



naked state:

| creativity and the empowerment of incarcerated women and girls
a Winston Churchill Travel Fellowship report by Leah Thorn

Star

■ *extract from the poem Universal Woman* ■

A woman's pain is universal.

A woman's tears are global.

We love the same. We cry the same.

We lose the same. We all settle for less of the same.

We dream the same. We mean the same.

We need the same and want the same.

No matter the cost, no matter the loss.

We prostitute our minds.

Sell our emotions short. Sometimes at no price at all.

Hidin' the same scars, pickin' at the same scabs,

whisperin' the same mantras.

We laugh the same, though the sadness never leaves our eyes.

We trust the same, fallin' prey as victims of abuse and misuse.

We fall prey to vicious addictions and afflictions. It's all the same.

We are all the same. Our struggle to survive is the same.

Universal



appreciating

| for inspiration, collaboration and fun

Thank you to every artist and activist I met, who passionately and tirelessly supports women and girls to speak their minds and tell the stories that need to be 'out there'.

Thank you to the women and girls in incarceration, whose words, voices and movement captivated me, and in bringing me closer to them, brought me closer to myself.

And thank you to the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust for enabling me to take a long, impassioned look.

contents

3	appreciating
4	summarising
6	scene setting
8	incarcerating
12	creating
19	embedding
24	healing
26	meeting
28	disseminating
30	resourcing
33	appending



image@Fabulous Females

summarising

During my two-month Winston Churchill Travel Fellowship, I shadowed a range of artists in the United States who work with incarcerated, or formerly incarcerated, women or girls and acknowledge creativity as a force for social change. The main aim of my Fellowship was to see first-hand the practice of projects that fuse writing, theatre and movement with a strong commitment to women's empowerment.

Most of the individual artists and companies I contacted were able to obtain security clearance for me, which is no mean feat in the United States. This allowed me entry into correctional facilities to see the work of the practitioners and to meet, and work with, incarcerated women. I visited State prisons, a County jail and youth detention centres.

My two-month Travel Fellowship began long before I took the flight to Chicago in April 2012 for the annual conference of the National Association for Poetry Therapy. For the preceding eight months, I methodically planned my programme, one contact leading me seamlessly to the next, until I had a web of amazing projects that criss-crossed the United States. Here is my itinerary –

26–29 April 2012

Chicago

■ 'Winds of Change', National Association for Poetry Therapy Annual Conference

5 September – 30 October 2012

Hartford, Connecticut

■ York Correctional Facility for Women

■ Judy Dworin Performance Project

■ Trinity College, 'The Arts and Special Populations' course

New York

■ Victoria Sammartino and Julia Taylor, Voices UnBroken

■ Stephen Chinlund, the Network Program

■ Maureen McNeill, ex-'Prison Diary Project', the Anne Frank Center USA

■ Cynthia Cooper, journalist on women's issues

■ Sherry Reiter, Poetry Therapist, originator of Poets-Behind-Bars

■ Connie Procopio, dancer and choreographer

■ Cheryl Wilkins, Criminal Justice Initiative, Columbia University

- 'My Name Is My Own', a poetry performance by formerly-incarcerated Black women, Harlem
- Julie Gayer Kris, Avodah Dance Company
- Memorial for Shulamith Firestone, radical feminist
- Lauren Shpall, writer, ex-workshop facilitator on Rikers Island

Chicago

- Meade Palidofsky, Storycatchers' Fabulous Females at Illinois Youth Detention Centre, Warrenville
- Rachael Hudak, Neighborhood Writing Alliance
- Joanne Archibald, ex-Beyondmedia
- Amanda Klonsky, Free Write Jail Arts at Cook County Juvenile Detention Centre

Ann Arbor, Michigan

- Buzz Alexander, PCAP [Prison Creative Arts Project], University of Michigan
- Macomb County Correctional Facility for Men
- Huron Correctional Facility for Women

Florida

- Leslie Neal, ArtSpring
- Homestead Correctional Facility for Women

Denver

- Stephen Hartnett, professor and Chair of the Department of Communication at the University of Colorado
- Kathleen Adams, founder/director of the Center for Journal Therapy

San Francisco

- Manijeh Fata and Ruth Morgan, Communityworks
- WRC [San Francisco Sheriff's Department's Women's Re-entry Center]
- San Francisco County Jail
- Rhodessa Jones, The Medea Project: Theater for Incarcerated Women
- Amie Dowling, choreographer and professor in the Performing Arts and Social Justice Department, University of San Francisco

- Judith Tannenbaum, writer, ex-poet-in-residence at San Quentin
- Margo Perin, Write and Rise

I was inspired by the collaborative work I saw with current- and formerly-incarcerated women and girls, where autobiographical writing was moved into dynamic performance and publications. Women empowered themselves by articulating long-suppressed stories and emotions, surprised and impressed themselves by their new-found abilities and insights and began to take control of their decisions and actions.

I returned home with a wealth of resource material, including art film, documentary film, books, articles and chapbooks. I list all the resource material and contact links at the end of this report, under 'resourcing'.

There is nothing quite like the immediacy and emotional charge of seeing and hearing women and girls express themselves honestly, lyrically and powerfully and the most potent part of my dissemination events so far has been the screening of extracts from the films. I look forward to creating many more opportunities to share film and thoughts with other artists, with those working in the field of criminal justice and with the general public.

Do contact me at leahthorn@hotmail.com if you would like to be invited to upcoming events.



scene setting

‘naked state’

‘In prison ... power is manifested in its naked state ... and justified as moral force’

Michel Foucault

‘naked state’

The act of artistic creation requires a certain metaphoric nakedness, a willingness to expose and be seen

‘naked state’

The literal nakedness of women being strip frisked

I undertook my Winston Churchill Travel Fellowship not as a social scientist or a criminologist or a formerly incarcerated woman, but as an artist/activist. I went to the United States as a spoken word poet, who uses words for social change and as a woman who is passionate about women and about women’s liberation.

in a naked state

the women who name

those women have to be contained

those women who disclose, expose

those who show, too eager to show

show scars, who hurting

hurt others

take them, scapegoat,

away

Leah

I have been involved for nearly ten years in the use of creativity in prison. I run poetry workshops for the Anne Frank Trust alongside their prison exhibition and I undertake short-term projects with the campaigning, advocacy and support organisation, Women in Prison.

As an artist/activist, I am also committed to contributing to the implementation of an approach in the UK Criminal Justice System that is ‘holistic, woman-centred and integrated’ [Corston Report 2007]. Shortly after the Corston Report came out, I began a two-year writing residency in a women’s prison, where I ran groups, worked with individuals, organised performances and compiled and edited publications. One such publication, ‘release’, is a book by and for women in prison, who self-harm. I am committed to enabling incarcerated women’s voices to be heard and the book contains powerful stories and poems, such as ‘Universal Woman’ that opens this report.

It is this commitment to incarcerated women that fuelled my aims for the Travel Fellowship, which were –

- **To learn about similarities and differences between the UK Criminal Justice System and the US System of Corrections**
- **To increase my understanding of the power of creativity to enable incarcerated women and girls to take charge of their minds, speak their minds and make their life experiences visible and audible**
- **To see how arts projects in the United States have embedded creative writing within the culture and the regime of women’s prisons**
- **To explore how I might incorporate Poetry Therapy into my practice**

Before embarking on the Fellowship I decided to drop my fifth aim, which was to examine ways of determining whether creative writing projects can help reduce the likelihood of women re-offending. So many social and political factors contribute to the reduction of re-offending, that no matter how many powerful stories are shared of growth of self-esteem and of self-awareness, it is hard in an evidence-based system to quantify the specific contribution of creativity.

There is one point that is important for me to make from the outset. ‘Universal Woman’ explores the commonalities of women’s lives. However, in order for the arts-in-prison work to be effectively embedded and sustained, there has to be an acknowledgement of the differences in experience and challenge of women of diverse identities and the intersection of sexism with all the other oppressions that women face. This is especially true of racism. Because of the disproportionality of Black women in prison, it is crucial that Black women’s lives are authentically represented – and on their terms. As Rhodessa Jones of the Medea Project said, ‘There just weren’t enough stories on stage about women that looked or felt like me’.

Almost all of the artists I met were white. With the exception of the Medea Project, all of the organisations were white-led. This may be due solely to the networks I tapped into and there may be parallel networks that I missed completely. For example, in New York, I made contact with Urban Bush Women, a dynamic dance company with a focus on African-American women. They will obviously work with women who are formerly incarcerated, but that is not their focus and so I did not pursue them.

Whilst I saw many brilliant examples of trans-racial, trans-cultural closeness and communication between white facilitators and incarcerated women of colour, as a white woman I am always mindful of the insidiousness of racism and the ways it impacts on interpersonal relationships. And the possibility always exists that there are things Black women will choose not to share with me and other white women artists, no matter how trustworthy we think we are.

I will be re-evaluating my learning for a long time to come, as I put new awareness and ideas into practice. What follows are brushstroke impressions, supported by extracts from my diary, which appear in pink.



image©Judy Dworin Performance Project

incarcerating

5% of the world's population, over 20% of the world's incarceration,
a carceral nation where dissent and poverty are criminalised
and one in one hundred is doing time,
the colour of complexion
a target in the Prison Industrial Complex;
where more Black men are in incarceration
than in college education,
more Black men imprisoned today
than enslaved in 1850 in Transatlantic Trade;
where the imprisonment of women
grows at twice the rate of males
and a Black woman is four times more likely
than a white woman to have her freedom curtailed;
where a Department of Corrections seeks to 'correct'
the outcome of racism, not the source;
where dehumanisation takes many forms –
officers use shackles to 'Wag The Dog',
women are forced to strip, 'Squat & Cough';
where life means life or Death Row;
where eleven States deny 'felons' the right,
sometimes for life, to vote;
where surveillance, policing and incarceration
are 'solutions' to unjust economic, social, political situations.
Seven point five million people in prison, on probation, on parole.
Rehabilitation? No.

Social control

Leah

Aim One

To learn about similarities and differences between the UK Criminal Justice System and the US System of Corrections

The United States is the world's leader in incarceration, with more than 2.2 million people currently in the nation's prisons or jails. The Prison Industrial Complex is far-reaching.

- Due to extreme policing in urban areas, unequal access to quality legal representation, underfunded public education, and other social and economic inequalities, young African American men are more easily caught in the net of the criminal justice system.
- 1 in every 10 Black male in his thirties is in prison or jail on any given day.
- Nearly half (47%) of people incarcerated in state prisons are convicted of non-violent drug, property, or public order crimes.
- By the time they turn 18, one in four Black children will have experienced the imprisonment of a parent.
- Once released from the criminal justice system, most people continue to face barriers due to a lack of accessible jobs, housing, education, and voter disenfranchisement.

From the Curriculum Guide accompanying the film, 'Well Contested Sites'

Women in prison – some commonalities

Despite the fact that there are state-to-state variations with regard to imprisonment, the situation for incarcerated women felt familiar to me.

- Women are a small and often ignored minority of the overall prison population, 4.8% in England & Wales, 8.5% in the United States. However, the impact of their incarceration is enormous.
- The vast majority of women are convicted of non-violent drug or property offences. Only around 18% are incarcerated for violent crimes and many in that category are women who have experienced domestic and/or sexual abuse and who struck back at their assailants.

'P, a vibrant, young Black woman, was sent to a women's prison despite being a juvenile. She was sentenced to a life sentence at 17 for killing her sexual abuser, a man who raped her most days after school for ten years.'

Although there is now clemency in the State for women who kill an abuser and the abuse is taken into account in the trial, it doesn't apply to women who were sentenced prior to the law change.'

From my journal

- Certain populations of women are more vulnerable than others to being criminalised. Black women are four times more likely to be imprisoned than white women and to receive longer sentences. One of the white women I met in the States told me she felt guilty that she only got a one year sentence for importing cocaine into Hawaii, whereas if she were Black she would have got at least ten years.
- Not surprisingly, there is a universality to women's narrative. The stories and poems I heard from women in the United States duplicate those of the women I work with in the UK, interchangeable in their similarity of detail and emotion. Once a safe creative space is made, the women focus mainly on traumatic stories that they are eager to share, often for the first time. Throughout the Travel Fellowship I was audience to poignant poems, monologues and dance/movement pieces on themes such as domestic violence, childbirth, sexual abuse, drug and alcohol addiction and involvement in the sex industry.

The constant presence of sexism and male domination coats women's minds, dictates women's actions and how we feel about ourselves and each other. And men frequently feature in women's paths to prison.

Many of the women and girls I met had ended up inside because were in the company of male partners in the wrong place, at the wrong time, or they were carrying drugs on behalf of a man they trusted or they had acted in self-defence after being abused or trying to protect themselves or their children.

- Two thirds are mothers of young children, concerned about their care and about preserving parental rights.
- Women are imprisoned a long way away from family and friends.
- Healthcare, both physical and emotional, is poor. Journalist Cynthia Cooper said '...women face exceptional hardships in a system based on a military design, with young and healthy men as the treatment model'. Screening programmes are virtually non-existent and women die of cancer because of late treatment.

- █ There is a pressing need for gender-appropriate training for staff, with a particular emphasis on respecting female prisoners, understanding trauma and developing awareness of responses to trauma.
- █ Most women in prison represent no risk to the community, so there is no need for an authoritarian, punitive, security-driven model that has been designed for male offenders. Militarism is accentuated in the States by correctional officers being ranked as sergeants, lieutenants and captains.
- █ Staff-on-inmate sexual abuse and harassment occurs and is almost certainly under-reported, as many women keep quiet for fear of officer retaliation. PREA [Prison Rape Elimination Act] came into being in 2003 in the States, stating that ‘any sexual act between an employee or volunteer with an inmate is illegal, even if the prisoner ‘willingly’ participates’.
- █ The social conditions that fuel women’s routes into prison, such as poverty, isolation, harassment and abuse [along with emotions that justifiably arise from those conditions, such as rage, anxiety, mistrust, fear, indifference] are often intensified by the experience of imprisonment. Those leaving prison often go back to the same conditions, with the same challenges as when they entered.
- █ Women’s mental health suffers in prison. While I was in New York, I attended a memorial event for the radical feminist Shulamith Firestone and the following quote from her book ‘Airless Spaces’ stayed in my mind throughout my travels. Although she is referring to her time in, and after, psychiatric hospital she could well be describing the process of imprisonment and re-entry into society – ‘Every time she went in, especially after the first, she felt submerged, as if someone were holding her under water for months. When she came out she was fat, helpless, unable to make the smallest decision, speechless, and thoroughly programmed by the rigid....routine, so that even her stomach grumbled on time, at precisely 5pm.’

Women in prison – some differences

Prison is prison. Prison is a stark, stripped-bare arena, mirroring the way power is played out in society. I hesitate to say that the situation is harsher for women in the States than in the UK, as I do not want it to seem that I am saying things are fine here. They are clearly not. But by comparison, I begin to see the gains that have been made here.

I mistakenly assumed that the States would be at the forefront of social challenge and change when it came to women and imprisonment, so at first I was unprepared for the incredulity and delight that I met each time I talked about the Corston Report. US artist/activists were impressed by the remit and recommendations of the report, by the attempts at implementation and the groundswell of support from such a wide alliance of organisations. I was told repeatedly that there was nothing comparable in the States and I felt proud of the organised resistance to the incarceration of women that has gone on in the UK over the years – however far there is still to go.

During my travels across the States, I witnessed a starkness, a harshness, a dehumanisation of women on a level that I have not known before.

DENIAL OF INDIVIDUALITY

Women told me that up until about fifteen years ago they were allowed to wear their own clothes in prison. Now all women and girls wear uniform and anonymity is enforced and reinforced in this way.

‘The women are in a uniform of pale blue shirts and trouser with white stripes down the sleeve and trouser leg, or a shapeless blue knee-length dress with little white socks and shoes. The effect is heartbreakingly infantilising.’ From my journal

And the women I met are denied the use of make-up. Whatever view one holds about the beautification industry, denying an incarcerated woman the choice to wear make-up is punishing and a further blow to her expression of individuality. But I also saw acts of inventiveness and covert resistance, such as pastels going missing and re-appearing as make-up.

RESTRAINT

One of the harshest sights for me was seeing women in shackles. The restraint is called a tether strap or control strap, though the women say it is called ‘Wag the Dog’, as the strap makes movement jerky and slow. A chain encircles a prisoner’s waist and is passed between her legs and attached to ankle cuffs. The device is used when a prisoner is moved from a detention area because that’s where traditionally many escapes occur. Women rarely try to escape but, as is nearly always the case, they are governed by the security rules made for incarcerated men.

SEARCHES

Pat frisking is the name given to the search of a clothed woman, which includes touching her breasts and vaginal area. Male officers can undertake this search unless a woman has been issued with a Cross Gender Pat Frisk exemption. This is issued to a

woman if can be proved that she is suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, as a result of a history of sexual abuse. Even with the exemption, a male officer can conduct the search in an emergency. Pat frisks have been known to lead women to make a charge of sexual abuse.

Strip frisks happen when a prisoner has been in contact with someone outside the prison, say on a visit, or if there are grounds for suspicion of weapons or contraband. I learned about the strip frisk, which the women call ‘Squat and Cough’, in a vivid way. After I performed my poem ‘Self Love’ in an ArtSpring drama class, K. walked into the middle of the circle and said she wanted to act out a strip search for me. Her job is in the legal library and twice a week she takes legal documents to women in Confinement (Segregation). She is searched going in and coming out, so that is four strip searches a week. As she acts out what she goes through, she tells the following –

‘I go into a room and the officer, most often a man, tells me to take my clothes off. If I’m lucky, he’ll let me hang them up, otherwise I have to throw them on the dirty floor. Then I have to turn my back to him, on command bend over, pull my butt cheeks apart and cough. When he tells me to, I can straighten up and put my clothes back on. Every time it happens, I feel humiliated, like I’m nothing. I will remember your poem next time and feel self love.’ From my journal

PROGRAMMES

There is an absence of programmes and schemes that I take for granted in the UK. There are no Listeners [Samaritan-trained prisoners, who offer emotional peer support]; no Toe By Toe [peer literacy project]; no Storybook Mums [whereby women write and illustrate books for their children and record them, so their children can hear their voice]. Many of the facilities had no art department, a space in prison that traditionally offers a more relaxed and intimate setting.

Yet there are innovative activities, that I have never come across in the UK. At York CI, there is a wing for women who train puppies to be Guide and Hearing dogs. Each woman has a dog that lives with her day and night. The women clearly love their dogs and the whole feel of the place is one of lightness and connection.

‘One of the women showed me what she’d taught her dog to do, including turning lights on and off and opening the fridge and taking out a bottle of water. Her dog is leaving next week to be paired with an owner and several of the women talked about their sadness at the separation from the

dogs they have reared since puppyhood. I am excited to see this initiative, although later the irony hits me of women training dogs in the same contained space in which they are being ‘trained’. From my journal

ENVIRONMENT

The architectural styles of the prisons were varied, reflecting the diversity of architecture in the different states. The maximum-security prison at York is housed in a sprawling new complex, all white stone and low buildings. The prison is sited on the ocean, there is a lot of space and as far as the eye can see is lush greenery, thick forestry. Covered walkways link the buildings. There is a thick yellow line down the middle of the walkways, denoting which direction women are to walk. Some of the women take tiny, painfully slow steps to prolong the feel of air and sun on their skin. All the buildings have sealed windows and the women live in cells of recycled-air.

I am shown into a ‘tier’ (wing) for lifers and it strikes me that uniformed and non-uniformed staff carry a very small bunch of keys compared to staff in England. Then I realise the reason for this is that the whole security system is electronic and a click signifies a door has been locked or unlocked. It is strange not having the metal-on-metal clang that I associate with prison life. It’s also eerie, everything being carried out at a distance.

San Francisco County jail is in the middle of the city and looks like an office block from the outside. Women can be imprisoned here for a year or so. In that time they will rarely breathe fresh air. There is no outside space for exercise or recreation, the space is airtight, and the windows sealed.

‘A few women talk animatedly about going to the gym – there is an open window there. The women say they crowd round it, just to feel a breeze.’ From my journal

And into this harsh scenario of women’s incarceration shines the power of creativity.....



creating

Aim Two

To increase my understanding of the power of creativity to enable incarcerated women and girls to take charge of their minds, speak their minds and make their life experiences visible and audible

When we write an honest story about a hard experience, it becomes externalised and concrete. When we write and act out a traumatic back-story, it may help us understand how decisions in the present have been shaped by our past. When we write poetry, we use few words to express a wealth of thoughts and feelings and offer a way to identify and communicate them precisely. In developing an ability to perceive and to express feelings and identify them by their specific names, we are better placed to deal with them.

When we dance to demonstrate a memory or free ourselves from physical restriction, we reclaim control over our bodies.

‘Art constantly challenges the process by which the individual person is reduced to anonymity’

Aharon Apfelfeld

Nowhere is this quote truer than in prison. The power of creativity to transform lives of those in prison has been increasingly recognised, with a wealth of literature and anecdotal evidence promoting its restorative and rehabilitative powers and its significant impact on communication & social skills, well-being and self-esteem. As Buzz Alexander says in his poem ‘For Mike, Because You Asked’, ‘Prisons are about no, workshops are yes’.

And the Aharon Apfelfeld quote may have a particular resonance for women, who may be especially vulnerable and marginalised within a criminal justice system designed for men.

As one woman dares to speak out, other women’s stories tumble out – a kind of call and response – many women telling their stories for the first time. And as the stories are told and moved into dance or theatre, previously invisible women and lives come into sharp relief.

Every day of the Travel Fellowship something happened to reinforce and expand my belief in the transformative power of creativity and the ability of artists to reach out and reach in to women, many of whom decided a long time ago to never trust again. Here are some points of learning –

Girls and young women

Shadowing artists who focus on work with girls and young women was extremely informative for me. I never rush to work with juveniles or young offenders of either sex and I have found incarcerated girls and young women the hardest group to engage with. On those occasions when I have run a workshop with that age group, I count the minutes till the end. I feel disrespected and I feel irritated by their seeming lack of attention. It appears that I am uninteresting to them and consequently [and unfortunately] in my mind I make them uninteresting to me.

I have come back with a whole new perspective and an eagerness to connect with young women. This change came about because of two particular projects, Fabulous Females and Freewrite Jail Arts, both based in Chicago.

The Fabulous Females project is part of Meade Palidofsky's Storycatchers' Theatre, a company which enables disenfranchised young people to create, develop and perform musical theatre from their lifestories. I go with Meade to Warrenville, the only facility for young women in the State of Illinois, housing fifty 14–20 year olds. The State has community-based initiatives to enable the young women to avoid incarceration where possible, but the behaviour of the young women in Warrenville is deemed too problematic/troubled for them to stay in the community. Meade has a solid connection with Warrenville, as the Superintendent is very supportive of the work and the project is long-standing and the programme ongoing. Meade refers to the year-round programme as 'long-term immersion'. January–May is intensive storytelling and staged readings; June–August is musical playwriting and performance skills; September–November is rehearsal, leading to a fully produced musical.

My initial change of perspective came after seeing the approach of Meade and Fabulous Females in person, but also later from the documentary, 'Girls On The Wall', which is about the development of a performance, as well as a charting of the young women's growing confidence and self-awareness. I recommend the film strongly as a resource for workers and for use with incarcerated women and girls. I have also shown it to people not involved in

the field of criminal justice and the message the film portrays is clear, accessible and very immediate.

Fabulous Females artist/facilitators work with the girls and young women for a year to share theatre and musical skills and to support them to devise material for a performance. For the last couple of years, members of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra have been involved as facilitators.

The day I visit there are auditions for the next production. Some of the young women have been in the project for the whole year, some returning intermittently, and some are relatively new. The previous week there had been a four-day 'boot camp' and out of that fifteen young women had put themselves forward to audition. They are guaranteed a part, either as a character or in the ensemble. They have chosen which part they would like to audition for and have been given a piece to memorise. They have to act, sing and dance at the audition and then Meade and two other artists allocate roles.

Meade has co-authored a very interesting journal article [details in 'resourcing'] on Trauma-Informed Musical Theatre, where she outlines the rationale for her work – 'Discussing, writing and performing their experiences and translating them into a single, communal dramatic arc helped the girls to safely process the events and to see the similarities in their stories.' [Palidofsky and Stolbach]

One idea I will try out is that of encouraging the young women to give their writing to another young woman to read/perform. I had never considered this previously as, from my experience, I would not have expected a young woman to relinquish control over her writing in this way. Meade says that sometimes there are complaints that the other young woman is not reading it properly – but ultimately it means that the young women get a distance on their story, seeing it from other perspectives, so that their story exists outside of themselves. They also get to see similarities and differences between their stories and it prepares them to be ready to be less individualistic and to work collaboratively.

Once the stories emerge and are shared, Meade and a couple of the young women give a shape to the material by creating a script that incorporates stories and themes and then some of the script is turned into song. Last year the theme was forgiveness. Can you forgive? Can you be forgiven?

'The auditions are an eye-opener for me. The young women come in individually or in pairs to show what they have prepared. The songs are

classic musical theatre-style and I wouldn't have thought such young women would have touched them with a barge pole – but they are committed, accept direction for the most part and are willing to be vulnerable. Lots of times they say 'I can't' but they clearly trust Meade and she encourages them to push themselves and try. She's very physical with them and several of them rush to her to be held.'

From my journal

Meade likes to work with young women deemed problematic by Detention Centre staff. She advocates on the young women's behalf when necessary and clearly has their trust. It was interesting to learn, too, that Pongo Teen Writing Project in Seattle also focuses their energy on young people who have a hard time expressing themselves. The young people are invited to a poetry session not by being asked, 'Who wants to write poetry today?' but 'Who hasn't written a poem before?'

Through watching the work of Fabulous Females, I was forced to recognise and reassess the prejudices I have of younger women, that have coated my work with them. These adultist prejudices are further shattered by the work of Amanda Klonsky of Free Write Jail Arts. Amanda works in Cook County Juvenile Temporary Detention Centre, where she runs groups for young women in the school. Amanda has worked in the Centre for nine years and in that time she has seen the same girls returning over and over again. The age range there is 10–17 and nearly all the young women are African-American and Hispanic and most come from Southside Chicago.

Amanda communicates to the young women that she has high expectations of them. She tells them firmly that they are there as poets and that she will be treating them as such. She presents them with a powerful poem by Jimmy Santiago Baca, 'Who Understands Me But Me' [Appendix 1], which she reads aloud. Because of the images and language used, I would have thought that the poem too complex for this age group and that they would find it 'boring', but they are totally involved. She gives them coloured pens and tells them to mark the poem as she reads, highlighting words or phrases they do not get, or words or phrases or images that they relate to. They then have 10–15 minutes for a free write, journaling on ideas from the poem. They can choose whether to read it to the group and they all do. Their writing is strong and truthful and moving and others are encouraged to give feedback, which they do supportively and with insight.

I learn, once again, how I do not think to challenge young women. When I was giving feedback to one of the young women, I had the word 'staccato' in my head, but used words like 'choppy', 'sharp' as I did not want to risk alienating her. Amanda agreed with what I was saying and used the word 'staccato' – and they all readily nodded in recognition.

When Meade and Amanda ask a question, they have an expectation of a response and wait for an answer far longer than I ordinarily would – and responses always come. Both women put very strong boundaries in place, demanding the young women stay present and engaged and that they listen to the adult. In watching them, I come to understand that my tentativeness around young women stems from a desire to not dominate them or replicate the unequal power inherent in teacher/pupil relationships. The outcome is that I do not provide a firm enough structure in which they can stretch their creative, and interpersonal, muscle.

Demonstrating my complete interest and belief in adult women is second nature to me. Having now seen what is possible to achieve, I am grateful to Meade and Amanda for the push to apply that belief to my work with younger women.

Bringing the work out

I witnessed many ways of bringing the writing of incarcerated women and girls to a public audience. Every artist I met was committed to informing the wider community about who incarcerated women really are and about the issues they confront and they do this by transforming stories into chapbooks, books, film and performance.

I had interesting discussions with artists about the notions of ownership and authorship and appropriation of the women's experiences. I am aware that it is all too easy to shape the women's work through the prism of my identities and my experiences and to impose my agenda and poetic style on their words. As a freelancer, I am not allowed to maintain an on-going relationship with the women once my workshops are finished and so it was useful to learn about structures that enable the continued involvement of 'authors' in the development of the performance piece.

The Judy Dworin Performance Project [JDPP] in Harford, Connecticut and the Medea Project in San Francisco are two companies that take the work created by incarcerated women and build on it with professional performers. They then perform this developed piece in community and theatre spaces

for the public. Eve Ensler has also undertaken a project, that is the subject of the film, 'What I Want My Words To Do To You.'

1 The latest JDPP performance piece, 'Meditations From a Garden Seat', has been developed from text and movement work created during an annual residency at York CI, intertwined with the words of Harriet Beecher Stowe. The performers are professional dancers, plus a woman who worked on the piece in the prison and has since been released. In the residency, JDPP artists support women to get their stories out and then express them through movement. The women edit their work along with Judy, as they take it off the page and rehearse for performance. The women understand that when they submit work for the script, Judy may edit it. If she does, she always speaks with each woman about what she suggests and why she wants to make the changes. If they have objections, she discusses it with them further and they find something that feels good to both of them. In prison, the piece is performed for other prisoners by the women, alongside company professionals.

Once Judy gets approval from the Warden to take material outside, she obtains the writers' permission to use and edit their work. Once the script and movement is in place, she returns to the prison to show the women what she is planning and to check out that the women are in agreement. She says the most common response is of delight and excitement at their work being presented in that way.

2 Rhodessa Jones' Medea Project: Theater for Incarcerated Women is autobiographical, interdisciplinary theatre in the powerful raw. Through the use of myth, women are inspired to explore their own stories to confront issues immediately relevant to their lives such as incarceration, motherhood, domestic violence, drug addiction and prostitution. A dramaturge and other company members help shape the piece, with a strong use of chorus as a theatrical device. The chorus keeps many women involved and interested in somebody else's story, whilst demonstrating the Second Wave women's movement mantra that 'the personal is political', that one woman's story is wider than just her own personal one.

The work is shown to the public in a professional theatre space outside of the prison. The Medea Project arranges day release from the county jail,

so that around ten incarcerated women can perform in a theatre alongside fifteen or so Medea Project performers.

3 Playwright and activist Eve Ensler ran creative writing workshops in the late 90's at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility, a maximum-security prison in upstate New York. The focus of the writing exercises were the women's crimes, their culpability and the nature of their earlier lives, that led them to commit such crimes. As with Ensler's far-reaching work 'The Vagina Monologues', the women's work was read/performed by acclaimed actors including Glenn Close, Hazelle Goodman, Rosie Perez and Marisa Tomei, both in and out of the prison. This work is featured in the film, 'What I Want My Words To Do To You'.

Although my focus was on work with women, when I came across exemplary work with men, I of course, did not ignore it. Choreographer Amie Dowling was one of the artists I came across almost by accident midway through the Travel Fellowship. We corresponded and she sent me a link to her dance/theatre film, 'Well Contested Sites', which was developed and filmed on Alcatraz Island. I was lucky to be in San Francisco for the launch of the film. I find it to be one of the most powerful artistic representations of incarceration that I have seen and I look forward to sharing it widely in the UK. The piece follows a group of men as they make their way through the transition from incarceration to life on the 'outside'. Several of the cast members have been incarcerated and Amie drew on these men's physical memories to devise a piece that would engage the audience at a visceral, body level and connect them to the impact of incarceration.

Amie and filmmaker Austin Forbord hope that as a result of seeing the film, audiences will explore the impact of prison policy and practices in the United States today. They have developed a curriculum to accompany the film, for use in high schools, colleges, community outreach and libraries. There is a link under 'resourcing' to the film and accompanying educational material.

Enhancing my practice

I came across many ideas that will enhance my effectiveness as a workshop facilitator and as a performer, which in turn will benefit the women, and men, I work with in future. These include –

1 From Maureen McNeil, the former director of the 'Diary Behind Bars' project at the Anne Frank

Centre in New York, I gained ideas for the workshops I run in prisons for the Anne Frank Trust. The Anne Frank Center USA runs a national initiative in collaboration with PEN USA, sending free copies of Anne's diaries to prisoners in exchange for them sending their prison diaries. A similar initiative is now being planned in the UK. A link to information about the project can be found in Useful Links under 'resourcing'.

As well as focussing as I do now on the wider themes thrown up by Anne's story, such as building community in confined space, survival and resilience, the refusal to be a bystander, I will now re-read the diary with an eye for ways of developing the 'smaller' incidents Anne records. For example, in the leaflet sent to prospective diarists is the following writing activity –

*Pick a favorite object you lost – a car, hat, and ring – and write its story: where did you find it? What did you do with it? How long did you have it? How did you take care of it? See Anne's entry Ode to My Fountain Pen, In Memoriam (Nov. 11, 1943). The story has a beginning of great joy, middle of satisfaction and a sad ending, much like Anne's own life.
From the Anne Frank Center USA Prison Diary Program*

- 2 Leslie Neal of ArtSpring in Florida showed me the power of ritual in prison.

'We go to the Library for the 'graduation' of the art class and to see their art exhibition. The dozen or so artists are standing in a semi-circle, wearing beautiful masks they have made and there is an audience of about a further twenty women. Each woman states her name and her 'matrilineage' – 'I am the daughter of, mother of, granddaughter of, sister to...' This is how every ArtSpring session starts.' From my journal

I have since used this structure with women, acknowledging Native American and African American cultures of honouring ancestors. It has been very useful for women to place themselves in this way, connecting themselves proudly to women in their family and bringing them into the group by vocalising their names. The ritual enabled women to speak, too, of negative feelings about women in their family or of enforced estrangement.

I also experienced the role of finger-clicking as a show of appreciation. I first encountered this at a vibrant poetry performance in Harlem by formerly-incarcerated women. At the end of each poem, rather than claps or cheers, there was enthusiastic

finger-clicking from the audience. This was amplified when I visited ArtSpring. After a woman has shared her work, appreciations are invited from the rest of the group.

If you agree with the particular appreciation that is being given, you click your fingers, so the poet or singer can see the response to their work. The louder the swell of clicks, the more it denotes agreement with the feedback' From my journal

- 3 I brought home several versions of evaluation forms, so that I can be more rigorous and systematic in judging the effectiveness of my work.

At the beginning of each Fabulous Females session, artists' and participants' goals are displayed. The young women then fill in a form containing prompts like, 'Your artistic goal', 'What will you do to make yourself feel successful by the end of this session?', as well as an 'Outside' [something visible to all, like 'I'm wearing glasses'] and an 'Inside', [something not readily visible, like a feeling]. These are then spoken aloud in an opening circle and later referred back to during the closing circle.

Voices UnBroken uses pre-workshop questionnaires, with statements ranging from 'I know types of poetry', 'I feel confident speaking in front of people' to 'I get mad at myself when I make a mistake'. There are boxes for each statement to be rated, 'Yes', 'Kind Of', 'No', 'No Comment'. The post-workshop questionnaire revisits these statements and adds others, such as 'This workshop helped me with my writing' and 'I feel like my ideas count in this workshop'. Victoria from Voices UnBroken tells me that one difficulty in collating responses is that the young women are not motivated at the start of the workshop to give much thought to the questionnaire and tick 'No Comment', whereas after the workshop they are fully engaged with reflecting on themselves and their experiences.

I also brought back from ArtSpring a comprehensive Participant Authorisation and Release Agreement, which I will adapt and give out at every workshop. Currently, I have some excellent poems that have been created in my workshops but I will never be able to use them for lack of release forms.

- 4 I have brought home writing activities, poems and poets that are new to me and that I can use as stimuli to encourage writing in my workshops. Examples of some of the poems can be found under Appendix 1.

I also collected many poems from the National Association for Poetry Therapy conference. These poems have been chosen for the immediacy of their language or for the theme or for the universal application of the message. For example, this poem was distributed in a workshop on the celebration of ageing –

■ I will not die an unlived life ■

I will not die an unlived life.
I will not live in fear
of falling or catching fire.
I choose to inhabit my days
to allow my living to open me,
to make me less afraid,
more accessible,
to loosen my heart
until it becomes a wing,
a torch, a promise.
I choose to risk my significance
to live so that which came to me as seed
goes to the next as blossom
and that which came to me as blossom

Dawna Markova

I have since used this poem to great effect as a writing activity during an Anne Frank Trust workshop.

I have never been drawn to the idea of using imagery from fairy stories, until I saw the JDPP ‘Meditations from a Garden Seat’. The performance contains a section that comprises of references to several different fairy tales. I found the power to address issues of sexual violence and exploitation compelling and chilling. Here is an excerpt –

You always told her
Home is where the heart is
Home sweet home
When Grandpa comes to visit
He gets her alone
Kisses her like Prince Charming
Smells like mothballs
Tastes like sin
Now Daddy’s little Princess
Carves love letters into her skin
Kathy Wyatt

I will use the complete section as an impetus for writing in future workshops.

Performance

As my focus was on the practice of artists in the USA, I did not expect to perform my own work during the Travel Fellowship, except perhaps as a way of introducing myself to the incarcerated women. In the end, I did perform on two occasions and gained invaluable learning from the experience.

1 In preparation for my trip, I corresponded with Julie Gayer Kris, the director of Avodah Dance, who expressed an interest in choreographing a couple of my poems. When I was in New York, we did a workshop/performance/presentation for an invited audience, predominantly of prison arts practitioners. The Avodah dancers demonstrated how they generate movement with women in prison by building movement phrases from text and then taking direction from the audience about alternative movement choices. The audience had great ideas and strengthened the choreography.

The company and I are continuing our experimentation through Skype contact and in March we will go into Bedford Hills Correctional Facility to run a workshop, as well as doing a performance and presentation about our work with women in prison for an invited audience at Hebrew Union College.

2 I had an opportunity to visit a men’s prison when I was in Michigan, seeing the work of the Prison Creative Arts Project. In the UK, I run workshops for men in prison and work best with them in small groups, where the focus is on their creativity and where I offer a poem or two of mine by way of illustration. I never perform for men, as I assume that a lot of my poetry would not be of interest to them.

Buzz Alexander of PCAP arranged for me to do a performance at Macomb Correctional Facility for Men and I found a new way of performing alongside, rather than to, male prisoners.

'I learn that several of the men who are coming to the event are in the PCAP Creative Writing class and I decide to set up a dialogue with them through poetry, whereby I perform a poem and one of them responds with his poem, which I or another man respond to with poetry. And so the evening goes. I talk and share poems about being a woman and about being the daughter of a Holocaust survivor and they come forward and share powerful poetry about the women in their lives, about the impact of slavery on them and the way incarceration controls them as Black men. In this way we have two-way communication. Several men share work for the first time and each man is willing to be vulnerable. At the end I get to shake hands with many of the men, even though touch is forbidden and the guards hassle them to leave.' *From my journal*

I intend to replicate this structure with women as well as men, as it went some way towards creating peer-ness as artists, as well as affording meaningful, respectful communication.



embedding

Aim Three

To see how arts projects in the United States have embedded creative writing within the culture and the regime of women's prisons

Inclusion

For arts work to be included and sustained in a prison setting, it is key to have a 'champion' on the inside, as well as support from prison management and from officers on the ground. This support can ensure that the work is seen as an educational and therapeutic programme, rather than just recreation.

The ultimate of an inclusive model was the California Arts in Corrections organisation. Poet Judith Tannenbaum told me of the 'glory days' in the 1970's and 80's, when it was mandatory to have an arts programme and every prison had a full time arts facilitator, who had to be a practicing artist. In the 80's and 90's San Francisco had the biggest arts-in-prison programme in the world, with several 20-hour a week residencies in each prison. In the early 2000's, the San Francisco Arts Council budget was slashed. The artist facilitators were kept on but everything else was cut. In 2010 the whole programme was dismantled, with funding given as the main reason.

However, the fact that an increasingly evidence-based culture has developed in the area of corrections cannot be ignored.

Joe Lea at York Correctional Institution was the only person I had contact with directly who is employed by a prison. Joe is a great example of someone who understands the power of creativity and he uses his influence to bring artists in to work with the women.

'Joe has created an amazing library, light and airy and awash with beautifully framed women's art – landscapes, memory boxes, Korean folded paper mobiles – alongside art from the UK Koestler Awards and posters from the many artists he invites in to work with the women. He animatedly shows me the origami books and boxes and picture frames he teaches the women to make so they have something beautiful to have in their cells or to give to loved ones.' From my journal

Joe brings in Avodah Dance Company once a year; once a month he has a resident dancer, Connie Procopio, who comes in from New York to run a choreography workshop called RISE (Raising Incarcerated Sisters Everywhere); once every two weeks he has a renowned writer, Wally Lamb, run a day of workshops; and he has a resident theatre company, the Judy Dworin Performance Project. As

already mentioned, the JDPP works with the women to devise their own dance/text performance piece in the prison, then develops the work for performance by the company for the general public. Joe has enabled many of the staff to see the power of creativity and several non-uniformed staff comment to me how Joe's work increases the women's self esteem and confidence.

With a 'champion' on the inside, it is possible to undertake long-term, on-going series of workshops, so that women are able to participate in the process from story-telling, through development to performance or publication. It was also inspiring to see, in several of the projects I visited, the depth of connection and trust between facilitators and incarcerated women, where relationships span one, or even two, decades.

At Homestead CI, I go on to an ArtSpring Inside Out session, an introductory 15-week course covering movement/dance, voice, creative writing and visual art. There are two Inside Out courses running, one with 30 participants, the second with 24. When the women complete the introductory course, they can go on to the specialised classes, which are –

- Visual Art classes – one Basic, one Advanced
- Theatre classes – one Basic, one Advanced
- A Creative Writing class
- Dance classes – one Basic, one Advanced.

A few women have been involved in Artspring for fifteen or so years. The continuity and the longevity of the courses makes it possible for women to become mentors for other women in and outside of sessions – a dream I tried unsuccessfully to realise when I was writer-in-residence in a women's prison. And when they move to other prisons, several women with a long involvement with ArtSpring are equipped to lead Inside Out sessions for other women.

The women are encouraged to address issues of responsibility to community, and supported to feel that that they have contributions to make rather than getting lost in feeling victimised. The women tell me that the programme develops them as leaders. There is an expectation that they will reach out to other women, bringing them into the programme or giving them attention and perspective at hard times.

Another form of inclusion within the culture and structure of the prison occurs where artist/facilitators work closely with support staff, such as counsellors. Fabulous Females has direct input into the young women's care plans. The artist/facilitators often know

more than the counsellors do about the young women, as the young women disclose so much of themselves through the creative process.

The Medea Project works with a social worker, recognising the need for emotional support when long-held stories burst open. The company also links closely with welfare agencies, understanding that the therapeutic process of theatre cannot meet all of the women's emotional and practical needs.

I am surprised to learn that there is disagreement, on political grounds, with artists and arts programmes being embedded in prison. The Berkeley-based group Critical Resistance believes that activists should not participate in prison programmes, as it makes them complicit in sustaining the system. They believe standing by gives the appearance of compliance, agreement. However, I rarely feel that I am a bystander when I work in prison. And as long as women are imprisoned in an environment that denies them human contact and imposes uniformity, I am glad that they have access to art forms that offer possibilities for connection and individuality.

Juggling acts

Working as an artist in prison is always precarious. You make plans, but the need for security in prison means that best laid plans can be swept aside at a moment's notice. You can be in, and of, the prison one week, the next week your work can be cancelled or postponed.

I encounter the need for flexibility in the first week of my Fellowship, when I learn there is a lock down at the first prison I am due to visit. York Correctional Institution is a high-security facility for 1030 women, serving as the Connecticut's only institution for female offenders. The day before I am due to go in, I find out that the women will be locked up for the whole week, whilst officers search for drugs and weapons. This completely scuppers the brilliant programme that has been devised for me and in the end I spend my time leading workshops for mental health staff, education staff and addiction services staff. Although not part of my remit, this opportunity gives me an interesting entry into the subject of women's incarceration in the States. It also enables me to show the documentary, 'Beautiful Sentence', which is about my work in a UK women's prison. I get a sense from this of the international accessibility of the film – despite the fact that I had to interpret sections, where the language of English and American English part ways.

Self-determination is not in copious supply in prison, and this fact can sit uncomfortably alongside artists' need for freedom to think and act. The priority and

focus of a prison is Security and Containment and that has to be our consideration as artists, as long as we are on prison ground.

Security can make demands, that we see as unfair and unhelpful, such as a prohibition on physical touch, emotional release and personal disclosure. Yet as artists we know we must contain feelings of frustration, rebellion and recklessness, if the work is not to be endangered.

In every establishment I entered, there was an official prohibition against touch. No touch is allowed between staff and women AND between the women. This is unbearable, as sentences can be long and women clearly 'in pain'. However artists told me that often the women will let you know if you can come close and touch, as they know which officers will punish them for it and which will look away.

Creative workshops can offer opportunities for touch. I watch a rehearsal of a choreographed piece, which will be shown to a visiting group of women judges.

It is both tender and dramatic work. There is a lot of pairs work, which is sensual and the women get to have close physical contact, which they clearly enjoy.

Funding

As in the UK, the voluntary sector/not-for-profit organisations play a vital role in the States in bringing programmes into prison. Despite decreased funding, artists in the US and the UK still find ways to work within prisons, with programmes that are dynamic.

The prisons I visit pay nothing towards the art projects, while the organisations and artists I met have to raise a considerable amount of money themselves, sometimes just to cover travel expenses. Organisations and artists say they would not want the prisons to fund their work, as this would mean they could have control over the content and approach. Of course the prisons do have control, with lockdowns, requirements, restrictions with regard to performances etc. but they would have even more control if they held the purse strings. Some staff in prisons clearly see the value of the work undertaken and enjoy the kudos of such high-quality work, but there is always the fear that an inside 'champion' will leave and the work will be discontinued.

There is diversity in the payment of facilitators. At one end, Leslie Neal of ArtSpring pays her facilitators a high fee, whereas facilitators in the Prison Creative Arts Project [PCAP] are students on, or graduates of, the University of Michigan programme and are volunteers, paying their own travel and even on occasion buying art materials themselves.

University and college courses

In order to embed the work now and in the future, it is important to train up younger people, who can articulate the issues and politics of incarceration and know how to use creativity sensitively and with purpose inside a prison. I visited three Higher Education courses that enable students to enter prison as arts facilitators. I have returned home keen to find out if there are comparable courses in the UK.

- 1 All roads lead to the Prison Creative Arts Programme (PCAP) at the University of Michigan. Many of the contacts I made whilst devising my Travel Fellowship programme were passionate PCAP Associates.

Dr Buzz Alexander teaches undergraduates about the Criminal Justice System and supports them to work in pairs leading arts workshops in prisons and juvenile institutions across the State. The programme has been going for 22 years and his work is nationally acclaimed. Once they have graduated, the young people can continue as Associates and I am meeting them wherever I travel. They are passionate about arts-in-corrections, many continuing to do the work without payment once they have finished the course.

Over the six days I spent in Ann Arbor, I sat in on several sessions, including a University class featuring a panel of formerly-incarcerated women and workshops of creative writing, art and crafts and theatre at Huron. I loved seeing how the students got alongside the women and enabled conversation, as well as the creation of some powerful art and performance. It was all the more remarkable as some of the young people are not artists themselves.

I strongly recommend Buzz's book about the development and work of PCAP '*Is William Martinez Not Our Brother?*'. For details, see under 'resourcing'.

- 2 Stephen Hartnett runs the Department of Communication at the University of Colorado. His students go into prisons and detention centres as Learning Partners, serving as reading tutors, study mentors and writing and speaking coaches. This experience most often inspires them to advocate for the women and men they meet inside. They are encouraged to take action and to bear witness to what they have experienced and I saw some fantastic art that the students produced. I meet with three young women who are undergraduate or Masters students in the department. One tells me, 'This is my work for the rest of my life'.

Stephen has co-authored a journal article in which he outlines the rationale for the course. This can be found under 'Articles' in 'resourcing'. An anthology, 'Captured Words, Free Thoughts: Writings from America's Prisons', is produced by the students, featuring their writing and that of the prisoners with whom they work. For details, see under 'resourcing'.

- 3 I sit in on a workshop for a group of enthusiastic 18–20 year olds, who are taking Judy Dworin's course at Trinity College, called 'The Arts and Special Populations'. The course examines the issues that surround those re-entering the community from prison; victims of crime; and children with parents in prison and the way that the arts can be used as a positive intervention. Field work in the course entails working with a group of women from Community Partners in Action's Resettlement House, who are returning to the community from York Correctional Institution in Niantic, Connecticut. As with PCAP, the students have elected to take this course in addition to their academic major, so there is a range of interests and skills as the students are drawn from many different University departments.

Supervision and peer support

In every project I visited I saw great attention being paid to the need for support and supervision of facilitators. As a condition for participating in the prison work, students and Associates of the Prison Creative Arts Project have to attend a weekly evening meeting in addition to their weekly prison visit, plus a weekly team meeting for peer support. Students also hand in weekly journals, which are responded to in detail by the course director. In the Pongo Teen Writing Project in Seattle, mentors' emotional well-being is addressed by being on a peer team, meeting before and after each session to plan, exchange stories, release emotions, give and receive support and write and share their own poems.

As freelance facilitators, it is important to set up support structures for ourselves to counteract isolation, to address the emotional cost of doing arts-in-prison work and to ensure that the work is built on a solid foundation –

'Back in prison the next day for a two hour creative writing class led by K., who is passionate, alive and clearly adored by the women. It's a huge class of around 17 women. She sets them three writing exercises – 'Write about a scar that's visible, how you got it, write the senses, as much detail as possible'. Then, 'A scar that's invisible'. Ending with, 'Some way you've tried to heal either scar,

successfully and/or unsuccessfully'. When it's time to share, the majority of the women read harrowing stories, several crying deeply. K. clearly cares for the women, but critiquing the words is inappropriate, so she thanks them for sharing and moves on to the next.' *From my journal*

After the session, K. and I have an informal support meeting, exploring how we deal with the horror of the women's stories. We talk about the impact of the work on us and about the need for a regular space, in which to offload feelings and to notice if our distresses have been 'triggered', which could threaten to impair our judgement and functioning.

Children of incarcerated parents

Arts work with children of incarcerated parents was another new area for me to explore. The Judy Dworin Performance Project has formalised this work with a project in which the children, primarily of primary school age, work with Judy's company to devise a performance piece that they show in a community centre in Hartford, and then in their mothers' prison. The JDPP also runs a weekend camp near the prison, where the children stay with artists, social workers and counsellors and go into the prison on the Saturday and Sunday to share and create performance and art with their mothers.

The Judy Dworin Performance Project has a short film, 'What I Want To Tell You', about their work with children. It is informative and on the occasions I have shown it, it has been well-received. Details are under Film in 'resourcing'

In California, I learned about the Bill of Rights for Children of Incarcerated Parents www.sfcipp.org and Project WHAT!, a Communityworks initiative that raises awareness about the effects of parental incarceration on children. The Project employs young people, who have had an incarcerated parent, as training facilitators. They have also researched, created and piloted a training curriculum for teachers and social workers, as well as a resource guide for teens with a parent in prison or jail.

<http://www.communityworkswest.org/index.php/project-what?id=44>

Re-entry

I have no previous connection to re-entry programmes, so it was good to get first-hand experience of Rising Voices, an arts-based mentorship programme in which women are paid twenty dollars to attend two two-hour sessions a week. Rising Voices is part of the Women Rising programme at the WRC [San Francisco Sheriff Department's Women's Re-entry Center], a re-entry program for formerly

incarcerated 18–25 year old women. The programme provides them with a range of services that increase their chances of transitioning to a productive and self-sufficient lifestyle. This is crucial as re-entry can be a lonely and destabilising experience and a point at which women can be vulnerable to pressures to re-offend. Women Rising provides services ranging from immediate needs like groceries, clothing and internet access to long-term support including case management and housing.

The other re-entry programme I visited, The Network, is not arts-based, but nonetheless fascinating for me, as it is built on the principles of the peer counselling model that I practice. Stephen Chinlund, an Episcopalian minister and former prison warden, devised the Programme, which provides the opportunity for former prisoners to listen and be listened to. It is peer-led because, as Stephen told me, ‘I realised they got more from listening to each other than to me, so I showed them how to lead the programme.’

The Network meeting I attend has eight members, four formerly-incarcerated women and four who are currently in Bayview, the re-entry prison in Manhattan. Two are due to be released in the next day or two and the fact that they can continue to attend the weekly meeting gives them great strength. The two-hour session is led by two powerful African-American women, one of whom served 20 years in prison. There are four rounds. The first is a specific and personal self-affirmation. In the second, everyone has the opportunity to express a stress or concern, followed by a focus on one person’s issue. Others offer ‘feedback’, in the form of same or similar experiences but free of advice giving. The third round is the sharing of short-range plans or first steps in long-term goals. The fourth is silence followed by The Clearing, an opportunity to add anything they wish to. The evening that I visited, The Clearing turned into a circle of appreciation of the group and its place in their lives.



healing

Aim Four

To explore how I might incorporate Poetry Therapy into my practice

Poetry therapy

As a poet and a counsellor, I have been intrigued for a long time to see how Poetry Therapy operates. I started my Travel Fellowship by participating in the NAPT [National Association for Poetry Therapy] Annual Conference, 'Writing the Winds of Change' in Chicago. There, I was in the company of around a hundred people, many of them registered as Poetry Therapists, or working towards registration, a role still very new in the UK.

The Conference afforded me the experience of being in a linked poetry therapy group each morning. I learned first-hand how a session is structured and experienced the benefits personally. An opening circle contains questions linked to the theme of the poem that poetry therapist will present. For example, before using a poem about the strength of the company of women, group members were given the instructions, 'Say a few words about community' and 'What are some of the groups you belong to?'

The poem is then read silently by the group, followed by two readings of the poem by the therapist or a group member. Questions are then asked by the

therapist to assist engagement with the theme of the poem – 'What words or images caught your attention?' 'What are you seeking within this poetry therapy community?' Group members then undertake a very short 'write' that can be shared towards the end of the session.

There are many similarities with the way that I work, but understandably in Poetry Therapy sessions a higher proportion of time and attention is spent on talking and self-exploration, rather than the act of writing. 'The accent in a poetry workshop is on the poem, while the accent in a poetry therapy session is on the individual.' [Dr Art Lerner]

For my practice, I learned –

- to talk about 'a writing activity' or 'doing a write', rather than using the potentially more charged and intimidating term, 'writing exercise'
- to have a poem read aloud twice, before eliciting participants' responses or writing
- to be more specific about copyright, when I distribute a published poem as a stimulus in workshops. Underneath every poem that I use in my workshops, I now type '© in the name of the poet/author. To be used for therapeutic and/or educational purposes'

■ that poetry and belly-dancing makes a great combination for a workshop!

The NAPT conference enabled me to meet two women at the forefront of Poetry Therapy and Journal Therapy, both of whom I later met in New York and Denver. Both women enriched my practice by their expertise and understanding of the therapeutic form.

Dr Sherry Reiter of The Creative Righting Center has been running a long-distance writing programme, Poets-Behind-Bars, with the collaboration of the Education Department at Indiana State Prison. Twelve trainee poetry therapists, known as ‘mentors’, are assigned to twelve poets in the prison as writing coaches. The prison poets receive assignments, which when completed are responded to by the mentors. The link to Sherry’s informative article about this programme is listed under ‘resourcing’.

Kay Adams of the Center for Journal Therapy and Therapeutic Writing Institute gave me the idea to incorporate ‘reflection writes’ into my workshops, as a way of amplifying the benefits to the ‘client’ of the writing process. The instruction she gives clients is, ‘Re-read what you have written during the session, and pay attention to what you notice, or what surprises you, stands out for you, suddenly makes sense, or is something you didn’t know you knew.’ I have since tried this out in several workshops and interesting re-evaluations have occurred for the writer.

Emotional release

The act of artistic creation, along with the atmosphere of engagement and interest exhibited in creative workshops, taps powerfully into the emotions. In nearly every workshop I visit, there are expressions of emotion, which are welcomed in a relaxed fashion by the facilitators. As soon as safety is established, many women and girls will openly express their emotions. Tears flow freely, fear is admitted and shown, whilst laughter can be a common soundtrack to the act of creativity. In a controlled prison environment, it is clear to see that emotional release can offer great relief.

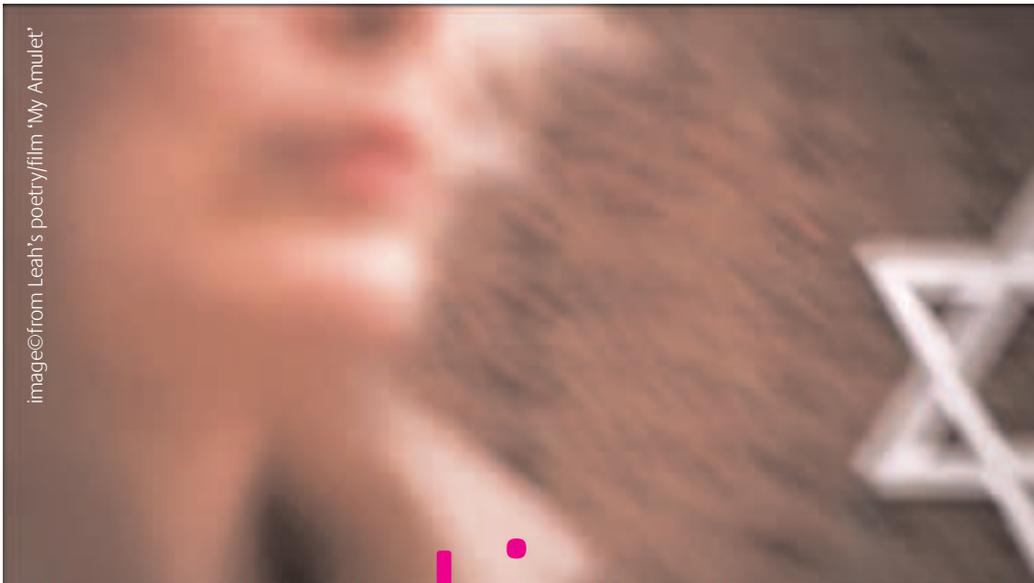
Prisons, however, can pathologise the show of emotions. Cry ‘too much’ and you risk being put on suicide watch, show your frustration too forcefully and you risk segregation. And a show of emotion from a workshop facilitator can be seen as ‘inappropriate’, and portrayed as transgressing boundaries of familiarity, becoming overly involved and losing professionalism. It’s a narrow line to walk. To make a real connection with a woman or a girl, a

facilitator many need to take risks and make themselves vulnerable. For example, to be a member of the Medea Project company, women facilitators have to be willing to tell their own stories honestly and emotionally, in order to breach the artificial divide between women on the inside and those on the out.

Healing relationships

To be creative is to be in relationship, both with yourself and with others. As stories unfold and women show who they really are and what they have been up against, relationship difficulties can recede.

‘One of the officers shouts that M. and K. should be kept apart as they have just had a fight. They are seated opposite each other around the table and the tension between them is tangible. M. is grinding her jaw continuously and K. sits slumped in her chair, refusing eye contact with anyone. After a period of writing, M. starts to read and when she gets to the part where her friend was murdered in the street next to her, she folds the paper and says she wants to stop. She starts to cry and immediately has the attention of all the women, including K. Soon M. has tears pouring down her face. She looks less tough by the second and K., along with a couple of other girls, is also crying. They then share about the deaths of friends and brothers and cousins. More poems follow, about rape and child abuse. More tears, more disclosures of harrowing stories from the group. A. closes the group by getting them to say one way they will look after themselves today, as they have opened up so much and she asks them to look out for M. They all agree they will.’ *From my journal*



image©from Leah's poetry/film 'My Amulet'

meeting

Meeting Jewish women involved in arts-in-correction work was a totally unexpected outcome of my Travel Fellowship.

Everywhere I go, I go with an awareness of being a Jewish woman. Prison is no exception.

I continually explore my motivations for doing the work I do and as I have never [knowingly] met another Jewish woman artist in prison, I am used to thinking about this on my own.

As I devised my programme schedule, I began to notice how many women artists had what I thought could be 'Ashkenazi [Eastern-European heritage] Jewish' names. I was curious and when we met up, I asked them if they were Jewish, or they volunteered that information, and that led to meaningful conversation.

We were diverse in terms of our age, religious practice/non-practice, prison work experience, relationship to our Jewish identity and the ways we express our Jewishness and yet many themes resonated. Many of us grew up with the notion of 'tikkun olam' [repairing the world]; some of us are mental health system survivors or had mental health system survivors in our families; several of us are daughters or granddaughters of Holocaust survivors; all of us feel drawn to action, not by-standing.

Having these conversations propelled me to write out some previously unspoken thoughts and I intend to develop the fragments that follow into a performance piece.

Making links

I am always interested to meet Jewish women, who are incarcerated. The number of Jewish women in US prisons is unclear – many of the artists I met said there were 'hardly any', but that's a problematic answer.

'A young woman approaches me and pointing to my Magen David [Star of David], shows me hers. I see from her name badge that she is called Shayna, a Yiddish name meaning 'beautiful'. Shayna later tells me that she has been celebrating Shabbat with Shelly, another Jew and that there are twelve Jewish women in Homestead CI out of a prison population of 700. She says this is proportional to the number of Jews in Florida.'
From my journal

It is also hard to estimate the number of Jewish prisoners in the UK. Once imprisoned, a questioned is asked about religious affiliation and unless Jews are religiously observant, in my experience they will not say they are Jewish. I can think of three main reasons for this –

The identity does not feel important enough to them

or

They are overwhelmed by shame at being in prison and want to keep quiet about being Jew

or

They fear being picked on and want to narrow the possibilities for victimisation.

I go into prison with a fair smattering of identities and many skills born of six decades of life experience. One crucial identity I carry is that of being a daughter of a Holocaust survivor and many of my strengths [and unfortunately my challenges] as an arts-in-prison facilitator derive from this identity.

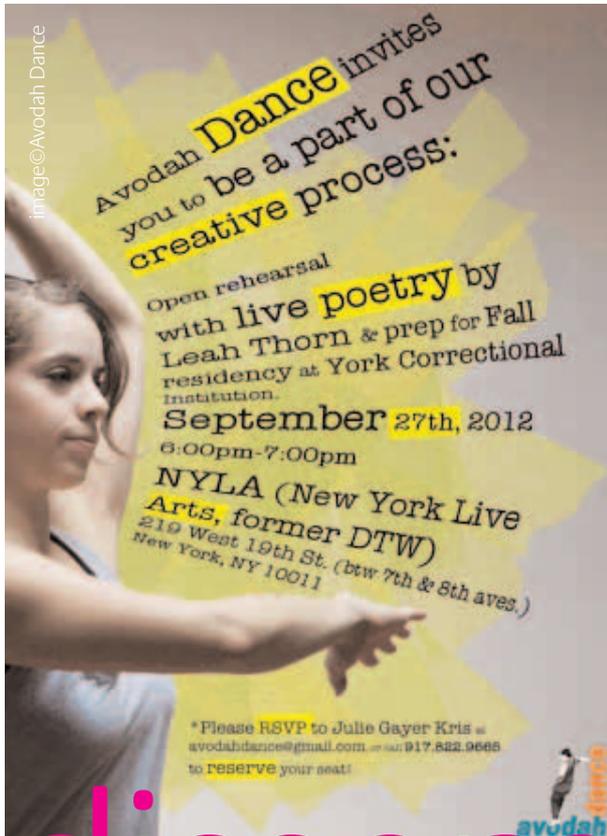
I started working in a women's prison just after my mother died. I could not have managed to be a support/facilitator for women in prison AND my mother, as she demanded a lot of me. After her death, it was as if I transferred my skills of calmness in the midst of chaos to the prison setting. In my family I learnt early on that it did not work well for several people to panic at the same time, so I taught myself to be [outwardly] relaxed and comforting when my parents panicked, to become that calming influence, a benign contradiction to raging terror and grief. This is an invaluable skill in prison.

Because of the heaviness of my upbringing, I learned to think well in hard places and I am quick to use light, sometimes humorous, interventions to deflect a threatening atmosphere. I always try and think of a positive way to interrupt what I perceive as unjust action. Again, useful in prison settings.

Very early on, I decided I would never be a bystander and I try not to be hard on myself when I do not live up to this ideal. This is especially true in prison, when I sometimes decide to stay quiet in a situation, so as not to accelerate tensions.

I can't bear to see the intense pain of another person, yet am drawn to it, a kind of 'Horror by Proxy'. Working in prison means coming face to face with all that is wrong in the world – and just how wrong it is. I want to 'fix things', [tikkun olam] with all that's honourable about that AND all that comes from the urgency and unbearable-ness of seeing suffering up close, stark, stripped bare.

Some of the Jewish artists I met wrote down thoughts about their identity and what this means for their work in prison. I want our voices to be heard – exactly in the spirit of the work we do so expertly with women who are incarcerated – and so with their permission, I have featured some of their writing in Appendix 2.



disseminating

I feel drawn to speak out about my experiences in the States and to spread the women's words by showing the films. So far, I have spoken at three events –

- on a panel at the London Feminist Film Festival
- at the Women In Prison 'The State of the Estate' event, January '13, where I also showed an extract from the Fabulous Females documentary, 'Girls On The Wall'
- at a gathering of artists and therapists in East Kent, where I showed clips from several films and participants created a group poem [an extract from the poem ends this report].

I am organising further dissemination events, which will take place at London Met University; Sydney De Haan Research Centre for Arts and Health; the RSA; Canterbury Christchurch University; Harrow Limmud; Women In Prison and Clean Break Theatre Company.

In March '13, I return to New York to do a performance/presentation with Avodah Dance Company at Hebrew Union College and in Bedford Hills Correctional Facility for Women.

In May '13, I will co-present two workshops at the Inter-Disciplinary 4th Global Conference, 'Experiencing Prison', Prague May '13 with Amie

Dowling and Reggie Daniels, two of the artists I met in San Francisco.

In June '13, I am presenting a paper at the International Culture, Health and Wellbeing Conference in Bristol.

In August '13 I will return to York Correctional Facility to run workshops and see the latest performance piece devised by the women as part of the Judy Dworin Performance Project residency.

I have contributed an article for the University of Michigan's Prison Creative Arts Project newsletter; have been invited by Rachael Hudak of Chicago to contribute to the self care zine, 'May You Be Free' and by Kay Adams to write a chapter for the next book she is editing, 'Teaching In and Out of the Classroom'.

I have set aside February to begin to create a poetry performance piece about my take on the incarceration of women.

As a result of the Travel Fellowship, I am extremely motivated to run a weekly workshop in a women's prison, with a long-term goal of training women to facilitate workshops themselves. I also want to offer individual sessions based on the Poetry Therapy model. I am currently identifying funds that will enable me to do this.



image©Medea Project

resourcing

Books

Airless Spaces
Shulamith Firestone
Semiotext[e] 1998

All Alone In The World: Children of the Incarcerated
Nell Bernstein
New Press 2007

'By Heart': Poetry, Prison, and Two Lives
Judith Tannenbaum and Spoon Jackson
New Village Press 2010

Creating Behind the Razor Wire
Krista Brune
<http://www.lulu.com/us/en/shop/krista-brune/creating-behind-the-razor-wire/paperback/product-3361270.html>

Disguised As A Poem: My Years Teaching Poetry at San Quentin
Judith Tannenbaum
Northeastern University press 2000

Is William Martinez Not Our Brother?
Buzz Alexander
University of Michigan Press 2010

Longer Ago
Spoon Jackson, 2010

Only the Dead Can Kill: Stories from Jail
Margo Perin
Community Works West 2006

Performing New Lives: Prison Theatre
ed. Jonathan Shailor, Jessica Kingsley 2011

Prison Transformations: The System, the People Inside and Me
Stephen Chinlund 2009
www.Xlibris.com

release
compiled and edited by Leah Thorn
Bar None Books 2011

The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness
Michelle Alexander
The New Press, 2010/2012

Unruly Women: The Politics of Confinement and Resistance
Karlene Faith
Press Gang 1993, 2011

Write Your Way: Voicing Individuality and Community a Voices UnBroken Curriculum 2010
www.voicesunbroken.org

Chapbooks and magazines

Captured Words, Free Thoughts: Writings from America's Prisons
Department of Communication
University of Colorado
Denver 2012
[http://www.ucdenver.edu/academics/colleges/CLAS/Department of Communication/Documents/CWFT 10 2012.pdf](http://www.ucdenver.edu/academics/colleges/CLAS/Department%20of%20Communication/Documents/CWFT_10_2012.pdf)

City Limits: Behind Bars
issue on Female Inmates, Male Guards and Sex Crimes in New York's Prisons
Vol 35, no.2 May/June 2011
<http://www.citylimits.org/magazine/157/may-june-2011>

Escape Route
Free Write Jail Arts anthologies
<http://www.freewritejailarts.org>

Girls in the System: a story about young women and the juvenile justice system
a graphic zine from Jane Addams Hull-House Museum 2011
<http://www.hullhousemuseum.org>

How to explain jails and prisons to children: A caregiver's guide
California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation and Friends Outside
<http://www.f2f.ca.gov/res-YouthParents.htm>

Stories from the SHU: psychiatrically disabled inmates in solitary confinement in New York State
Mental Health Alternatives to Solitary Confinement 2005

The Prison Industrial Complex is...
Jane Addams Hull-House Museum 2010/11
<http://www.hullhousemuseum.org>

Voices Ink
Voices UnBroken magazine
<http://www.voicesunbroken.org/program.html>

With My Hands I Write
by young women of Odyssey House Lafayette
Voices UnBroken

Write Your Own Story
by students at Island Academy High School on Rikers Island,
Voices UnBroken

Film

At Night I Fly
This documentary shows men, most serving a life sentence, who work to uncover and express themselves. Their primary tool is making art and the film takes us to New Folsom's Arts in Corrections' room, to prison poetry readings, gospel choirs, blues guitar on the yard, and to many more scenes of creation.
<http://www.atnightifly.com/index.php?id=1>

Beautiful Sentence
directed by Suzanne Cohen
A documentary following Leah Thorn's work as writer-in-residence at HMP Bronzefield
<http://vimeo.com/24013313>

Bridging The Gap
An intergenerational project between incarcerated women and young women in a detention centre, ArtSpring

Dreamcatching and Pieces Of Me
Youth With Incarcerated Parents Program

Girls On The Wall: a true story of a lockdown musical
Fabulous Females process leading to performance
<http://www.girlsonthewallmovie.com/>

Meditations from a Garden Seat
Judy Dworin Performance project

My Life in the Concrete Jungle
Medea Project: Theatre for Incarcerated Women performance, where incarcerated women come out of the county jail to perform in an established fringe theatre alongside professional actors.
<http://www.medeaproject.org/resources.php>

Prison Lullabies
Portrait of four women arrested for dealing and prostitution, who are in a Mother and Baby Unit in prison
<http://www.sandblastproductions.com/film.prison-lullabies>

Time In
Judy Dworin Performance project

We Just Telling Stories
The process by which work is devised by the Medea Project: Theatre for Incarcerated Women, building on women's true stories about themselves and the world,
<http://www.medeaproject.org/resources.php>

What I Want To Tell You: children with incarcerated parents
Youth With Incarcerated Parents Program
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gha7inTSFZc>

What I Want My Words To Do To You
Focuses on a writing group led by playwright and activist Eve Ensler at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility for Women. The film culminates in a performance of the women's writing by acclaimed actors
www.youtube.com/watch?v=szBDN-Hp4PU

Well Contested Sites
Amie Dowling and Austin Forbord
<http://vimeo.com/52877758>

For curriculum guide and additional resources visit
<http://www.facebook.com/WellContestedSites?fref=ts>

Articles

Beautiful Sentence: Poetry as a therapeutic intervention
Leah Thorn
'Interventions in Criminal Justice', ed. Peter Jones, Pavilion 2012

Dramatic Healing: The Evolution of a Trauma-Informed Musical Theatre Program for Incarcerated Girls
Meade Palidofsky and Bradley C. Stolbach
Journal of Child & Adolescent Trauma August 2012

Expression and reflection: Toward a new paradigm in expressive writing
Kathleen Adams
Expressive writing: Foundations of practice, ed. Kathleen Adams. Lanham MD: R&L Education, forthcoming 2013

Manual for Artists Working in Prison
Judith Tannenbaum
<http://judithtannenbaum.com/prison-arts/>

Obstacles Confront Women in Prison and the Women Who Advocate for Them
Cynthia L. Cooper
American Bar Association Winter 2005
http://www.americanbar.org/publications/perspectives_magazine/_home/perspectives_magazine_index.html

Poets-Behind-Bars: A creative 'righting' program for prisoners and poetry therapists-in-training
Sherry Reiter
<http://theprisonartscoalition.com/2011/09/20/poets-behind-bars-an-opportunity-for-poets-inside-and-out/>

Turning Silence Into Speech and Action: Prison Activism and the Pedagogy of Empowered Citizenship
Stephen Hartnett, Jennifer K. Wood and Bryan J. McCann
Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies vol 8, no 4 December
http://www.academia.edu/961207/Turning_Silence_into_Speech_and_Action_Prison_Activism_and_the_Pedagogy_of_Empowered_Citizenship

Writing with teens at risk
Richard Gold
Expressive writing: Foundations of practice, ed. Kathleen Adams. Lanham MD: R&L Education, forthcoming 2013

Useful Links

Anne Frank Center USA

Prison Diary Program

This program encourages prisoners to utilize the same means of self-expression — writing a diary — that Anne used to endure her imprisonment while in hiding.

<http://annefrank.com/current-exhibit/prison-diary-program/>

ArtSpring

A not-for-profit organization in Florida, believes in the power of art to transform individuals and strengthen communities, using arts-based educational programming to develop self-growth and effective life skills.

www.artspring.org/

Communityworks

Engages youth and adults in arts, education and restorative justice programs that interrupt and heal the far-reaching impact of incarceration and violence by empowering individuals, families and communities. Programmes include 'Rising Voices' a paid writing and performance internship for previously incarcerated women aged 18–25, and Project WHAT! [We're Here And Talking], a youth-led initiative that raises awareness about the impact of parental incarceration on children.

www.communityworkswest.org

The Corston Report

A report by Baroness Jean Corston of a review of women with particular vulnerabilities in the Criminal Justice System

www.justice.gov.uk/publications/docs/corston-report-march-2007.pdf

Critical Resistance

<http://www.criticalresistance.org>

Fabulous Females

http://www.storycatchertheatre.org/site/epage/50818_678.htm

Free Write Jail Arts

<http://www.freewritejailarts.org/>

Medea Project Theatre for Incarcerated Women

<http://www.medeaproject.org/>

National Association for Poetry Therapy

<http://www.poetrytherapy.org/>

Pongo Teen Writing Project

Printable poems and structured activities

www.pongoteenwriting.org

Prison Arts Coalition

<http://theprisonartscoalition.com/>

Prison Creative Arts Project

Founded in 1990 by Professor Buzz Alexander of the University of Michigan, The Prison Creative Arts Project (PCAP) is committed to original work in the arts in Michigan correctional facilities, juvenile facilities, urban high schools, and communities across the State

<http://www.lsa.umich.edu/pcap>

Therapeutic Writing Institute

<http://twinstitute.net>

The Creative 'Righting' Center

www.thecreativerightingcenter.com

The Center for Journal Therapy

www.journaltherapy.com

Voices UnBroken

An organisation dedicated to providing under-heard members of the community, aged 14–21, with tools and opportunity for self-expression. Through creative writing workshops in jails, prisons, group homes and various other transitional and alternative settings, Voices UnBroken nurtures the inherent need in all people to tell their stories.

<http://voicesunbroken.org/>

Write and Rise

www.writeandrise.com



appending

Appendix 1 |
Examples of poems used
as stimuli in workshops
pages 34–39

Appendix 2 |
Being Jewish women artists
working in prison
pages 40–43

■ Who Understands Me But Me ■

They turn the water off, so I live without water,
they build walls higher, so I live without treetops,
they paint the windows black, so I live without sunshine,
they lock my cage, so I live without going anywhere,
they take each last tear I have, I live without tears,
they take my heart and rip it open, I live without a heart,
they take my life and crush it, so I live without a future,
they say I am beastly and fiendish, so I have no friends,
they stop up each hope, so I have no passage out of hell,
they give me pain, so I live with pain,
they give me hate, so I live with my hate,
they have changed me, and I am not the same man,
they give me no shower, so I live with my smell,
they separate me from my brothers, so I live without brothers,
who understands me when I say this is beautiful?
who understands me when I say I have found other freedoms?
I cannot fly or make something appear in my hand,
I cannot make the heavens open or the earth tremble,
I can live with myself, and I am amazed at myself, my love,
my beauty,
I am taken by my allures, astounded by my fears,
I am stubborn and childish,
in the midst of this wreckage of life they incurred,
I practice being myself,
and I have found parts of myself never dreamed of by me,
they were goaded out from under rocks in my heart
when the walls were built higher,
when the water was turned off and the windows painted black.
I followed these signs
like an old tracker and followed the tracks deep into myself,
followed the blood-spotted path,
deeper into dangerous regions, and found so many parts of myself,
who taught me water is not everything,
and gave me new eyes to see through walls,
and when they spoke, sunlight came out of their mouths,
and I was laughing at me with them.
We laughed like children and made pacts to always be loyal,
who understands me when I say this is beautiful?

■ Fear Poem ■

I release you, my beautiful and terrible
fear. I release you. You were my beloved
and hated twin, but now, I don't know you
as myself. I release you with all the
pain I would know at the death of
my children.

You are not my blood anymore.

I give you back to the white soldiers
who burned down my home, beheaded my children,
raped and sodomized my brothers and sisters.
I give you back to those who stole the
food from our plates when we were starving.

I release you, fear, because you hold
those scenes in front of me and I was born
with eyes that can never close.

I release you

I release you

I release you

I release you

I am not afraid to be angry.

I am not afraid to rejoice.

I am not afraid to be black.

I am not afraid to be white.

I am not afraid to be hungry.

I am not afraid to be full.

I am not afraid to be hated.

I am not afraid to be loved,

to be loved, to be loved, fear.

Oh, you have choked me, but I gave you the leash.
You have gutted me, but I gave you the knife.
You have devoured me, but I laid myself across the fire.

I take myself back, fear.

You aren't my shadow any longer.

I won't take you in hands.

You can't live in my eye, my ears, my voice,
my belly, or in my heart my heart
my heart my heart.

But come here, fear.

I am so alive and you are so afraid
of dying.

■ Where I'm From ■

Because she liked the 'kind of music' that I listened to and she liked the way I walked as well as the way I talked, she always wanted to know where I am from.

If I said that I was from 110th Street and Lexington Avenue, right in the heart of a transported Puerto Rican town, where the hodedores live and night turns to day without sleep, do you think then she might know where I was from?

Where I'm from, Puerto Rica stays on our minds when the fresh breeze of cafe con leche y pan con mantequilla comes through our half-open windows and under our doors while the sun starts to rise.

Where I'm from, babies fall asleep to the bark of a German shepherd named Tarzan. We hear his wandering footsteps under a midnight sun. Tarzan has learned quickly to ignore the woman who begs her man to stop slapping her with his fists. 'Please, baby! Por favor! I swear it wasn't me. I swear to my mother. Mameeee!! (Her dead mother told her that this would happen one day.)

Where I'm from, Independence Day is celebrated every day. The final gunshot from last night's murder is followed by the officious knock of a warrant squad coming to take your bread, coffee and freedom away.

Where I'm from, the police come into your house without knocking. They throw us off rooftops and say we slipped. They shot my father and say he was crazy. They put a bullet in my head and say they found me that way.

Where I'm from, you run to the hospital emergency room because some little boy spit a razor out of mouth and carved a crescent into your face. But you have to understand, where I'm from even the dead have to wait until their number is called.

Where I'm from, you can listen to Big Daddy retelling stories on his corner. He passes a pint of light Bacardi, pouring the dead's tributary swig onto the street. "I'm God when I put a gun to our head. I'm the judge and you in my courtroom."

Where I'm from, it's the late night scratch of rats' feet that explains what my mother means when she says slowly, "Bueno, mijo, eso es la vida del pobre." (Well, son, that is the life of the poor.)

Where I'm from, it's sweet like my grandmother reciting a quick prayer over a pot of hot rice and beans. Where I'm from, it's pretty like my niece stopping me in the middle of the street and telling me to notice all the stars in the sky.

And a poem inspired by the Perdomo poem –

S.R. | of Voices Unbroken

■ Where I Come From ■

where I come from
fathers don't come back
where I come from
people die every day
where I come from
little girls always get raped
where I come from
you hear gunshots every hour
where I come from
people die in front of your face
where I come from
newborns are HIV positive
where I come from
teenage boys and girls are smoking crack
where I come from
little girls sell their bodies
where I come from
that's where I come from

■ Self Love ■

There is nothing wrong with me
that has to be fixed
not the size of my thighs
not the wrinkling of my skin
not the swelling of my belly
the panache of my moustache
not the depth of my scars

SELF LOVE

It's a long, long journey from self-hatred to self-love
self-abuse to self-caress
self-critique to openness
self-regard without distress

It's a long, long journey from self-hatred to self-love
self-restriction to expansion
arid to creation
numbness to elation

SELF LOVE

I don't give myself away willingly

Prick my innocence
till I bleed
droplets of self-disgust

Mess with this mind
that is mine
till I spew self-doubt

Desire my soul
till I disconnect
and own it no longer

Drum into me I'm nothing
till the beat
becomes my beat

conditioned to upbraid
compelled to negate
coerced to castigate

everything I do
everything I say
everything I think
everything I choose
everything I am

everything I think I am
everything I choose to think
everything I say I do
everything I think I think
everything I am

What blocks the journey from self-hatred to self-love?
aspiring to perfection
terror of rejection
believing limitation
craving adoration

It's a powerful move from self-hatred to self-love
letting go of long ago
learning to say NO!
radiant glow
energy flow

SELF-LOVE

'cos

there is nothing wrong with me
that has to be fixed
not the size of my thighs
not the wrinkling of my skin
not the swelling of my belly
the panache of my moustache
not the depth of my scars

SELF LOVE

Kathy Gersten | Judy Dworin Performance Project

I have for the past eight years been involved in an original performance based project at a state prison for women in Connecticut. In this particular program the women divide themselves into speakers, dancers and singers. I have the fortunate opportunity to work with the women who choose to use movement as their vehicle for expression.

I have always thought of myself first as a woman, then an artist and then Jewish. Having been brought up in a conservative Jewish household, making bat mitzvah, I was taught to believe and to give back; tzedakah. My religious upbringing formed a foundation that grew to be less focused on religion and more on culture and spirituality; humanity and compassion, no matter how small or grandiose.

As a young dancer technique was my primary focus, learn a new language, a new vocabulary and discover the many ways it could be used to express an idea, thought or feeling. The life and breath within this language led me to a place of focus within; enabling me to find the pathways out to and for others. Working with Judy Dworin and the Performance Project for three decades has enabled me to hone this skill, dig deeper and find an honest authentic voice that this language of movement offers.

My journey into the prison has felt important from the very first moment the idea was presented. The honesty of movement, the soul exposing and embracing moments, confirms for me that our actions are as important if not more important than our beliefs. Seeing seven or eight women who don't trust, are hyper-vigilant, and possessive about their space form a clump as tight and as close as they can and then slowly circle, speaks volumes to our collective humanity. When researching Judaism I found the words, yetzer ha-tov, inclination to do good and yetzer hara, as well as harm. These two Hebrew words truly express the underlying base for my understanding of this work with the women, not to ever judge. We share a responsibility to help one another, tikkun olam, 'repair the world'. I try to do just that through the arts, one moment at a time.

I teach visual art to women at the Homestead Correctional Institution, a maximum-security prison in Southwest Miami as part of ArtSpring. My deep belief that creative expression is essential to a healthy life, and that it becomes even more essential when a person is placed in a position of stress, where their rights have been stripped away, and their ability to make choices revoked. I am also addicted to seeing the product of my students work – they make such incredible things and they always surprise me.

I'm the kind of Jewish woman who loves tradition, holidays, bagels and lox, but doesn't feel very connected to Judaism as a faith since Hebrew school. I was raised hearing about my mother's biological parents struggle fleeing Poland to Italy and then the US during the Holocaust – always in the context of why I should marry Jewish and raise Jewish children (as vindication? out of reverence?); my father, however, was raised Irish Catholic and is a long-time agnostic. I don't think we ever talked about God in my house growing up. We celebrated Christmas until my parents separated when I was eight.

I always cringe when people say "You look Jewish," "I've never seen a Jewish girl with blue eyes," or "You don't look THAT Jewish" – both because they are being somewhat prejudiced and naive, and because I am certain that the standard "Jewish" aesthetic they might have in mind is not a stunning one. I think it's strange for people to think that I look "Jewish" when I don't feel particularly Jewish in faith – I should, and do, look Polish and Irish. Those are my genes, not my religion showing.

I stumbled upon the field of arts-in-healthcare while looking for deeper meaning in my own art practice during college. At a workshop on arts-in-health, I met Leslie Neal, the founder of ArtSpring, and had the privilege to hear her speak about the incredible impact of her work. I couldn't adequately express how floored and moved I was by her program at the time – I just knew that I wanted to do what she was doing for the rest of my life. I was even more awed when I saw a performance of her students' work. I felt that everyone needed to see these people, women that our communities push away and reduce to numbers, as whole individuals. The reflective work they were doing, the way they spoke about themselves with clarity and confidence – I said then and uphold that they are more poised and self-aware than 90% of the people I meet in the free world. Every session I get to spend working with the women at HCI is a gift. Their creativity and insight continue to amaze me.

The connection between my identity as a Jewish woman and my prison work is somewhat lengthy but very close. My mother's biological parents were Holocaust survivors. Deeply shaken by their experiences, they were institutionalized when they arrived in the United States, and were not able to continue caring for my infant mother and her slightly older sister. They were placed in the care of the Jewish Child Care Association in New York, and moved between foster homes for a few years before coming to live with the grandparents I knew, who were also Jewish, but were never able to officially adopt my mom and her sister due to legal restrictions and the fact that my biological grandparents were still living. My mother and her sister were severely affected by this as young children. They lived in several damaging households before they found a stable home with their long-term foster parents. Some combination of biological predisposition and life experience gave my mother, her sister, and their biological mother a huge burden of trauma and mental illness to bear. My aunt committed suicide in her twenties. Her mother attempted the same. My mother has suffered from major depression her whole life and has been hospitalized many times for such. Her battle with this illness and her personal history have been an enormous part of my own development. I was always a caretaker, and constantly seeking a way to make her feel better. This instinct is what drew me to healing art work – I was amazed to see how the things I already loved to do, and used to protect my own sanity, could be so effective in helping others to cope with hardship and recover from trauma. Knowing my family's story also gave me great sensitivity to how childhood trauma and family circumstance can affect adults and their decision-making. I know that so many of the women I work with have been victims of abuse and neglect. That immediately gave me perspective as to how they may have ended up incarcerated. My experiences with my mother gave me the belief that there aren't 'good' and 'bad' people – there are people who need empathy, patience and room for self-exploration, and people who need even more empathy, patience, and room for self-exploration.

Is it coincidence that I am Jewish and working with prisoners through the Poets-Behind-Bars? I thought so till I met Leah Thorn. We sat over lunch, pondering the question. I was startled to learn that Leah’s mother was a survivor and we had some parallel experiences. At age eighteen in Vienna, my father was a young man on the run. He left Vienna shortly after the Nazis came, rounded the youth, made them kneel on the ground, take off their socks and scrub the street. Fortunately for him, he took this humiliation to heart, packed a knapsack and left home the next morning without any papers. He kept moving from France to Switzerland to Cuba and eventually, with the kindness of strangers, to America. There were many years of struggle ahead, and as his daughter, I have often wondered if I could have fared as well as he did in the face of adversity.

I am named for my grandmother, Zelda, who died in the camps, as did my grandfather. This knowledge alone was of great impact. Even as a child, I had nightmares about the war, layering my clothing, hiding jewellery, trying to decide what to take, and the terror of being powerless in the clutches of malevolent forces. What was it like to be taken away, transported, imprisoned in the camps, and then gassed? Even though my father never spoke about his parents or their death, the silence about it was deafening. I grew up knowing that the world is a place that has evil within it, and evil sometimes prevails over good. And knowing this, early on, I made a promise to myself that I had no choice but to be good.

Perhaps, I reasoned, as only idealistic imaginative children can, that if every Jewish child borne of every Jewish survivor made this promise, we could tip the scale for good. The concept of Tikkun – mending, or repair of the world is essential. Nothing I do can bring back my grandparents or the torment of that generation. But if I could help people who suffer, or if I could lessen pain in the world, perhaps...There would be less evil.

Like my father, I became a social worker but I was also a writer. I came from a very strict and overprotective home where emotion was not well tolerated. My father was moody; perhaps he suffered from depression. When I was 18, I found that in writing poetry, I could express my thoughts and feelings and the blank page was always welcoming. By the time I was 21, I was doing expressive workshops – using creative writing and drama, and in my late 20s became certified as a poetry therapist.

This eventually became the center of my professional life – to help others to express themselves—to assist people to empower and liberate themselves through the spoken and written word. I became known as a trainer of poetry therapists – working with many marginalized populations.

One day I received a letter from a prisoner who stated that there were a group of men in the Indiana State maximum security prison who wanted to write. Could he somehow receive training in poetry therapy? Or was there a way to make my program available to the men? At first I said no, and then the second time, I said no again. When he sent his third letter, I was impressed with his perseverance, and it reminded me of my own struggles, professionally banging on doors that would not open. So why not? Why not say Yes. There are enough Nos in the world. So a little voice inside whispered ‘Say yes.’ And I did.

I was able to get the certifying body of the National Federation for Biblio/Poetry Therapy to accept facilitation and supervision credit for poetry therapists in training, and then persuaded the prison, with the help of the Education Director, Helen Gabriel, to implement the program. Twelve men who wanted to write were partnered with twelve poetry-therapists-in-training. The results were so rewarding that the program has continued for five years, and now, in addition to poetry therapists in training, writers, therapists and other qualified volunteers who are well versed in poetry and psychology continue the work.

I have always had a great sympathy for persons who are trapped – whether from psychological, physical disorders, or social/economic/political conditions. Is that an accident? Is it accidental that I had nightmares of trying to leave, trying to get out, living in exile from the time I was young? Is there a genetic memory through which my grandmother’s experience was transmitted to me? Or is this a common phenomenon in second or third generation Jewish children? What I know is this: Humans so often imprison themselves and are imprisoned by other forces. I cannot liberate them, but the words are signposts, markers, that are reminders that the Soul itself is capable of breaking free.

Julie Gayer Kris | Avodah Dance Company

I sometimes accept BIG challenges with little or no experience to see how I'll do. I thought of this as Jewish in a way – giving myself 'challenges' or 'obstacles' to create a struggle for myself as a way to grow.

Working in prison has felt a lot of times like feeling my way through a dark room. Unable to see, yet leading others. Stumbling quite often. Feeling awkward. Feeling the support of the women, or our dance group, of our supporters. That support helped me. I needed to create work that was meaningful and not in a vacuum. I needed to experience ritual in dance that wasn't only for a stage or a theater. I needed a safe (how odd!) place to explore and develop my own creative voice. I floundered and found it in prison/also in the Jewish community in NYC. Feeling safe and supported helped me to be creative as an artist. And to find my voice. And the chaos of that journey – sometimes leading us all into that chaotic, unsure place where the outcome was uncertain. But having some incredible moments with the women that really tapped into the power of what I believe dance can be. And feeling a freedom in a new way of expressing. While I am encouraging them to find expression through dance, I've been searching and finding my own.