
Naming Our Fears

by

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In the Lifeskills, Jobskills and Relationship Programming that I have developed at the Belknap County Department of Corrections, Laconia, New Hampshire, inmates take the first steps in naming their terrors or addictions by creating word-lists or word associations that contain the hidden patterns of their lives. We may break into small group sessions and speak a lot about domestic violence, or substance abuse, or any number of issues, but until we make a record of our thoughts and goals and strengths and weaknesses, we can turn our backs on all of it. In writing our lists, we confront what T. S. Eliot has called, "the still point in a turning world."

The ages of these inmate students range between eighteen and mid-thirties; they are male and female. In a class of eight, males outnumber females by 3 to 1. If they're lucky, some might have their G.E.D. Most don't. For many of them, abusing alcohol and drugs has obliterated much of the education. They are usually in jail as the direct result of a misdemeanor committed under the influence of substance abuse that began in grammar school and simply became a way of life. They've had to think about their own survival since they were kids. Selfishness guarantees survival. Empathy is a luxury they cannot afford. Living fast, carefree and for-the-moment is as far into the future as most can see.

Getting caught may be a gift. It will force some of them to reconsider where they've been, and where they're headed. It's a long journey.

My job is to present them with options that they may never have considered before. So, slowly, I begin to establish a rapport, and because writing is such an important part of my life, I introduce it into theirs. I ask each of them to begin the transformation of their world with the scratching of a single word onto paper. It becomes their act of commitment. Very much like the first lines of the Gospel of John, where the creation of a new world begins with the uttering of a single word made flesh: "Before anything else existed, there was the Word..."

One twenty-year-old man, when asked to compile a list of the influences on him as a child, wrote only three words:

picked-on
drinking
working

Another inmate, a thirty-year-old mother forced to give-up custody of her daughter because she was addicted to pain-killers, wrote why she used drugs:

No worries
Feels good
Warm
Didn't have to think about nothing
I like it

These kinds of lists offer the inmates the opportunity to ask, "Who am I?" Carol Pearson, in *The Hero Within*, writes that "wanderers do not learn their lessons all at once..." Later in the book she adds that "first choices are crude and clumsy." But she reiterates that none of us can skip our journey toward individuation. Ultimately, Ms. Pearson tells us that "there is no way to avoid the hero's quest."

So I begin by telling my "students" that they are on a hero's journey and, in the end, the lists that they develop will become maps of where they've been and, more importantly, where they're headed.

In a Values and Decision-making class, these inmates and I look in a hand-held mirror and record what we find there. For thirty seconds, each of us, in our turn, stares back at the face staring back at us. Then we try to pass on that face. It never works. As soon as the light in the mirror is reflected away from our face, the visage of a stranger takes its place. So we let it go. But hurriedly, we begin our list of the features that we saw in the mirror when the face was ours: Stubble, acne, red eyes, loneliness, fear, a chip on the shoulder... The list is that short and varied. But it begins the process of exploration. That list becomes a reference point for each writer to expand on, if not in that class, then in others that will follow.

From this list exercise, we have created "community pieces." These are shared experience word lists that sometimes become magic. Through discussion, individual lists are gingerly threaded into fragments of a similar idea that are shared by all of the group members. Then these ideas are edited into a theme piece and composed into a poetic format. When fleshed out, it becomes a vision statement, a momentary reflection on a way of life:

As a child I played on the tracks
because I enjoyed picking up the warm rocks
that tickled my palm

Spreading my legs wide
I reached from tie to tie
It felt good

The train might come
But surely it would come later

It's always a struggle to complete a "community piece." Some inmates are not ready yet to get their act together. They're not at their bottom. But there are times, when all the connections are just right, that a silence enters the room and heads nod in agreement. Sneers are wiped away. For the first time, for some, the idea of looking at something from somebody else's point of view becomes clear.

When I first started this job at the Department of Corrections, I tried to explain to an inmate why his wife might be throwing fits every time he came home late, and drunk to boot. "Look at it from her point of view," I said. "She had supper ready at five because you said you'd be home at five. The kids waited up until eleven to see Dad. But by then they were tired and cranky. Your supper was cold and your wife had had it. Tell me you wouldn't be in a bitchy mood." But he didn't get it. He could only see it from his perspective. The guys at work asked him out, he said "sure," had a few beers, shot some pool, and before you know it it's one in the morning. He gets home and the bitch is yelling at him. Why shouldn't he hit her to shut her up?

I realized then that he didn't really understand who he was yet, and here I was asking him to try to understand his wife. So I began my listing exercises. The lists that begin with the characteristics of their role models when they were children become greater acts of discovery as I ask them to expand them into reflections on their own strengths and weaknesses as adults. These lists become foundations for constructing their own education.

That twenty-year-old man who created a three-word list about the influences on him as a child? He didn't elaborate on it then, but near the end of his term, he wrote me a one-page essay. It was single-spaced, misspelled, but full of punches. It was about his mother dying from cancer and the numbness that he experienced

during her illness and the subsequent falling apart of the family after her death. She had left him to grow up too fast and too alone.

By writing it down, he confronted it. Now it is possible that he can be transformed by it. He became his own best teacher. He is the only one who can make a choice to overcome his trauma. I remind each of these inmates that there was nothing on that sheet of paper before they put down the first word. They are gods. They are creators. They tried. They did it. They own it.

I have taught first-year composition classes to better understand the concept of pace and direction in a short story by scanning a page and writing down only the action verbs that appear three or more times on that page. Follow the chain of verbs and you can trace the framework of the story.

In an Introductory Sociology class, I gathered single word responses to the term "society" and from there began to explore the concept. Mathematics and Business courses might smooth the way for wary, undeclared majors by having these students list their fears in approaching what they believe to be interminable subjects. These lists can then become strings of words that become thought processes that become formulas that become statements of purpose.

Writing Across the Curriculum can be the key to unlocking chests laden with painful and confused memories. How many of our students may be living with terrors too fearful or too trivial to name? But until they do name them, they cannot own them. They cannot begin to face them down.

As a kid, I remember being afraid for my Dad the first morning I saw him off at the train station. I was probably five or six years old and I didn't know what was

going to happen to him on that train. All day I thought about him. Would I ever see him again? It was dark when my mother drove me and my sisters down to the train station to pick my father up. We waited on the platform until a single headlight broke the darkness at the far end of the track and the people on the platform with us surged forward. I too took a hesitant step forward. When the train stopped, there was my Dad, the first one off the train, a smile on his face, a newspaper in his hand, and I knew, it had been OK.

It's essential to realize that Writing Across the Curriculum does not just happen here in our classrooms, on this campus. Its ramifications go far beyond the simple boundaries I have set here. I see it in the correctional setting. You will see it elsewhere. Inhibitions wear many monstrous disguises.

For my inmates, my students and me, the train is waiting to pull away from the station. Its powerful headlamp cuts the darkness. The conductor is calling, "All aboard." It's time to take that first step. We must give up our tickets and take our seats.