and it is practically impossible to stay in contact with family, friends or lawyers."

The women nodded in grim recognition. They were upset about any transfers, whether of friends or themselves. They had been through this too many times before.

After a while it seemed that enough venting had gone on. I suggested that we sit and focus on our breathing. Gradually everyone in the room began to soften and cool down and connect again with the earth. And with something bigger.

We all had different names for it. The Big Picture. Great Spirit. Creator. God. Goddess. Allah. Life Force. It didn't matter what we called it. What we all noticed, time and time again, was that when we connected to this big quiet place, it was possible to remind ourselves that our usual definition of ourselves was not sufficient. We weren't really our thoughts or feelings or fears or anger or pain. We weren't really our personalities or even our stories. We encompassed all of that, but still we were much, much more. In that big quiet place there was peace, space, perspective, solace, and the wherewithal to stretch out of old skins, to survive, to grow.

Going to the Beach

Over a weekend, Henry and I took a trip to the ocean in order to recharge our batteries. We walked for miles, listening to the crashing waves. I found myself fascinated with the bits of shells, brightly colored stones and sand dollars strewn under our feet. We spent a long time looking and gathering a few in our pockets. I remember thinking, "I want to bring these sea treasures to the women in prison."

A few months later while rummaging around at home, I found all those shells, stones and sand dollars. I decided to put them in the pockets of some baggy pants and take my chances as to whether I could get them through the gate. (As volunteers we were always thoroughly inspected at the prison gate for metal, money or obvious contraband. But sometimes the inspection procedures were followed tightly, and sometimes they were more relaxed. I never brought in anything more controversial than shells or stones, but there were times when I probably could have.) This time I was not asked to empty my pockets, so I went through the gate and proceeded to my long-term stress group.

I knew I wanted to give each woman a shell or stone, but I didn't exactly know how that was going to happen. Teaching the way I do, I often rely on intuition and clues from the outside, and pray that the appropriate words and actions will come forth when they are needed. I often find myself not knowing how I'm going to get from here to there.

As we were going through the weather report, one woman sighed wistfully and said, “Lately I’ve been feeling so closed in and claustrophobic. Couldn’t you arrange to take us on a field trip?”

Ah, just so. I had my clue. We could all go on an *internal* field trip. To the beach! They seemed delighted with the idea.

I asked them to lie down on their backs with their feet in the center like spokes in a wheel, and close their eyes. It seemed right that we start with a visualization of the beach, but I wanted it to be more than visual. First I asked them to imagine they were packing warm sand under the high places in their bodies, the places not touching the floor, the places that needed supporting. The sand could be moist, dry, black, white, pebbly, shelly, fine, coarse – whatever they wanted. They could have their bodies partly touching the water. The waves could be crashing or gently lapping. There could be gull sounds, even sea lions. I mimicked the sound of a sea lion and drew a chorus of giggles.

As the dimension of sound came more and more into our “visualization,” I began to softly jiggle the shells and stones in my pockets. Then I put them inside my hat and shook and rattled them more loudly. I saw smiles wash over their faces. One by one, I placed the hat down on their bellies and invited them to reach inside without looking and take out a shell or stone.

“Consider that these shells and stones have power,” I improvised. “They certainly have the power of the ocean. Perhaps they also have the power to give you something you want, or take away something you don’t want. Perhaps they have the power to heal and ease pain, or to teach and guide. Take some time to tune into your object and your body, and, when you’re ready, put the power object on the part of your body that needs the most attention.”

Jazmin put a shell in her navel. Maria placed a pebble on her forehead. Julia put a stone between her toes. Sylvia put a sand dollar over her heart.

“Consider the source of your object,” I continued. “Consider the creature that made the shell, and the forces that shaped it or broke it and polished it and brought it to the beach where I could find it and bring it here to you. I wonder if each of us has inside of us qualities of sea creatures or shells or stones. I wonder if parts of us have been broken, reshaped and polished. How far have we traveled to come to be where we are now?”

For a while we were all silent, basking at the beach. Then, checking my watch, I realized I needed to bring them back, but I wasn’t sure how to do it. Noticing that it had gotten colder in the room, I decided to use the chill as an incentive.

“Brrrr, “ I said, “ The sun is going down and it’s time to go back home. Time to pack up your stuff and dust the sand off. Let’s gradually bring ourselves back into the room.”

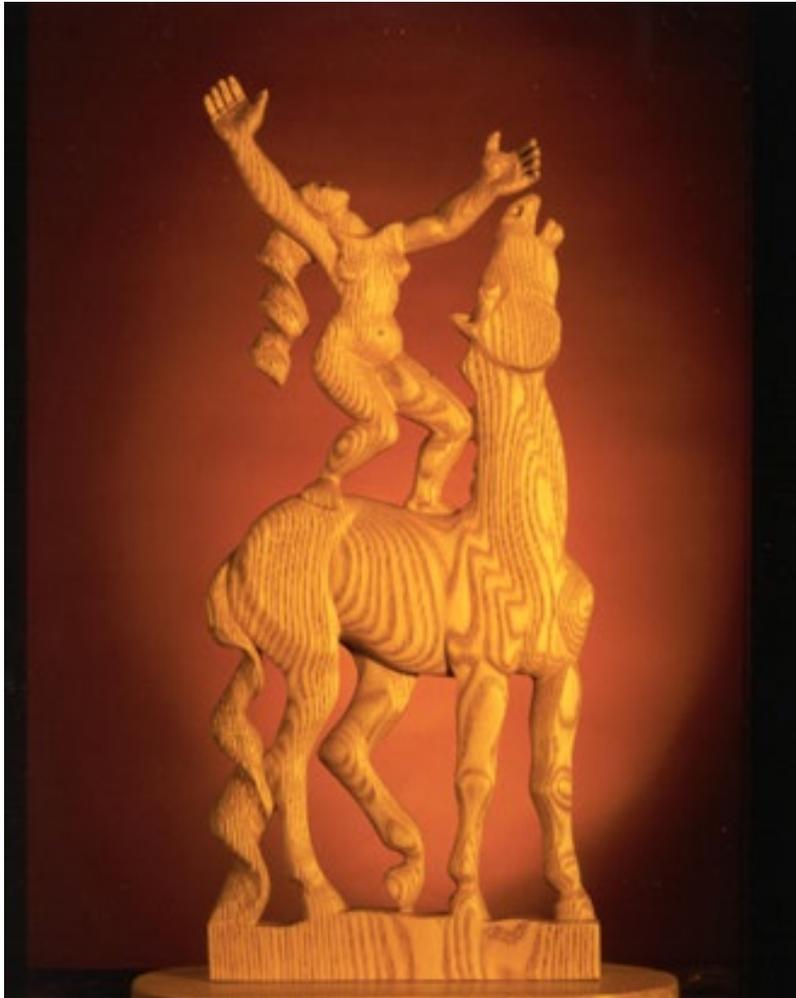
Slowly the women opened their eyes and sat upright. They looked with delight at their shells and stones. They were thrilled when I said they were theirs to keep.

Chapter 9

A Rock and a Hard Place

“Freedom’s just another word for nothing left to lose. . .”

Kris Kristofferson



“Calling Down the Moon”

ash wood, 22” tall, 1997

photograph by Ken W. Hall

At a certain point in my life I realized that I was not in control of it. Probably never had been. “Being in control” did not seem possible without being heavy-handed and, well, controlling. A fluid, dynamic, ever-changing balancing act was much more appealing, more practical and, in the end, more attainable. Like this woman balancing atop her horse. No bridles or heavy bits. Not even a saddle. Just her balance and her connection to self, to beast and to spirit.

Lee Manacled to a Hospital Bed – excerpts from my prison journal

I found out today that Lee has lung cancer. Her family has a history of it. Her sister just died of it. Right now she's out in the local hospital. Terry says she has a prognosis of less than a year, which, if luck holds out, might mean she's eligible for a compassionate release from prison.

Where were the warning signs? Now we can see things in retrospect, like a cough Lee thought was the flu, and the recent difficulty she's had bending over to tie her shoes. She was still exercising, still feeling OK when all of a sudden there's a lot of fluid in her lung. Terry said she immediately thought of cancer. Pneumonia would have had other symptoms.

Terry says some of Lee's prison friends have been saying to her that they've been dreaming of seeing her free within the year. Now we can say, great, but at what cost?

I hold on to hope. Maybe freedom, the warmth of her family, is what's needed for health, for turning the cancer around. But if she were to get a compassionate release and didn't die, does that mean she would have to go back to prison? Catch 22? Get terminal cancer and you'll be released?

What about the Buddhist view? We all have to die. This is what life is about. Accept, it, open to it. Open to the whole experience. Open to life, to dying and to death. Live it all as fully, mindfully, joyfully and compassionately as possible. What else is there to do? Love your life. Live your love. Live in the truth. Do what you have to do. Stay present. Stay grounded. Forgive yourself. Pick your battles carefully. But you cannot, in the end, beat death . . .

What would I do with a similar prognosis? . . .

We went to see Lee in the local hospital after prison yesterday. I had been told there would be armed guards sitting with her and that she'd be manacled to the bed by the ankle, but I didn't realize how upsetting and disturbing it would be to actually see that. IV tubes were hooked into her wrist while a big suction tube drained her lungs. She got morphine from time to time, muddying the sparkle of her deep brown eyes.

Her cheerfulness seemed forced, strained. Lee always did like to keep things moving, but this was beyond her usual amperage. Hoping to drop down a little deeper, I asked if she'd like a foot rub. At her nod I sat down awkwardly on the bed and grabbed her foot in its pink sock, the one with the manacle. On the surface I was gently massaging her foot. What I was really doing was trying to understand that manacle. I didn't dare touch it, or mention it. I didn't even know if it was OK to look at the guards.

They were nice enough, a man and a woman who listened to our conversation and laughed at the appropriate places and kept an eye on all of us the whole time. Two people with good pay and job security.

Lee, Terry and I talked of the cancer: where it was, what it was doing, how it showed up or didn't on the tests, what to expect, what kind of attitude to have, what

kind of miracle to create, how it affected her mother, older sister, younger sister, aunt, daughter. All our talking sounded very practical.

We talked about how the news of her cancer was hitting the prison yard: how the Catholic sister had given a prayer service, how everyone was sending their blessings, how Lee should prepare for an onslaught when she returned. (I thought of what else I had heard: how her memorial service was being planned, how her roomy had had to deal with women shouting across the yard, "How long has she got to live? Where should I send flowers?")

We talked about the prospects of compassionate release: how the Warden was in favor of it, how her short prognosis made it possible, how the paperwork was underway.

It was almost time to go. I had run out of foot to massage. The tubes were getting to me, the pumped up optimism, the irony, the guards silently watching, the manacle, the slightly glazed look in her eyes.

She asked for a back rub. We asked the guards for permission. I moved into a better position, careful not to step on the tube of yellow liquid leading from some mysterious hole in her body to a strange container on the floor. I felt the eyes of the guards on my back. Her back felt like wood, cement, a logjam, bars.

I tried to stay grounded, let the tension in the room go, just trust my hands. Lee chattered away, holding the very muscles I was working on in order to sit up, stay positive, keep her hopes up. There was no way those muscles were going to let go.

I hung in there, hoping something useful was being transmitted, if nothing else than the caring touch of skin on warm skin. Maybe it was enough that at least for a moment, the guards could not see everything. There was a tiny corner of privacy, intimacy, contact.

At last my fingers found a place that made Lee stop and notice, a charged point. She winced and said, "No, not there."

I backed off, respectful but curious. "What's in there?"

"Oh, maybe that's where I got a shot."

I wondered.

How is it we cannot know that something as major as cancer is going on in our bodies? Shouldn't we feel something? Shouldn't our dreams tell us something? Shouldn't our friends know what's going on with us? Shouldn't we be able to tell the difference between the flu and a lung filling up with cancerous cells?

Does the fact that most of the female members of her family died of cancer necessarily mean a death sentence for her? For her daughter?

What about all the members of my family who have died of cancer?

Shouldn't there be answers to all these questions?

I saw Lee again yesterday for bodywork. She's back in the prison, in pain and nauseated from coming down off a week or two of morphine. Seems like if you

take pain medication it just delays feeling the pain you would have felt without it. Not sure it's worth it.

She kept saying, "This is not my body. I want my body back."

Since her body hurt so much, we agreed to just work with her breathing. She nervously chattered, "I'm not cute and popular anymore. My body looks terrible."

I kept steering her back to her breath and holding the trashcan when she felt like puking. No, she did not look so great. But dignified and willing to go through every nuance of this gruesome experience? Yes, absolutely.

So many questions yesterday in group. How do you treat someone you know is dying?

Jazmin: "Why should I treat her any different than I did before? Why cozy up to her now when we weren't that close before? That feels phony."

Sheila: "I'm going to treat her like I've always treated her, like she's alive. Not anything special just because she's dying."

Maria: "We've got an 'assembly line' of support to wash her sheets and clothes, sign up for the washing machine at 5:30 AM, change the dressing on her shunt wound where the lung cavity was drained, wheel her around, help her up the stairs, etc."

Everyone knows all too well that if she doesn't get better, or if she gets sicker, she'll be sent off to another prison, this time a medical facility. And the compassionate release? The women say, "That kind of paperwork is always too slow. It could easily be too late."

Meanwhile Lee's cellie Bonnie is being shipped out to another prison very soon. So Serafina will become Lee's roomy, which means Maria will have to find another roomy. I get the feeling of an amazing organization forming itself and I think, this is what women are good at. Not just healing, nurturing, comforting and care taking, but also organizing . . .

How to Get Through the Barnyard

In one of my bodywork sessions I worked on Jane, a new prisoner whom I'd never met. She was struggling with breast cancer. She spilled lots of tears, but there also seemed to be unacknowledged anger behind those tears. I asked her to write down some things she was angry about on a piece of paper. Saying she wasn't angry, she began to write some words. Before I could read them, she scribbled them out so they were black, practically going through the paper. I pointed out to her that those scribbles surely looked like anger. She had to laugh.

When I asked what she was angry about, she said, "I'm angry at the women on the compound for talking about me behind my back. I'm angry that my tears are leaking out. I'm angry that I don't have the same kind of control I'm used to."

When I asked her what kind of pictures she had about anger, she replied, "People yelling at each other, being mean to each other. I'm afraid that if I let myself feel my anger, I'll get stuck in it."

It was hard for her to see how feeling her anger could be useful when so much of her experience of anger was its damaging effect.

We talked about the image of the barnyard and the barn. "In order to get to the haven of the barn," I explained, "we must go through the muck of the barnyard. As much as we'd like to, we can't fly over or avoid the barnyard. In the barnyard there are hard feelings to cop to, feel, or accept. There's grief, betrayal, depression, confusion. There's fear, panic, tears, loss of control, anger. There's aloneness and numbness."

Jane was nodding her head. The barnyard was not hard to recognize.

"But in the barn," I continued, "There's refuge, shelter, warmth, acceptance. There's serenity and peace. In order to get to the safety of the barn, can you find a way to move through the muck – in this case that's your anger - without getting stuck in it?"

She looked at me skeptically, but said she'd be willing to think on it. We agreed to work again next week and see what's next.

Margarita and her Girlfriend

Margarita had deep cocoa skin and wide eyes, sometimes sweet, sometimes seductive. Terry had put her in the long-term stress group because she was having a really tough time dealing with her special problem. Margarita was HIV positive.

This was a secret on the compound. No one knew except for Terry, Margarita's girlfriend and perhaps a very few trusted friends. If word got out, Margarita would be mincemeat. As it was, a cloud of wariness, suspicion and distrust followed her. Alone during a bodywork consultation or sometimes in the group, the sun might break through for a moment, showing a glimpse of someone inside holding out for hope, trust and love. She was hungry to learn a way to work with her inner self, her imagination, her thoughts and her body in order to heal herself. Despite my few words in Spanish and her poor English, we found a way to connect.

About this same time the holistic health program was able to help arrange for two volunteers to come to prison to talk about AIDS and safe sex for women. Their workshops were informative and very well attended.

The next time I was scheduled to see Margarita for bodywork, Terry told me that she was in the SHU, otherwise known as the hole. Nevertheless, Terry was able to arrange to have her brought to her office for the session.

Margarita was brought in late, so I had little time to work. I asked the guard to come back in a half hour. Margarita was wearing a bright orange jumpsuit and her hands were cuffed in front of her body. I had never worked on someone in handcuffs before. She hopped up on the doctor's examining table that served as my bodywork table, and I began to work. The next thing I knew she had slipped off the handcuffs with a grin.

After a little while we were startled by a knock on the door. The guard had returned a good ten minutes early. Luckily I was on the door side of the table and had enough sense to move toward the opening door. Margarita slipped her handcuffs back on, unnoticed, and was escorted back to SHU.

Later I asked Terry how Margarita had come to be in the hole. She said it had to do with getting “snitched off” for making a cocaine deal inside the prison. Apparently she had needed the money to pay her lawyer.

(The terms “snitching,” getting “snitched off,” “ratting,” being “ratted on,” “singing,” or being a stool pigeon refer to the prisoners’ code which universally condemns informants. Someone known to snitch could expect retribution. The prison dealt with this issue by locking up everyone concerned.)

Some time passed before my last session with Margarita, who was by then back in the general prison population. We talked about a lot of things, but when she mentioned that she had slapped her girlfriend around, red lights went off in my head. She had gotten physical with her girlfriend because they had had an argument about safe sex. Speaking in her faltering English, she told me they had both gone to the safe sex workshop but had apparently heard different advice. Margarita was convinced that how they were handling the fact that she was HIV positive, while her girlfriend was negative, was all cool and fine. Her girlfriend felt otherwise and had told Margarita that she wanted to end the relationship. Margarita said that this had freaked her out so much that she had gotten violent.

I felt compelled to talk with her about her temper and how to blow off steam in ways that don’t hurt other people, especially the people we care about. We talked about short fuses and how to train ourselves to take some time to cool out in order to allow other choices to emerge. It seemed like a good talk, and Margarita promised she would work on it.

But soon after this, I found out from Terry that not only Margarita, but also her girlfriend and a third woman, were all in the hole. Margarita would probably be shipped out to another prison as a consequence of her repeated offenses. This time, she had kicked her girlfriend in the shin with her steel-toed boots, splintering the fibula bone. The third woman had taken a bad fall and hurt her back while trying to break up the fight. Since this woman had also reported the incident to the guards, she was now seen as a snitch and would be in danger from the other prisoners, especially Margarita’s friends. The safest place for all three, therefore, was in the hole.

Soon after, Margarita was sent to another prison and I never saw her again.

Seize the Day

"I don't really know why I care so much. I just have something inside me that tells me that there is a problem, and I have got to do something about it. I think that is what I would call the God in me.

All of us have a God in us, and that God is the spirit that unites all life, everything that is on this planet. It must be this voice that is telling me to do something, and I am sure it's the same voice that is speaking to everybody on this planet - at least everybody who seems to be concerned about the fate of the world, the fate of this planet."

Wangari Maathai



"Forbidden Prayer Circle"

machine pieced, hand appliquéd, embroidered and quilted cotton
77" by 70", 1997

photograph by Charles Bleak

As told in the following story, "Somebody to Love," this large quilt was inspired by an impromptu prayer circle the women prisoners held when they heard that my mother had suffered a major stroke.

Bringing Flowers to Prison

One spring morning in the early days of my work at the prison, I got an impulse to bring twenty big, showy flowers to give to each of the members of the long-term stress group. I raided my mother's rose garden and went to the florist for the rest, selecting gladiolas, asters, irises, giant daisies and a bird of paradise. I put them in a vase with water. With so many colors and varieties, I felt very special walking up to the guardhouse.

But the entrance guard eyed my flowers suspiciously and said, "I hope you aren't planning to bring those inside. There's nothing on your visit sheet about flowers."

"Oh," I said, a bit flustered, "I didn't realize flowers had to be on the visit sheet. I've brought flowers in before and it wasn't a problem."

"No, I'm sorry," the guard replied. "I hate to be the one to tell you, but you can't bring those in. There's no way I can shake down those flowers."

"Oh, I don't mind taking them out of the vase and pouring out the water so you can see that they're all right," I said, searching for a way to blend with the guard. "Maybe if you'd just call the doctor down here, I'm sure she can clear this up."

But just then, another guard came in and told everyone in the waiting room that they would have to go outside to the flagpole because a prisoner was going to be brought through and the armory would be open.

I had seen this before. When a prisoner was transported, she was handcuffed, hobbled and shackled to a chain around her waist and escorted by armed guards, rifles at the ready. Any volunteers or visitors waiting for clearance in the guardhouse had to be removed from the building and stand at least fifty yards away.

Waiting out by the flagpole, I watched the prisoner being loaded into a big van. Then I saw Terry waiting inside the guardhouse. Pretty soon she walked outside to wave me in. The coast was clear. When I told her about the flowers, she said, "No problem. I handled it."

The women in the stress group loved our fragrant, colorful centerpiece and got a big kick out of hearing how hard it was to bring those flowers in. "Now you know a little more what it's like for us," they told me. "It's like they make you feel like everything you do is bad or suspicious." I had to agree.

No one felt like writing in their journals because they had had to wait so long for us to get in. After a brief weather report, I impulsively suggested that the group lift each woman up into the air. I was afraid it would be a little too kooky and weird, but it seemed a good way to focus the group and change the energy, perhaps even lift it (so to speak).

Lee volunteered. We all gathered around her. I asked if it was all right for the rest of us to touch and lift her. I asked the group to link up with each other and to stay linked throughout the process so we could feel what was happening and know when to lift. We took a moment to settle in and then slowly placed our hands underneath her shoulders, back, hips, knees, feet, and head. We took a long, long time to find a way to lift her. Meanwhile I had lots of doubt running through my mind. I realized I had to shut up and let the women take over and show me the way. And they did. We lifted Lee and rocked her and gently brought her back down. Lying on

the floor and looking up at us, she seemed to be in an “Oh, Wow,” space. “I feel so weird,” she laughed.

Next was Jazmin, big, big Jazmin. She said she weighed 197 pounds. Couldn’t be that much, I thought. I went through a lot more doubt and our lifting was awkward and lopsided, but we did it. Later we talked about the doubt all of us had felt and worked through, including Jaz.

Next Alicia volunteered, giggling. But after she laid down on the floor, it was obvious to us all that it was too hard for her be surrounded and touched. Her body went through involuntary recoils and contractions of fear, especially in the muscles of her neck. I coached her to breathe and asked her friends to speak to her in Spanish. Gradually she relaxed again, stretched out her legs and let us touch her. It still seemed scary for her, but she breathed with it and allowed us to be with her. This part seemed good.

But the lifting was no go and I called it quits. Alicia was beginning to cry. I asked her to breathe, stroked her head and whispered, “Is there someone in the group you’d feel comfortable cuddling with?” She immediately went to Maria who held and rocked her and praised her for crying. The whole group watched in stillness, each woman touched deeply.

Alicia came out of it first with a smile and then with an apology. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry.” We responded, “It’s OK. You did fine. There’s nothing to be sorry about.”

But Alicia was not convinced. Jazmin was crying too. So once again we talked about tears. Even though our group felt a hundred times safer than the rest of prison, it was still very hard for them to let their tears out without shame or fear.

In our work together, the women had slowly begun to realize that this “stress management” business often catalyzed unexpected, and sometimes difficult, feelings and insights. In the early days, everyone in the group was thrilled to have even a little bit of tension eased. They relished learning new skills. They learned to take refuge in the safety and steadiness of our circle. But as we went deeper, some of the vigilance locked up in tight muscles and guarded postures was softened and cracked open. Feelings, whether happy or sad, joyful or mad, content or afraid, began to emerge as our bodies – our containers – began to regain flexibility and permeability. What was difficult to accept was that freeing our bodies meant freeing up ALL our feelings. We didn’t get to select which ones to feel, discarding the difficult and uncomfortable in favor of the easy and pleasurable.

Each woman’s cultural context was in the background of our work. What were the guiding beliefs, expectations and constraints each had grown up with in her culture and family? Was emotional expression accepted or prohibited, rewarded or punished? Was the private language of the body – intuition, dreams, physical sensations, gut feelings – valued, honored and listened to, or was it overridden, ridiculed and denied? Did we learn to look for answers outside of ourselves, or inside? Did our cultures and families teach us to trust ourselves?

In the foreground of our work was the forbidding authoritarian atmosphere of prison culture, one in which feelings, emotions and physical needs for love, sex or sensuality were feared, avoided, suppressed, hidden, prohibited and punished.

We began to see that in order to go further in our work together, we would be trailblazers at least and rebels at most, acting in defiance of the constraints of the dominating culture. The women sobered as they gradually came to realize that this

inner journey meant coming to grips with basic aloneness. Each flower blooms alone in her own time. There is no one but each woman herself who can give the answers she seeks, the solace she needs, the balm that soothes, the love that will never cease.

Back in our group, sitting in silence, looking at the vase of beautiful spring flowers and feeling the bonds of our circle strengthen, I once again gave thanks for this community of amazing blooming women.

At the end of group, I asked Terry, "Would it be all right to let each woman take a flower?"

But she said, "No, I've pushed the line enough for one day."

Bernice jumped right in and asked, "Would you mind leaving the bouquet for the last day of Ramadan? All the Muslim women on the compound are celebrating it this evening."

I glanced at Terry for her advice, and after a moment of hesitation, she grinned and nodded.

Turning to Bernice, I said, "Please make sure to take good care of the vase. I'll pick it up next week."

After a moment I added, "But, as to what becomes of the flowers after tonight, well, that's beyond my control, isn't it?"

Bernice smiled and nodded.

Liberating Food

One day in stress management group, the women loosened up and told me stories about stealing food from the prison kitchen.

"Back in the days when the women were allowed to wear dresses," Sylvia recalled, "there was one large woman who always wore great big muumuus. She would come back from the kitchen with loaves of bread tucked under her arms and slabs of cheese stuffed down her underwear. And sometimes she would hang little bags inside her dress, and come back with these full of goodies too."

Lila said, "One time I put a cube of butter wrapped in paper down my bra. But on my way outside, I ran into my boss who wanted to talk to me about something concerning work. It was hot that day, and pretty soon the butter was melting, and there was nothing I could do about it."

Sheila said, "Many women regularly 'acquired' fruit from working in the kitchen to help make their hooch. They would add raisins or whatever was available to fruit juice and stash the jar in back of the dryers in the unit laundry rooms. Periodically the jars would have to be burped or else they'd explode."

"Once when I was new to prison, I slipped some raw eggs from the kitchen down my bra," Betty recalled.

(Judging by Betty's bra size, she probably got at least half a dozen down there without anyone blinking an eye.)

"But on my way out of the kitchen," she continued, "a guard carrying a tray bumped right into my chest and muttered under his breath, 'You've got to be faster than that.'"

Betty's Graduation

It was always traumatic when one of the "old-timers" left the prison, not only for the women she left behind, but for the woman herself. Although the prison staff did its best to help prepare those who were about to re-enter society, the pressures, stresses and fears of re-entry were daunting and sometimes overwhelming.

Betty was due to leave the prison next Friday, and the long-term stress group was having a difficult time handling it. Somehow we wanted to acknowledge her leave-taking, even celebrate it, but in such a way that no one would be stuffing her feelings, however mixed.

We came up with a two-part ritual: a graduation certificate and a birthing. First, on the finest paper the women were able to scrounge up, we all took turns writing in colorful markers all the qualities we wished to bestow upon Betty as she graduated from our stress group and from prison itself. We wished her patience, wisdom, good health, a great sex life, courage, and a good sense of humor. On top of the page, I wrote in my best handwriting, "This certifies that on this day, Betty has completed all requirements to graduate from the holistic health program and from the prison itself, etc."

But before we presented her with the certificate, we formed a birthing tunnel, which Betty had to crawl through. A dozen of us stood packed in tight, belly to butt, with our legs spread so that Betty could crawl between our legs. As she crawled, we groaned and moaned and cried and sighed, first squeezing her so she couldn't move and then pushing her forward and out. At last she happily emerged, full of hugs and smiles.

When the group sat down to talk, Betty shared, "It's funny, but physically going through this birth helps me see how being here in prison has been like being inside the womb. I know that sounds crazy because it's so awful here, but even so, in a strange way, it's also been safe and protected. Especially when I compare it with how scary it feels to be going out into the 'real' world. I want so badly to be with my family, but I'm so afraid to face them. What's really painful is to leave behind true and deep friends like all of you.

"Why isn't there a support group on the inside for prisoners who are due to leave soon? And why isn't there another support group on the outside for those who have just gotten out?" she asked.

Why, indeed.

Somebody to Love

During the four years I volunteered in prison, the compound was frequented by a number of feral cats who apparently had no trouble getting through the razor fence. These motley, feisty felines provoked mixed feelings among the women and especially the staff. But for those women who took the trouble to befriend them, the cats were a source of warm and furry comfort, affection and love.

The need to love and be loved cannot be overstated for us humans, but in prison, this need is denied, thwarted and beset with bureaucratic hoops and regulations. One has only to observe the visitor's room to see how painful it is for all concerned to be in the company of loved ones, but not be free to touch, relax, be

intimate or just be held. It is well documented that most incarcerated women are also mothers. They are lucky if their families take up the slack and care for their children. Luckier still if their families live nearby and have the wherewithal and patience to go through the ordeal of visiting. They are unlucky if their children live far away, and unluckier still if they have to give their children over to the authorities. In the stress group weather reports, the most common feelings or stories concerned children.

Such a flood of pent-up, dammed-up, sublimated love naturally sought an outlet. Those lucky cats.

Those wild, wary cats got tamed in a hurry, especially the kittens. They learned to come to soft calls and softer caresses and offers of carefully saved scraps of food. They learned to run when they heard the jingle of key chains and the tread of heavy shoes.

For many years the cats were unofficially tolerated by the staff, but only barely. The standoff changed with one of Terry's skillful memos to the administration. Citing the many scientific studies which show the increased health benefits resulting from physical contact with animals, she advocated convincingly that the prison adopt a compromise solution for a limited, neutered, vaccinated and regulated cat population. For a brief period the cats were officially sanctioned, complete with "kitty condos" and feeding stations, until one of the women brought a cat into her room for the night. The cat sprayed, the Warden freaked out and all the cats were rounded up and shipped out.

It was not only the cats who were loved. There were special flowerbeds that were babied and coddled along with certain trees and hills on the other side of the razor wire fence. There were moon-gazers and sun worshippers. There were those who carried special pebbles, touchstones that were loved and cherished. There were crushes on certain staff people and volunteers. There were love affairs shouted across the field to the men in the basketball courts of the detention center next door. And there were deep loves among the women themselves, loves that had to be doubly hidden.

But the strangest love I heard about was Jazmin with her pet spider. A little spider had spun her web in a windowsill near Jaz's bunk. Every day she checked to see what was in the spider's web, and whether she was resting or hiding or spinning. She made sure that her two roommates knew not to disturb the web. Every time the guards shook down the units looking for contraband, she worried that they would destroy the spider and her web. She spoke to it after the day was done and told it her troubles, and she greeted it each morning.

The day Jazmin told the stress group about her spider, the other women nodded matter-of-factly, telling stories of mice or birds or bugs they had befriended while in various jails or prisons, as if it were the most natural thing in the world to do. And perhaps it was.

In the time I was there in prison, I came to see that this need to love, to be loved and to spread love was, like the spider's web, a web the women were spinning, weaving and constantly repairing. The blessings of this love were not just for themselves or their families. In their prayers, thoughts and meditations, many of the women quite consciously sent their love out in a much wider circle to include their fellow sisters, the prison staff and the volunteers, as well as home to their communities, their friends and comrades, their nations.

The power of this love came home to me when I learned that on the day the women heard that my mother had had a massive stroke, they spontaneously formed a prayer circle. In the middle of the compound, in full sight and total defiance, they held hands and sent their love to my mother.

A number of rules with grave consequences were broken by this simple act and yet the women had not hesitated. Later, when I asked them why they had chanced it, one of them wryly quipped, "What could they do to us? Throw us in jail?"

I was stunned by the gesture of this prayer circle. Most of the women had never even met my mother. In fact, only a few had been briefly introduced when she had come out to the prison for a special volunteer appreciation event. Why then did the women take such a big risk for my mother, for me? What was it really about?

Looking for answers, I felt compelled to make a painting about it, but it wasn't enough. So I made a large quilt with multi-colored appliquéd figures holding hands in a circle. I composed a poem and embroidered it around the edges. It reads:

"Forbidden prayer circle
an unbreakable hoop
of incarcerated women
who defy the rules
to stand in silent vigil
saying a prayer for my mother
for their mothers
melding hands, hearts and spirits
radiating power
banishing impotence
wrenching themselves
from bone marrow grief
to broadcast a blessing
to all who would be healed"

Celebrations of Freedom

“Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us.

We ask ourselves, who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented and fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small doesn't serve the world. There's nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us: it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.”

Marianne Williamson

(spoken by Nelson Mandela in his 1994 Inaugural Speech)



Strutting My Stuff

koa wood, 22" tall, 1997

photograph by Ken W. Hall

When an image is strong for me, I'll often work with it in several media. This composite portrait of the women in my long-term stress group first came through as a pastel drawing, then a quilt, and then this carving.

Names Quilt

I was fortunate to have been working in the prison when almost forty panels of the AIDS Names Quilt were brought inside for an unfolding ceremony. This was the first time the traveling quilt had visited a women's prison, and the women had sewn three twelve-foot square panels to add to its vast collection.

For two seasons, members of the prison AIDS counseling and education club labored not only on the quilts, but on all the necessary communication and red tape-untangling in order to set up this historic occasion. Henry and I helped collect donated fabric and thread, and one day we worked with the seamstresses to show them what we knew about fabric painting and the process of appliqué. The panels the women made were raw, colorful and very personal. One panel depicted the plight of prisoners with AIDS. Another panel of appliquéd and stuffed animals was devoted to children orphaned by AIDS. The last was a patchwork of individual quilts honoring friends and family with AIDS.

On the day of the ceremony, several members of the holistic health program were among those who slowly and solemnly read from a seemingly endless list of names of those who have died of AIDS. During this chant, the women, dressed in khaki prison uniforms, formally presented nine quilt panels, laying them out on the floor of the "barn" like a huge nine-patch quilt.

(The barn was the prison's multi-purpose assembly area and gym. Many of the stress and creativity groups met there. Everyone called it the barn because it was a dark, cavernous, uninspired building.)

In stocking-ed feet, several women simultaneously approached each folded-up quilt in turn. With synchronized and deliberate movements, each quilt was methodically unfolded in a repeating pattern. When the quilt was entirely open, the women bent down in deep squats at the corners and edges and, with perfect timing, lifted the quilt up high over their heads. As it gently fell like a parachute, the women rotated a quarter turn and spread the quilt flat. With each unfolding, it looked as if the women were opening giant flowers and then gently arranging them on the floor.

With all nine panels on the floor and each wall covered with the rest of the panels, the barn was transformed into an explosion of passionate color and form. Prisoners, staff and visitors alike took off their shoes and walked slowly down the black cloth aisles to peer into private worlds stitched and painted - worlds of memories, pain, humor, rage, and throughout, a great love.

The Story of the Minicamp

For several years I was associated with Women's Alliance, a high-powered non-profit group of artists, thinkers, activists and teachers who promoted women's spirituality. Each year Women's Alliance put on a weeklong summer solstice celebration and camp in the mountains. During these camps I found myself talking, singing, dancing and crying about the women I knew in prison. Likewise, when back inside the prison, I found myself trying to bring the excitement, flavor and spirit of the camp back to the women. After showing a video of a previous camp to the women, they wistfully wondered, "I wish we could have a camp like that here."

Yes, why not?

Thus began a tremendous challenge to put this idea into reality and actually bring a day of celebrating women's spirituality inside the prison gates. Looking back, neither Terry nor I nor Women's Alliance could have known what it would take. Not only was it a logistical nightmare, but there were some prison staff who were dead-set against it and made life very difficult. The fact that we were able to pull it off at all is a triumph. Today, given how prisons are closing off to the outside and rededicating themselves to the punishment model of corrections, such an event would be an impossibility. How lucky we were that somehow there was an opening, and for one day in prison, magic happened.

Our name for the Minicamp was "The Spiritual Path of Imprisonment: The Quest for Inner Freedom."

The morning of the Minicamp started off windy, cold and bumpy. First of all, Terry, who was the lynchpin for the whole event, slept through her alarm. She was supposed to have picked me up, so we had to change plans to meet instead at the prison. The streets were pitch black at 5:45 AM and I had trouble finding the home of the first woman I had to pick up. (I hate being late.) We drove like crazy to meet the large group of outside women, some of whom carried musical instruments or video and audio equipment, waiting at the prison gate. Everyone had to have her visitor papers filled out correctly and her driver's license at the ready. We sorted through a squall of questions:

"No, you may not bring in your purse. Best to lock it in the trunk of your car."

"Yes, you may bring in a water bottle, but it must be marked down on the form."

"What, you forgot your driver's license? Aagh! No, no, don't drive back to get it. You haven't got a license on you, remember? Here, I'll drive."

So my day began and so it remained. The job of trouble-shooter for an event as big and complicated as the Minicamp was essential and never-ending. All day long, Terry and I passed each other on the run, cryptically telling each other about the next task. I would alert Terry to glitches or unforeseen needs with the visitors, and she would somehow fix the problem with the prison administration. She would tell me of changes in the rules or timing, and I would pass that on to all the visitors.

In order to make the prison administration happy, Terry had had to write a detailed script for the entire day. She had to line up a number of prison staff sympathetic to our vision and willing to volunteer all day as escorts for the visitors we were bringing inside. There were mandatory head counts several times a day, unavoidable interruptions that had to be built into the schedule. We had to make sure that those women who wished not to be videoed were clearly identified with red armbands. We had to remind the visitors that they could not wander off and had to stay with their escorts at all times. Hardest of all with such a large group, we had to stay on time.

Despite all the behind-the-scenes struggles and dramas, the guests, teachers, facilitators, performers, camera- and sound-women who came into prison, and especially the hundred incarcerated women who were allowed to participate, managed to create a breakthrough day which none of us will likely forget.

I remember the small cadre of Native American women fanning sage smoke with feather wands as they smudged each woman coming down the steps into the large outdoor covered arena. I remember the colorful decorations of paper, cloth, photographs and wind-blown banners festooning the stage and walls. The women had gotten Terry's permission to set up an altar which was full of figures I had carved, the same wooden sculptures which usually lived in Terry's office (many of which are also shown in this book). As the video crew was setting up miles of cords, the outside visitors gaped and exclaimed at being inside a prison, most for the first time, trying to absorb all they were seeing and feeling. The prisoners stood with arms folded across their chests, coolly checking out all the visitors, hiding their feelings, as usual. Yet we could see glimpses of their excitement, telegraphing that this day was going to be different.

When the opening ceremony finally got underway, Native American Kyos Featherdancing called in the four directions, a protection prayer was offered by author and storyteller Clarissa Pinkola Estés, and the Warden gave a welcoming speech. Then I remember little and lithe Ruth (Zap) Zaporah, an improvisational movement teacher and performer, leading the women in a long snaky line, weaving in and out, spiraling tight, then doubling back out into a circle again. Zap made faces and mimicked those she saw, encouraging the women to use gesture, movement and facial expressions to say whatever they were feeling. After ten minutes of her irrepressible mischief, the women began to laugh and crack jokes. They began to act silly, letting themselves hug each other as if they had not seen each other in ages, and cry openly even though there were staff standing around in the background, watching in silence.

After the performers and facilitators were introduced, the hundred women were split off into different pre-assigned morning and afternoon workshops. Jazz drummer Barbara Borden, assisted by Kyos, led a drumming workshop called "All Hearts Beating" in the outdoor arena with a dozen conga drums we had rented for the occasion. All day long, the prison echoed with the rhythm of the drums. In the chapel, Clarissa led a storytelling workshop called "Warming the Stone Child." Singers Rhiannon and Melanie Demore led an *a cappella* singing workshop in a modular classroom. Zap led improvisational movement and theater in the visiting room. In the craft room, teacher Norma Cordell and filmmaker Vivienne Verdon-Roe showed the women how to make ceremonial spirit faces with plaster bandages, paint and feathers. Later on, violinist India Cooke delighted the women with her music, as did Melanie singing and playing her flute. Vivienne helped teacher Margaret Pavel weave the day together as co-MCs. Our lunch was interspersed with music and improvisational theater and much laughter.

To close the day of workshops and ready ourselves for an evening of performance, we enacted a "breaking the chain" ceremony. During the day, each woman had written down on strips of construction paper those obstacles which she felt to be between herself and inner freedom. These strips were then fashioned into a long paper chain which the women now held as they stood in a large circle. One at a time, each woman spoke aloud that positive quality which most affirmed her quest for freedom. Then at the count of three, the entire chain was broken and ripped into shreds, to our cheers and cries.

In our evening performance, the singing group sang the song they had spent all day learning together. The improvisational group did improv of their life stories.

The drummers beat the drums with pent-up fury and passion. The spirit face-makers paraded and danced with their painted and feathered plaster masks. We all sang and danced to songs and chants of freedom.

As our special day came to an end, there were many hugs, tears and exuberantly expressed appreciations. The ones I most often heard were:

“Today, I wasn’t in prison.”

“I don’t think you realize how much Women’s Alliance coming here has meant to all of us.”

“Thank you. Please come back. Please don’t forget us.”

But, back behind the scenes, the logistical nightmare of the Minicamp continued. In the middle of our closing ceremony, Terry and I were abruptly informed that we had to pack up and vacate the prison much earlier than expected. This was a message no one wanted to hear or respond to. I remember fighting tears of frustration at having to literally pull the plug when yet another inmate grabbed me up in a big hug, saying, “Thank you for the happiest day I’ve had here.”

As the women were hurried off to their units for the evening head count, we stood, exhausted and drained, facing what looked to be an impossible task: all the outside personnel and their gear, the conga drums and other musical instruments, and the video and audio equipment had to be inventoried, packed and out of the gate by 9 PM. We were lucky to be blessed with the assistance of some very patient and understanding guards.

Later, the women wrote community thank you’s to Women’s Alliance and the Minicamp staff:

“You sang from your heart into my heart and deep into my soul. I cried the tears from deep down inside.”

“ . . . I have been programmed to hold my feelings in, but for one day my hurts, anger and frustrations came out, and they felt so much better out than in. . . ”

“Thank you for caring enough to share with us.”

“There was so much togetherness and bonding. The feeling of love and friendship was overwhelming.”

“This space is like a bubble of freedom.”

A Council on Racism and the Multicultural Festival

Over and over again, the greatest gifts the women in prison gave me during my work with them were the blessings and encouragement to stop holding back and to stop imprisoning myself in spirit, feeling and action. Over and over again, as if their years of incarceration had imbued them with finely tuned compasses, they pointed me towards freedom – freedom in my body, in my choices, in my art, in my thoughts, and in what I imagined to be possible. While my teaching was more of a practical earthy nature, such as techniques to center ourselves under intense pressure or nurture ourselves through loneliness and grief, their teaching was more about spirit – how to become less bound, less serious, less heavy, more daring.

With the women’s support, I began to make public statements about my commitment to not hold back anymore. Soon after (and not surprisingly), I began to have some powerful visions and “crazy” ideas. One of these had to do with no longer feeling OK with doing nothing about the constant background of racism in the

prison. I envisioned a “Council on Racism” composed of an Inside Council of inmates of all colors and cultures supported by a similarly diverse Outside Council of volunteers. This composite Council on Racism would be a meeting place to air grievances; share cultural differences; learn new ways to resolve conflict and communicate clearly; work on dismantling racism in all its forms; and, most of all, put our collective wisdom together as a force for healing, inspiration and unity. On the outside, I hoped I could draw upon the resources and dynamic members of Women’s Alliance, which was itself making a deeper commitment to diversity and multiculturalism. On the inside, Terry supported my idea (as she did most of my ideas, bless her). We wanted to have an inmate act as co-chair with me, and Terry agreed to recruit her.

I met Lavelle for the first time a few minutes before our first meeting of the Council. I was very nervous, but her imperturbability and honesty put me at ease. I showed her my proposed agenda and we sketched out how we might support each other in the meeting.

About thirty women came dribbling in, so I had to make my introduction twice, pausing after each phrase for a translation into Spanish. I spoke of my vision and encouraged the women to look inside to see where they were coming from and what they envisioned for the Council. As Lavelle and I worked through the agenda and the women began to brainstorm, it became evident that not only were they willing and ready to do something constructive about racism, but their vision of “inclusivity” was much broader than mine. They wanted to open the meeting to anyone who cared to come, including staff, with a specific invitation to the Warden. The African American women present made the point that we needed to include the right-wing white women, some of whom were members of the white Aryan Nation. Otherwise, they argued, we would just be selecting ourselves into yet another exclusive separate entity. I remember thinking, “WOW. That’s a level of courage, wisdom and maturity I didn’t expect to find.” I wasn’t sure I could match it.

During this first meeting we described how racism manifested itself in the prison environment. Obvious to everyone was the fact that the prison population was racially and ethnically diverse. There were many women from other nations, including most of the countries of Central and South America, plus others as diverse as Nigeria, Thailand, the (former) Soviet Union, Korea and France. Many women commented on the prevalence of racial slurs and a general background of racial tension among inmates and between inmates and staff. There was also tension within racial groups and between different nationalities. Many women spoke languages other than English and suffered when the prison failed to be sensitive to the need for multilingual translations of prison forms and documents.

We defined racism in terms of ignorance, a lack of understanding, an illness and fear. By working directly *with* racism instead of avoiding it, we could help the prison community live together more amicably. We could help individuals develop more compassion for themselves and others. We could increase our trust for one another and recognize our common bonds as women.

We set several goals that first meeting: (1) create educational programs to enhance appreciation of our different cultures; (2) set up small language classes in the units; (3) provide Spanish translations of vital prison forms and information; (4) increase our own communication skills; (5) look at how racism is imbedded in the language we use; (6) work with our own inner prejudices; (7) invite outside speakers

and teachers to address different aspects of racism and how to work with it; and (8) create a play or event to dramatize all these issues.

The Inside Council was co-sponsored by the holistic health program and three inmate cultural groups - the Latinas, Native Americans and African Americans. The Outside Council was composed of a special group of women from the Diversity Council of Women's Alliance. We met on the average of twice a month, and, although the Council on Racism lasted only about a year, its benefits were far-reaching. We created a sub-committee to write Spanish translations of prison forms. The holistic health program continued to be committed to having a Spanish translator for all of its classes and workshops. We sponsored workshops on cross-cultural communication skills and conflict resolution.

But by far the Council's biggest accomplishment was co-sponsoring (along with the holistic program) a two-day, prison-wide Multicultural Festival entitled "Celebrating Our Differences, Appreciating Our Unity." We envisioned a Festival that would combine workshops on diversity and leaderships skills with singing, drumming, dancing, guest performances, storytelling, mime, ethnic food, cultural exhibits and a multi-national parade.

Buoyed by our success with the Minicamp, Terry and I went to work on this new project. She set about convincing prison staff to support the idea and began to prepare all the in-house logistics. Prison staff volunteered to help with escorting over thirty outside guests. Clearances were attained for bringing in conga drums, audio equipment and native costumes for the dancers and for the parade. The prison's food services staff was enthusiastic about the idea of cooking ethnic food for lunch and dinner for the two days. Along with the Outside Council, I began to line up a team of outside volunteers who would create programming and celebrations to meet the women's needs. The Outside Council handled the structure and content of the workshops and also recruited guest performers, sound and light technicians and stage managers. I briefed the guests and facilitators for what to expect while visiting prison, what to bring, what not to bring, etc. We established a special account for donations to the Multicultural Festival to cover expenses. The women inside kept the dream alive as they made decorations for the walls of the barn, wrote poems, learned songs and choreographed and rehearsed dances. As their excitement built up, they gave us lists and lists of art supplies and costume needs. "*Kente* cloth, we need *kente* cloth!"

At times the planning was overwhelming. But, like the Minicamp, the Multicultural Festival generated a momentum and enthusiasm all its own, and, once launched, we all rode its wave until the weekend it happened.

A look at the schedule the women printed up for Saturday gives a sense of the ambitious programming:

- 9:00 to 9:30: Opening ceremony and blessing
- 9:30 to 11:00: Part I workshop on dismantling "isms"
- 11:00 to 12:00: Lunch (German) and cultural displays
- 12:00 to 3:30: Part II workshop on dismantling "isms"
- 3:30 to 4:30: Afternoon head count
- 4:30 to 5:30: Dinner (Filipino)
- 6:00 to 8:00: Performance from "outsiders," including a slide show of photographs from women's lives around the world, an African American dancer,

several storytellers, a mime artist, a fire dancer, and an all-woman jazz fusion band called "Living on the Edge."

Sunday morning began with another blessing and a visit from a special volunteer group of "Aztec" dancers who braved the cold morning air to perform in their feathered costumes. There were readings of poems and prose by the inmates' counseling group on AIDS. There were dances from Haiti, Jamaica, Columbia and Hawaii. Lunch was South American *empanadas* followed by a parade of inmates singing and dancing in national dress. The paraders enjoyed themselves so much, pushing or pulling their jerry-rigged floats and waving hand-made flags, they decided to go twice around the compound. The afternoon workshops included drumming, Polynesian dance, singing, hip-hop dance, women's spirituality, and a follow-up workshop on leadership skills. A Korean dinner followed the afternoon count. Sunday evening performances included a repeat of Saturday's slide show and a Polynesian dance troupe from the outside. The inmate performances included speeches, songs, poems and dances from Spain, Mexico, Korea, Indonesia, Brazil, Thailand, Columbia and Argentina; a modern dance from a combined group of Africans and African Americans; and a country western square dance. The evening concluded with a "unity song" composed and performed by Sadie, one of the Inside Council co-chairs who had had the original idea for the Festival.

Since I was once again cast into the role of trouble-shooter and rover, most of the weekend was for me a blur. But some moments remain clear:

During the dismantling "isms" workshop there was a "stand together/stand apart" exercise in which the women began by standing together, shoulder to shoulder in a long line. The facilitator called out various descriptions, such as "All of you who have lost your fathers," or "All of you who completed college," or "All of you who are mothers." If you fit the description, you stepped out away from the line several paces, turned, formed a new line and looked back at where you had been standing. If you didn't fit the description, you stayed in the original line. Sometimes only a few women would leave the line to form the new line, and sometimes the new line would be bigger than the original. After thus standing apart for a few moments, the women were directed to return to the original line and stand together again.

Some of the descriptions got pretty edgy, such as "All of you who have been raped or sexually abused," or "All of you who identify yourselves as lesbians." It took courage to step out of the line for all to see. There was great power and clarity in asking all the Black women to stand together, or all the Latinas, or all the Asian women. It often was a relief to return to standing together. The exercise succeeded not only in making the contrasts of diversity and unity vivid, but also showing how they were fluid and ever changing.

At another time in the Festival I remember meeting a shipment of conga drums at the front gate and helping to ferry them on big dollies to the covered outdoor arena. After a few moments of instruction, wild and furious Afro-Cuban drumming echoed once again throughout the prison compound, reminding me of the Minicamp.

I remember seeing several pieces of African cloth I had borrowed from my mother being used as headdresses or wrap-arounds during the parade and later in Sunday evening's African/African American modern dance. This dance depicted the African Diaspora, beginning in Africa, ending in America, and passionately portraying the Middle Passage.

I remember seeing almost the entire prison population turn out for Saturday's performance night, especially to hear the all-woman jazz band, whose members came on stage with wildly painted faces. They took us all to the edge of dissonance and abandon. There was so much laughter in the crowd, lit-up faces, hugs of appreciation, hard edges softened.

I remember the headline in a local newspaper a couple days later: "Prisoners Sing Out to Combat Racism." One Nigerian inmate was quoted as saying, "This has broken down barriers for me. I wasn't a friend to a white person before this weekend. Now I feel like we can all be friends. During the workshops we broke into small groups and talked about our feelings and then everyone talked as a large group and I realized that we are all one big family."

But, despite the Festival's success, the wave of understanding and togetherness it inspired receded over time and many of the old racist patterns returned. For several days, however, the entire prison was transported by optimism, possibility, and hope.

Chapter 12

A Song of Home

*“There are those who are trying to set fire to the world
It is true we are in danger
There is time only to work slowly
There is no time not to love.”*

Deena Metzger



“A Song of Home”

koa and purpleheart wood, 33” tall, 1999

photograph by David Guerrero

This figure is inspired by my memories of the women in prison, the anguish of the African Diaspora, and a miserable year I spent working as a court clerk in order to make a dime.

Why is her face so sad? What is she doing with her hands? She is listening to a song no one else can hear. She is caressing a song she longs for, a song of home. Carving this piece helped me realize how badly I needed to reconnect to what’s really important: my body, my home, my life as an artist, my song. In fact, these same truths were what the women in prison had *always* supported in me. (I quit the job and decided to finish this book.)

Empty Space

Toward the end of my work in the prison, I realized my underlying intention as a teacher/facilitator had gradually changed. In the early days, I was driven by a sense of mission and purpose, brimming with ideas of how to help, serve and be useful. I made lists of classes, workshops and events that could be created. I was full of agendas to fulfill and the intention of DOING. Over time I gradually came to understand that the work was really much more about dropping my agenda, no matter how benevolent. Instead, could I be willing to listen, to improvise, to not know what was going to happen, and to come into prison with the intention of just BEING?

The openness, fluidity and emptiness that came with BEING were especially appropriate in the long-term stress group. We had come through so much together. We had proven to ourselves that each of us had wisdom to share across the circle.

Once, after an especially long silence in the middle of group, I felt a lot of tension about whether or not to fill the space. I decided to retreat as facilitator and “mama space-filler” and do nothing. Just let the space be empty and see what would happen. After a few minutes, Rosa took a big risk and stood up, saying she wanted to dance while we made music for her. She closed her eyes, stretched out her arms and began to spin, a small smile lighting her face. We began to hum, clap the ground or our hands, and thump our chests. As her spinning dance took on more speed and animation, we also raised our voices and drummed more loudly, supporting her movement with our sound.

Later when we talked, some women said they loved feeling the empty space and couldn't get enough of it. Others (like myself) felt restless, needing to fill it up or leave. We all agreed that allowing ourselves to BE in empty space, whether alone or in company, took some getting used to but seemed a potent way to discover some delightful surprises.

Looking back, I think this shift from DOING to BEING was connected to the fact that Henry and I were winding up our work in the prison and preparing to move to the country. We were changing the focus of our attention from the prison work to our artwork and a new home. As the directorship of the program shifted onto Penny's shoulders, I became less involved with decision-making, planning future events, choosing new volunteers, securing funding, etc. I was moving into the back seat.

I also think this shift had a lot to do with realizing how much we, the women and I, had proven ourselves to be equal. It wasn't about teacher-student anymore. Those roles were too limiting and we all knew it. We had become a circle. We had learned that while there wasn't that much left to DO with each other, there were worlds upon worlds in which to BE.

The day that Rosa filled the empty space with her joyous dance, we closed the group (as we often did) with singing a round which a friend had taught us:

“Standing like a tree with my roots dug down
My branches wide and open,
Down comes the rain, out comes the sun
Down come the fruits of the heart of the one
Who is standing like a tree . . .”

A Prison of My Own Making

I looked around the circle of women sitting on the floor, felt my weariness and then tried to rally and focus my energy for facilitating this group. Slowly we went around the circle, each woman giving her weather report. For some women, articulating these inner “weather conditions” came naturally. Others were consistently quiet, reticent, perhaps unwilling to crack the lid open and peer inside.

One woman in particular I considered a “sleeper.” While it was difficult to get her to talk and open up, when she did whatever came out of her mouth was worth listening to. But I was not at all prepared to hear what Serafina had to say that day.

She was a young woman, slight in build with a gap-toothed smile and long straight brown hair. She spoke with a slight lisp. She worked as an administrative clerk in the Warden’s office. When it came time for her weather report, she chose instead to look across the circle and report on what she saw and felt in me.

“Kathy,” she began. “For a year now you seem to be caught in a prison of your own making. The task of directing the holistic health program has become for you an invisible emotional prison. You seem burdened with not being funded and frustrated with grant-writing and collecting foundation rejection notices.”

Before I could protest, she took a breath and continued. “Kathy, you’re tired, dragged down, depressed. You say you never sleep well the night before you come into prison. You say the two hour drive to get here by 7:30 AM is getting to you. You say you’re throwing bones at your art. I think you’re burning out. In comparison, we are enduring our imprisonment with more ease than you are.”

Although her words struck a chord, I couldn’t get over their irony. Here was a woman who had served thirteen years and was looking at the probability of many more. Here was a young vital woman who was saying that she and her incarcerated sisters had learned to carry the forced burden of imprisonment with more ease than a free person was able to carry the chosen burden of running a volunteer program.

“Kathy,” she continued. “You need to get out of here. You’re no good to yourself or us if you’re burnt out. Go. Make your art. Follow your dreams. That’s what you’re always telling us, right?”

I was feeling that strange vertigo when the world gets turned on its head. I knew Serafina was right. I remember shaking myself out of my reverie, looking at the women in the circle and feeling each one’s kind regard. I looked across to the woman who had just put the mirror in front of me, feeling very “seen” by her. I was curious how she knew what she knew. Once again, I felt appreciative of this amazing circle of women.

How is it that, even though we may live as free people in a free country, we can still be imprisoned within our lives, our bodies, mind and soul? What is freedom, really? How can it be that someone locked up in a high security prison can feel free? What is the secret she knows?

The questions generated that day and every day I went into prison still live in me. They have helped to create many works of art and this collection of prison stories: stories of courage, creativity and determination; stories I hope will encourage us “free” people to take a good look at our tendency toward self-incarceration; stories that might make us ask why we as a nation build so many prisons; stories that have soared over the walls and sing a song of freedom.

Epilogue

In my experience talking about my work in prison, many people don't want to hear about it and don't want to know. Their eyes glaze over or dart about and their bodies take defensive, closed postures. They change the subject. The feeling is – THUD.

I can understand up to a point. Content to just pay lip service before I went inside, I didn't really want to know about prisons either. The fact that this great country of ours incarcerates people at a higher rate than any other "civilized" country is a fact none of us really want to know. It makes us profoundly uncomfortable. It challenges us to ask disturbing questions. It asks us to wake up when most of us would rather stay lulled, ignorant and asleep.

However, once in a while, someone, like you, dear reader, will bravely say, "What you're telling me makes me squirm. I'm not at all sure I want to know this. I want to do something, but I feel powerless. I don't know what to do."

This is encouraging. Perhaps the most helpful thing we can do at first is to really FEEL that discomfort. Allow it to work on us. Open to it. Let it get under our skin. Maybe, eventually, that discomfort will become the inspiration for taking action.

What action has been right for me to take? As you have seen, I chose to devote a part of my life to being a volunteer in a prison and to chronicle the stories I collected. As an artist, I have created a large body of work – sculptures, quilts, prints, drawings and paintings – which helps me understand, integrate and honor my experience working in prison. And now, by writing this book, I am challenged to put the stories together with the art.

The women in prison know that their story is largely unnoticed and untold. They know that even IF we on the outside think of people in prison at all, more than likely we think of men and forget the women.

They pray to be remembered. Every time I pick up our cat Santo, who was born in the prison in one of the last litters before the cats were forbidden, and who was named and loved by the women, and who was given to Terry and me to carry out through the guardhouse to the outside world, I remember the women in prison.

They know how powerful it is to know that someone out here is thinking of them, holding them in their hearts, working on their behalf in whatever way we can. If we "free" people do nothing else, may we remember our sisters in prison.

Appendix

Aikido and Conflict Resolution

Aikido is the modern Japanese martial art of peaceful reconciliation. In Aikido, the defender blends with the attacker, redirecting and neutralizing the attack in such a way that neither defender nor attacker is hurt. Aikido was developed by Morihei Ueshiba who lived from 1883 to 1969. Its high ethical standards, life-enhancing principles, insights into conflict resolution, and core philosophy of the true nature of victory – vanquishing the enemy within – have enjoyed great appeal through the world. See the bibliography for further reading.

I started my Aikido training in 1977. I earned my first-degree black belt in 1981 and my second-degree in 1993. My teaching experience spans over twenty years and includes kid's classes, college courses, workshops in developing personal power through the martial arts and conflict resolution, and traditional Aikido in a *dojo* setting, in addition to the Aikido principles I was able to bring into prison under the guise of moving meditation and centering practice.

Bodywork and Somatic Education

Somatic education (*soma*, from the Greek for body) and bodywork disciplines have in common the principle of mind and body integration, but there are many different approaches. Together they form a vast field and are enormously popular as alternatives or adjuncts to straight Western medicine. For the best overview of the various schools of bodywork and somatic education, I direct the reader to *Planet Medicine: Modalities*, listed below in the bibliography.

My own experience with bodywork and somatic education began in the 1970's with training in the Lomi School. Lomi Work's approach to mind/body integration is eclectic and wide-ranging. I like to think of it as a large and ever-growing tool bag, from which the practitioner can extract the appropriate tool, among which are: meditation, aikido, yoga, gestalt therapy, rolfing (and other forms of deep work with the body's connective tissue), breath work, re-educational work (such as from Feldenkreis' Awareness Through Movement), cranial-sacral work, polarity therapy, therapeutic massage, etc. You get the idea.

In addition to offering individual bodywork sessions, the prison holistic health program also offered somatic education groups, especially for those women who had massage or bodywork skills and were being called upon to work on their fellow prisoners. Because touch was prohibited among the inmates, bodywork was not officially sanctioned. Even so, the guards often looked the other way. We wanted to offer the inside bodyworkers a safe space to let down their hair, recharge their batteries and learn new techniques.

One bodywork experiment we conducted involved bringing in a large group of student practitioners who were involved in the same advanced bodywork apprenticeship training I was in. We set up several bodywork clinics during which we offered individual sessions for both the women and for prison staff. Everyone – the women, prison staff and bodywork apprentices (most of whom had never been inside before) – clearly benefited.

Creativity Class

Expression through the creative arts is integral to my definition of holistic health and core to my identity as an artist. I could not imagine a holistic health program without a creativity class. The women agreed. Once they started to enjoy a feeling of well being, hopefulness and a reconnection to their personal vision, they wanted to express themselves. They wanted to DO something with that good feeling, whether through fine art, craft, dance, theater or creative writing.

At first, when the holistic health program was new and small, I ran the creativity class as well as teaching meditation and yoga, running the stress group and doing individual sessions of bodywork, all in an eight hour day once a week. But, after a year or so, it became clear that I needed to hand the creativity class off to someone who could expand it into several classes over an eight hour day, thus freeing me to teach a second stress group and do more individual bodywork. I wanted that person to be Henry, my husband, and after meeting him, so did the women. How could he resist?

Henry encouraged the women to work with anything and everything on hand, including drawing, painting, fabric design, hand-made greeting cards (one of their favorite projects), finger puppets and other toys (such as the dolls they stuffed with sanitary napkins - hey, whatever works). He brought in tapes and played music and encouraged the women to sing and dance and loosen up. He offered critiques of their fine art, ceramics, hand-made clothes and quilts. Perhaps most importantly, he taught them how to transform difficult emotions into color, line, texture and form. Under his guidance, some very angry, troubled women made some very incredible paintings, and walked away with smiles on their faces.

In addition to Henry's work, volunteer Karina Epperlein, a teacher and performance artist, started a class in voice and theater for some of the more daring women. She guided them in creating a theatrical performance of dance, song, poetry and dialogue, which was performed in front of the prison population one night and the volunteers on another. The process of preparing for this performance and clips from the performance itself were documented in Karina's powerful video, "Voices From Inside," listed below in the bibliography.

Intuition Training

The more mind/body integration someone has developed, the more they are able to access deep, body-based ways of knowing and gathering information, such as intuition. Accurate intuitive readings are less dependent on mystery than on the ability to discern small, subtle messages encoded in the body, as any good poker player would agree. But to read these messages without confusion, the "reader" herself must be calm, unruffled, centered, and able to tell the difference between true information and static. See *The Intuitive Body* in the bibliography.

Meditation and Yoga

The basic form of mediation taught in the holistic health program was Vipassana or Insight Meditation. It is based on simple awareness of the breath and

mind-full observation of the body's sensations, thoughts and feelings. By developing such a practice, we can establish a home base in which the qualities of calm, peace and compassion can grow. Such a refuge can also widen our choices. We are no longer automatically hostage to our feelings or moods, or even to what happens to us in our lives. We literally have more breathing space, more room to choose wisely, and more of a foundation from which to take effective action. See *The Experience of Insight* and *A Path With Heart* in the bibliography.

In the prison program, we were blessed with several visits from guest meditation teachers, such as Mary Orr and Robert Hall.

Yoga is an ancient form of mind/body integration in which the practitioner uses breathing and different postures to regain flexibility, balance, vigor, concentration and over-all health. In the prison program, we emphasized the benefits of stretching and breathing, and pointed out that yoga, like meditation, could be practiced without special props anywhere, anytime, and in any situation. If you are in your body, you are always home.

Stress Management

The approach taken in the prison holistic health program was to learn to live WITH stress, not suppress it, control it, or make it go away. We did this by teaching forms of discipline and self-awareness such as meditation and somatic education, and by providing creative outlets for expression, such as creative writing, vocalization, art and crafts. The women were encouraged to identify the symptoms and sensations of stress or any other disagreeable emotion or state of mind. By going TOWARDS rather than away from the feeling, and by naming the physical sensations, the feeling itself begins to change. By developing a calm and neutral inner observer, one can learn to switch to a larger identity that calmly watches the progression of inner changes with curiosity, not aversion or panic.

The stress groups were almost always conducted in a circle, which was itself a powerful antidote to the confines of the prison's hierarchical structure, in which the chain of command rules. In a circle, everyone can see everyone else. Anyone can tell her story and see that someone else resonates with it. Everyone, including the teacher, is equal. I believe our dedication to the circle was one of THE determining factors in our ability to establish trust, reduce stress, share our stories and contact our creative potential.

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