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Where Lifelines Converge Voices from the Forest Correctional Creative Writing Group

This article is a teacher narrative examining the experiences of a teacher in a correctional facility writing workshop and how those experiences led her to understand that in order to effectively teach the workshop, she had to achieve a deeper understanding of the world of the prison as well as see that the success of the workshop depends on honoring the expertise of all of its members. Inmate work is included in the article that comments on both the importance of writing in their lives as inmates as well as reveals how the workshop setting allows for reflection upon and examination of their lives.

Ignorance is the biggest crime facing our society today. Every other Tuesday night, Forest Correctional Facility challenges ignorance by supporting a creative writing group. Twice a month, a group of talented inmates gathers together in the facility's activity building for two hours to share their ideas, poetry and short stories. Together these participants express thoughts which inspire each other. They show how far the mind can travel, even under the present conditions.

Within this group, some have fifty-dollar words, million dollar life experiences and diverse ethnic backgrounds that when put together create a culture that keeps each session real. They share their knowledge non-competitively and use their writing skills as a true form of healing therapy. This enables students the opportunity to see where lifelines converge in the written word.

These men have shown that the creative writing program allows the bright to be bright and the creative to be creative. Ultimately, ignorance will continue to be defeated on Tuesday nights at Forest Correctional Facility.

—Foreword to *From Within*

The students in our creative writing workshop at Forest Correctional Facility drift in, carrying folders full of poems, marble composition notebooks, and books they are reading. The small classroom, with a worn linoleum floor, mesh-covered windows that only open part-way on even the hottest summer nights, and a battered-looking, metal teacher's desk with locked drawers, is located in the prison's activities building, along with the chapel, gym, general library, law library, and other offices. The noise from the basketball game in the

gym as well as the terrible acoustics of the room always make it difficult to hear what anyone is saying. One member of the group told me he just doesn't like the room because it is where men wait for their Tier III disciplinary hearings, and it carries the bad vibes of all those anxious hours. It is not anyone's favorite room; we much prefer meeting in the spacious, clean and air-conditioned library when we are able to. The library, however is often being used by one of the high school equivalency classes or another volunteer-led group such as the Alternatives to Violence program.

Inmates spend time at the beginning of the class talking to each other before they settle down in the chairs which always seem too small for most adults. After everyone knows the date of our next meeting, I ask if the announcement for the creative writing call-out has been made over the loudspeaker (students are not able to attend unless the announcement has been made). Then one student leans forward and says that he has a question for the group.

"Mrs. Rogers," he says, taking off his glasses and placing them carefully on the desk, "I'd like to know if most people write the title of their poem first and then write the poem or do they do it the other way around?"

"I write the poem first," says a sixty-year-old student. "I never know what the poem's going to be about."

"That's true," another student offers. "You can't always control it. Sometimes the thing turns out way different than you thought."

Another student speculates about the value of allowing a poem to remain without a title.

"No, man," another student responds. "You've got to give some idea of what the poem's about. The title makes the poem stronger."

During the discussion, I act as moderator to make sure that everyone gets heard, but barely contribute except to ask a question or two.

"Thank you for all of your ideas," the student says, putting his glasses on and taking out his notebook. "You've given me insight into my question."

As I walked into the administration building at Forest Correctional Facility, on a warm September evening in 1995 for my first creative writing workshop, I felt uneasy and disoriented, even though I was familiar with the prison setting and had taught in a college program at Forest for several years. When I taught for the college program, the teachers for that evening's classes would be waiting together in the lobby or in a small lounge room filled with tables, chairs and snack machines that never worked. When everyone arrived, we would all either walk down to the near-by education building or else board the green Department of Corrections van that took us to our classes in the new buildings on the other side of the facility. That September evening, as I waited at the front desk, looking at the large, bland-faced clock that ticked quickly towards the hour

for my writing group's call-out, I realized that I was unsure of what procedure to follow in this place where rules and procedures were so important. The officer in charge of the front desk appeared and handed me my card.

"Thanks," I said to him as I placed my ID card in my jacket pocket. "Can I walk down to the activities building by myself or do I have to be escorted or take the van?"

"As long as you have an ID card you can walk down by yourself," he said, lifting the lid off the aluminum foil container of spaghetti that would be his dinner.

I walked through the two doors leading out of the administration building, past the wall of surveillance cameras behind the glassed-in room where two officers sat, outside into the first of two narrow rectangles of fencing topped with coils of razor wire. The heavy bolts of the outside doors made a jolting sound as the officer electronically opened the door from the inside. I walked through the last gate and onto the walkway that led to the activities building, past the school building, the mess hall and the infirmary as well as the dorms on the other side of a large, rectangular square of grass. Several inmates passed by. When the other college teachers and I had walked to the activities building and had passed inmates, the two groups of people had always greeted each other. Now that I was alone, the three inmates who passed by looked down, refusing to meet my eyes. How do they see me, I wondered? Now that I was on my own, everything seemed different.

That uncomfortable walk was emblematic of the many uncertainties I had as I approached teaching the creative writing group. What was the nature of my relationship to the facility, now that I was a volunteer and not a paid teacher? Were the rules somehow changed? More importantly, what would my relationship to inmates be? The non-encounter with the inmates on the walkway was uncomfortable, making me aware of my status as an "outsider," someone unknown. Now that I was not a "teacher," what was I? I was not an evaluator; I did not even consider myself a very experienced poet or fiction-writer. What would I possibly have to offer them? There was no literature in the field of composition to guide my way, or so I thought. I felt disconnected and uncertain as I walked towards the activities building—yet eager to meet my class, hear the students, and learn more about who they were and what they made of the worlds in which they found themselves.

For the past eight years, I have been the volunteer co-coordinator for that creative writing workshop at Forest Correctional Facility, a medium-security state prison in upstate New York. Before beginning the workshop, I had taught for twelve years at Forest and other maximum and minimum security facilities in the area as part of a college program run by a local private college and supported by state and federal funding. In 1994, the correctional facility college

teachers became aware that state and federal funding for inmate higher education was in danger of being discontinued; in the spring of 1995, largely because of public protest, all funding for the college program was withdrawn, and the program I taught in, like many others throughout the country, discontinued.

When the college program ended, I saw the opportunity to begin a voluntary creative writing workshop at Forest. I was aware of the existence of many such groups in correctional facilities across the country and had long been interested in establishing one at Forest. I sent letters to the dean of the college asking for support—donations of paper, pens, the old computers that had been used by the college program. However, I received no response from the college. With the help of the Forest Correctional Facility librarian, who has been instrumental in establishing and maintaining the group, I was able to begin a group that has persisted since 1995 despite the lack of any outsider funding (we were supported only briefly—and in spirit only—by the local writers' organization). The longevity of the group is a testament to the dedication of the writers in the group, their passion for writing and their hunger for knowledge. Despite the fact that the membership of the group is never stable (inmates are transferred, paroled, or just simply stop attending), the group has been able to not only persist, but thrive; the workshop has held three poetry readings, been the subject of a feature article in the local newspaper, entered a national writing competition for inmates, and has published three volumes of *From Within*, an anthology of the groups' work edited by inmates and published in the facility's print shop.

Although after eight years of facilitating the workshop, many of the questions I had that first uncomfortable evening in September 1995 have been answered, I still find myself learning, adjusting and adapting my coordination of the workshop in response to new situations and questions. As the coordinator of a completely voluntary workshop, I had to assume a very different position than I had as a college teacher. Released from the traditional role of teacher as evaluator and judge, I was able to achieve a deeper understanding of the inmates' worlds and lives even within the boundaries set up by the prison. Immersion in the inmates' worlds also meant that I had to listen, not impose my own agenda on the group; the workshop helped me understand the need to look to the students and their agendas, interests and capabilities. Inmates' ability to think with sophistication about important technical aspects of poetry, for example, helped me see that "letting go" of my position of authority in the workshop did not mean that nothing sophisticated would happen in the group. This does not mean that I abdicate my teaching experience or refuse to challenge students. It does mean, however, that each person in the group contributes his writing, responses and expertise.

From the first night of the workshop, students have come into the small and uncomfortable classroom with poems, stories, political commentary, songs,

astute observations of each other's work, personal struggles, joy and grief. Some students have come to the group with notebooks and folders full of work, and some have arrived with no practice in reading or writing poetry at all.

Somehow, in a place that discourages human interaction and communication, even though the membership of the group has shifted, the workshop has become a community that the members graciously have allowed me to join. Group members allow each writer to work towards his own voice and style and exhibit such a strong sense of community that individual members have refused invitations to read their writing at functions if the entire group was not invited. Group members have questioned, challenged and taught me; they have made me a better teacher by allowing me to achieve a deeper understanding of the world of the prison and helping me see that the success of the workshop depends on honoring the expertise of all of its members.

Through their texts, workshop writers have allowed me to understand not only their lives as inmates, but the larger social and political contexts of their lives; in the workshop, their stories are brought into the realm of public discourse as subjects of knowledge and inquiry. Many writers such as Calvin Lee, or "Big C" as he is known throughout the facility, are intensely interested in political and social issues and use their writing to explore the conditions of their lives. Calvin Lee, a large man with a large voice, glasses, and a serious and even academic demeanor, is older than most of the inmates in the facility and is a prolific writer, now working on a draft of his second unpublished novel. Before his incarceration, Calvin Lee was involved with working with youth groups and still sees himself as a teacher and educator of the younger inmates. Many of the pieces he writes are deliberately directed towards provoking a reaction from the younger men. The following excerpt, for example, begins to explore the importance of writing about the conditions of the lives of adolescent men whose paths often lead to incarceration; the piece is also directed towards an audience who may find those lives, as Calvin Lee says, "part of a culture rarely accepted."

The American culture is colored by poverty, mis-education and race. Black men take to the street life and delve into a world of money, guns, women and drugs. The domino theory can escalate violence and perpetrate hopelessness within bright youth who learn by being educated on the street or imprisoned. The innocent poor child still has to be realistic about the future. He is like a crippled victim, without money or a set of loving parents. The only way to make things right is to risk being the perpetrator, filled with hate and hopelessness and living among a gang of violence and drugs. His generation only knows about low self-esteem. Writing explores the lives and psyches of a culture rarely accepted.

My experience as a workshop coordinator has not only allowed me to gain

a deeper understanding of the backgrounds of such inmate writers; I have also gained a new understanding of the prison setting and the place of literacy in that setting. For example, although I had taught in the prison for eight years and was well aware that all inmate writing is potentially under surveillance, the workshop forewarned for me the presence of such surveillance and helped me think about its impact on the writing that students did for the workshop.

When the workshop first began in 1995, the group consisted of between twenty and thirty inmates. In the space of a few months, however, perhaps ten inmates remained as “regulars.” While I was pleased in many ways to have a smaller, more manageable group, I wondered why so many people had stopped attending. Some had been transferred to other facilities or had gone home; some just lost interest in the group. At one point, the remaining students told me that some people had stopped coming to the group because one group member had been transferred after officers, during a routine search of his living quarters, had discovered poems they thought were “dangerous.” This was not an isolated incident; Calvin Lee had his often intensely political poems confiscated during a routine search of his cube. Very recently, a young and enthusiastic member of the group also had his (non-political) poems taken from him by officers.

“What they don’t know is that I got it all up here,” the young inmate told the group members, smiling and pointing to his head. “I got it all up here.”

The confiscation of their work did not, however, stop these writers from attending the group

“You almost always have to hold back something,” one group member said one night after a discussion of facility surveillance of writing. While that statement may have been true for this writer, it does not seem to be true for most members of the group. Once I realized that my students were the experts on their own lives and allowed them to teach me about the experience of living and writing in prison, I began to understand that writing in prison can have serious—even dangerous—consequences as inmates are sometimes transferred or subjected to other disciplinary measures because of their writing. While punishment for writing is not inevitable, all the inmates in the group know that it is indeed a possibility.

“That’s the way it is,” one of the group members volunteered one night. “One minute you’re writing a poem; the next minute they’re slapping handcuffs on you.” Perhaps these claims were somewhat exaggerated; in the eight years the workshop has been in existence, I know of only three people who have had poems confiscated by officers. However, the prison administration makes clear that literacy and poetry are potentially threatening; for example, in every issue of *From Within* (which must be reviewed by prison administrators), the administration has asked us to remove at least one poem they read as a critique of the penal system. Additionally, I have not been allowed to bring in tapes of HBO’s

often politically charged *Def Poetry Jam* series, despite the critical acclaim the show has received.

In a place where literacy practices are highly regulated and where increased literacy can have negative consequences, writing still plays such an important role in peoples' lives that they will continue to write despite the risks involved. Writing in prison is an act of human agency in the face of the power of the institution. The inmate who volunteered the comment about officers who "slap handcuffs" on inmates who write poems told the group that after the officers make their rounds at night, making sure that all lights are out in each cube by the required time, he often pulls out a flashlight and secretly, under cover of a blanket, continues writing.

The importance of writing in their lives has often been expressed by members of the group. Lowell Howard, a long-time member of the group and one of its most enthusiastic supporters (the only time I can remember Lowell Howard missing a group meeting was when he was hospitalized), conveys in his poems the intense importance writing has for him as well as the need he expresses for all human beings to "be heard" and to know that someone is listening. Lowell Howard, who, in his fifties, is the oldest member of the group, brings notebooks and poems overflowing with work to every group meeting. In addition to his poems and stories, he often brings artwork as well as songs, which he will sometimes sing for the group in a rich and expressive voice. Howard is always the first to volunteer to read his work to the group as we begin our Tuesday night workshops:

We have found another way to express our thoughts and feelings
And tell the story of our rise and fall
as we have found a way to release all the anger within our system
as we sit here now behind barbed wire and a high stone wall.

There are many as me behind this stone wall this day
that have found a new found freedom in the words that we write
And as I have said...this freedom has it self a power
of making the darkness...turn to light.

Expressing all that is and was held within.
All of what was and hope to be.
Exceeding all the limitations that once clouded the mind.
And for the first time for many...feeling free.

My greater understanding of the risk that writing posed for inmates was just part of the immersion into the world of the correctional facility the workshop

afforded me. As a volunteer, my relationship to the institution changed now that I was no longer under the auspices of the college program; I began to learn something about the vast machinery of the prison system itself. I was now an inconvenience, an additional call-out to be scheduled, the workshop another group of inmates to be monitored. After my first workshop class ended, I came out of the room to the sight of five officers sitting at one desk, eating orange popsicles, their feet propped up on the desk. "We can relax, guys," one officer announced as he took his feet off the desk, "now that she's not in there with twenty inmates." More than once, I have arrived at the prison and learned that "something happened" to the call-out and was therefore not allowed to meet with the group. Announcements for the group over the loud-speaker are not always made or not audible to group members; our rooms are sometimes taken over by other groups.

As a teacher in the college program, college officials and counselors took care of all the "prison business," giving me little direct access to the world of the prison. As a volunteer, I have been brought into much closer contact with corrections officers and other prison personnel, who have exhibited a wide range of human responses to the group, some expressing support for the group and helpfully finding functional televisions, VCRs and lost paperwork, others speaking sarcastically about the group, letting me know what an inconvenience the group is or speaking rudely to inmates.

In addition to gaining an increased understanding of the world of the correctional facility and my changing relationship to the prison, I found that my new role as workshop coordinator allowed me a deeper understanding of the lives and worlds of the inmate students. In order to effectively teach the group, I had to become an observer of my students in order to understand them; I also needed to abdicate authority to their expertise. Although I was well aware, from teaching in the college program, of students' capabilities and capacities for excellence, I was not very familiar with inmates' out-of-school writing. I did not know what they would require as writers or what they already had to offer.

As a workshop teacher, I knew that my purpose was not to initiate writers into the requirements of academic writing, to be a gate-keeper. The group made this clear to me from the very first night; "We didn't come here to learn about grammar and stuff like that, things you learn about in school," one inmate said to me. "We came here to express ourselves."

However, immersion into the inmates' worlds meant that I had to listen, not impose my own agenda on the group. Workshop members initiate discussions or ask questions that help me see that their own agendas are important and interesting. Discussions of poems by writers such as Saul Williams begin with students' questions about the poems and their own observations of what they find interesting, intriguing or puzzling and often end only after we have dis-

cussed almost every line of the text.

Because the workshop is situated outside of school and outside of that institution's construction of me as a teacher and evaluator, the men in the workshop are able to establish relationships of trust with each other and with me. They sometimes reveal, in discussion and in writing, the conditions of their personal lives as well as their questioning and examination of those lives. For example, after reading one of his poems, one student spoke of feeling like a "glass ball" that would break if held too tightly. Visibly struggling to hold back tears, he told the group about how his father would beat him with his fists and with belts, then lock him in a closet for hours. We listened as he talked about the abusive relationship he had with his father that eventually led to violence between them, the inability of his mother to intervene, and his fears that he would never be an adequate partner or parent. Speaking and writing about the conditions of his life provided this young man with the ability to begin to investigate his world and the conditions of his life in writing.

Parental abuse and abandonment are not uncommon themes in inmates' writing; few inmates come from intact homes. Jay Brown, a quiet, small man of nineteen or twenty, was brought to the group by one of the older, regular group members. Although Jay was not in the group long before he was transferred to another facility, he shared some intensely personal poems, later deciding to submit them for publication in our third edition of *From Within*:

The darkness of the twilight
made me shiver in fear. The sorrow
and the dreadful emotion that overtook
me when I was a mere boy.
Stalked by the confusion I had
and still bear to this day, what father
was my father? The roughness
of his hard hands betrayed his image
when he brutally slapped my young
tender face. I hollered louder than I
ever did before. What father was my
father? Pain and suffering is all he
ever gave me. But yet I'm in
denial, hoping to this day that he
will gain the image he so long
ago lost and receive my trust
and love that was always there.

Inmates write about many other experiences in addition to parental abuse

and difficult home lives. Calvin Lee describes, in one of his pieces, recovering from heroin addiction as well as the peer pressure that leads so many to involvement with drugs. Calvin Lee's piece relays the experience of many inmates incarcerated for drug-related offenses, as well as the importance of writing and reflection in the recovery process:

Billions of opiate molecules cling to each brain cell as the body withers, shivering and screaming in pain. There is vomit lying next to a head with dilated pupils and a nose run. The heart rate, breathing, and temperature are up. The skin is covered with goose-bumps and both the arms and legs are twitching sporadically.

An experimental procedure is needed as he has had trouble sleeping for over a week. His liver and kidneys need to be flushed. He is achy and weak as if he were fighting the flu. His body is full of heroin. As a patient he needs compassion and a comfortable way to clean up that would be effective. He cannot detox alone. For the guy who has nothing, it is not cheap or safe.

His entire body and heart is racing. He is sweating and each time he goes to wipe away the wetness, his skin feels like bugs are crawling all over him. He imagines them in his hair and clothes. His fears and frustrations do not have him up to the challenge of trying to figure out who is there in the shadows, or why the light on him is so bright. He closes his eyes, hoping, praying that he will wake up and find that he is back in his bedroom a few years past, testing everything from alcohol to glue in a paper bag.

Past memories: even those were rough times. The hazy days when he would notice adults doing something and figure it was a cool thing to do himself. His friends would glamorize and romanticize getting high as the release from all kinds of pressure. He just wanted to be accepted and grew up fast. He often paid for his act by stripping away his youth and taking his punishment "like a man." Yes, he remembered being beat up with stitches from a broken nose, or worse, several broken teeth. His memory was vague, but now all he longed for was the eventual release from this monkey on his back.

Doing time won't let "them" get into his head or understand the thoughts which keep him captive. Examining and expressing his thoughts open gates to his mind which will allow a world of knowledge to continue its flow. The smarter he gets, the more he wants others to know just how smart he is.

As I drove home from the workshop one frigid January night after a particularly energetic session, I thought about an article I had read several years ago by poet and ex-inmate Michael Hogan, "Do Not Go Gentle: The Continuing Fight Against Psychic Death" (1985), in which Hogan characterizes participation in prison writing workshops as resistance to the "psychic death" (22) to which long-term inmates are susceptible. When I arrived home, still energized

by the workshop, I re-read Hogan's article. Hogan, himself now a prison workshop leader, states, "There is also a constant need in every human life for reflection, for a deepening awareness of one's own condition and that of all humankind, and a need to express that"(4). These ideas have been articulated by many members of the Forest Correctional writing group; however, one of the men who had been with the group the longest, Jonathan Jones, clearly delineates in his poem the importance of such self-awareness and self-expression. Jonathan Jones is a thoughtful, articulate man in his forties who has since gone home to Jamaica. At the last workshop meeting he attended before his release, Jones urged the group members to keep attending and supporting the group and reiterated for them the importance of writing. In his poem, intended as the introductory poem for the latest edition of *From Within*, Jonathan Jones echoes Hogan's statement as he explores the human need for self-expression the group addresses and which I have learned the importance of honoring:

I am a light that's grateful
to the dark
Yeah tho I walk
trying to embark
from stereotypical talk
about evil in the dark
day needs the light
billions of years' universal
right

A dream deferred
just when in sight
My alibi for success
airtight.
I say let's fight
others say be quiet
living on a passive diet
no need for a riot
like Rodney King
Police doing
the same thing
Here's a nigger
let's take a swing
He takes it to court
we're bound to win
want us to vanish like

Rumpelstiltskin
But we're going right up under
their skin
You see, we are the inspired
minds from within
as the dark reveals
the light...ever so dim
I say...let's begin.

Note

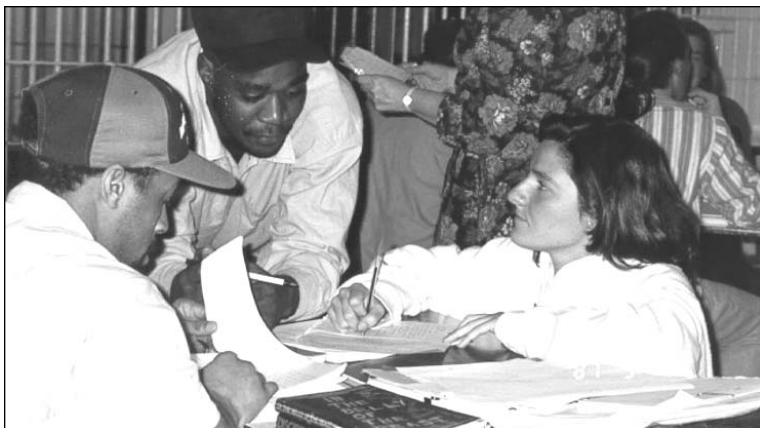
All of the current members of the Forest Correctional Creative Writing Group (a pseudonym) contributed their thoughts and ideas to this article. Some names have been changed to protect the incarcerated.

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Laura Rogers has taught in many different settings, from prisons and drug rehabilitation centers to a colleges. She has been teaching in prisons since 1983 and has coordinated a correctional facility writing workshop since 1995. She is currently the writing center director at the Albany College of Pharmacy.



Writing Workshop at Lorton Prison, Virginia. Courtesy of Kate Mahon.