

## TWO

### MEMOIR AND MEMORY: A “TELLING MY STORY” FOCUS GROUP

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For the final class session, we conducted a focus group to invite the women to share their own perspectives on the “Telling My Story” class and the collaborative anthology they had produced. Our intent was to give the women in the class space to discuss the writing and workshop process. Since the workshop was designed to offer the women at the facility a creative outlet, we wanted to elicit their feedback on class structure and curriculum. In this narrative summary, the women are generally referred to by the names they chose to publish under in order to preserve confidentiality for those who chose it without creating confusion. This focus group was conducted in two three-hour segments, one for the afternoon session and one for the morning session, and the two sets of responses have been integrated here and divided by topic. This condensed narrative summary was developed from extensive notes taken by University of Wyoming student Julia Dohan.

The first question our moderators asked the women was, “How do you define ‘memoir?’” Most of the women’s answers emphasized tight focus on personal narrative, both as a literary conceit and as a creative constraint. Sissy Pierce described a memoir as a “snapshot of me.” B.D.K. said, “I took it as a part of my story, a memory,” and Bueller added, “A time or space of somebody’s life that they choose to write and share.” DeeDee emphasized the subjective, first-person nature of autobiographical writing: “A personal story told from the point of view [of the writer]. Bueller linked “memoir” to the inherently personal and perhaps limited nature of memory: “A memoir, a memory...only your truth.” The women in the evening session defined memoir as,

“Honest accounts, our perceptions of a series of events, based on true stories—how this really happened.”

The women went on to highlight the challenge of sustained dialogue with self and memory. Chris described her work as “very tough...to write about yourself, a courageous experience.” Bueller agreed: “Tough...Putting into words what I’ve been through instead of just living it and leaving it there.” LeBeau said that she thought that writing about personal experiences was courageous: “Reliving it...BRAVE.” Bueller said that she was awed by the depth of “sincerity” in the writing that the class produced.

Bueller described autobiographical writing as expansive, not limiting – being prompted to write through her own experience allowed her to connect with her memories in a deeper and more introspective way. This process was cathartic for her: “It made me want to write more about other parts of my life. I revisited it all...Very draining, exhausting. I cried, now that I have it all out, I look at that memory more objective[ly]. I’m not as attached to the memory.” Chris said that structuring her work as a memoir gave her access to overarching themes she hadn’t considered before: “Mine went from this small-thinking deal to the big picture.” For her, the cooperative nature of the writing workshop enhanced this aspect of autobiographical writing – the iterative act of storymaking was deepened by the daily ritual of storytelling: “After the night I read it aloud to you guys, I felt so freed.” LeBeau compared memoir writing to giving birth to oneself: “Like a birthing and re-birthing experience.” B.D.K. described the writing process as therapeutic: “In psychology they talk about putting it down and sharing it is how you deal with shame.”

The women also debated the extent to which memoirs were imaginative or dramatic writing, including the idea of “Writing from the heart.” Pierce wondered, “Are we supposed to write from our heart? Does anyone else do that?” Rouse countered, “I write from my head a lot, I’m a logical thinker. I could write a textbook.” The women also were inspired by the creative nonfiction materials they read in preparation for the class. Pierce recalled one creative nonfiction essay in particular, “Coyotes,” by

Jo Ann Beard, which the class read and discussed: “The coyotes, that had to come from someone’s head. I couldn’t follow that. She describes it with such *oh...*” B.D.K. described the class as an extraordinary space, where women could express emotions that had to be muted or put away in everyday prison life. As she said to a classmate, “If I hadn’t been standing there when you broke down, I wouldn’t know that you knew how.”

The women also discussed the idea of “story,” examining what counted as an inspiration or core theme. Hart wondered, “How did we identify how to tell our story?” Pierce responded, “I didn’t do that...” and Rouse countered, “Yes, you did! When you said, ‘For the second time I gave up everything I had for a man.’” For some of the women, the story came together naturally. Hart said, “I just thought of memories in my life that were significant and they all seemed to fit together...This all seemed to coincide. All my unanswered questions, finding answers to those big human questions—how did I become the woman I am today?” For Lujan, such openness was part of her approach to life: “I tend to keep it at 100—just tell it how it is. I’m at the point that I’m past my regrets. Other people don’t voice certain things because of how people will react. I just tell it from my perspective cause I’m very good at judging character and looking at the big picture. Writing it in a *creative* way helped me talk about it. The more I read it, the lighter it became.”

Bayne described fiction as a potential refuge, and memoir as messier and more difficult: “I could have wrote a short story that was easier to write. It was worse to get into feelings and it was like cutting off an arm. I wouldn’t have written it like this to anyone at home. It was the fact that it was personal. I knew it was going to be challenging, without the personal anecdotes. I sat there for days, ‘where am I going with this?’ I’ve learned from this—I had to split hairs with how comfortable I was sharing sometimes and how important it was to the story. I would take this class again but would write about something less personal, whole-heartedly.”

Several women also described a sense of responsibility to their stories as a kind of testimony, including the hope that their

story might motivate other people to avoid making the same mistakes: “I shared my story. I’m not ashamed anymore. If I can show them that while they’re here, they can better their lives. This can change your life.” LeBeau expressed a desire to support other incarcerated women: “I want to help people in here and when I get out, I still want to help people out there and in here.” Rouse echoed this sense of purpose: “I was gonna write about redemption but I changed it to the lessons I learned.” Pierce wanted her narrative to help keep women out of prison: “If I can help just one person from coming here, or coming back, then that’s all I want.”

The moderators also asked the women to describe their writing process. Lujan emphasized the difficulty of writing about her own life: “Hard – really just details and bringing up the past. Reliving it all again.” Rouse described the difficulty of writing in a structured way, particularly through strong emotions, and mentioned that journaling was recommended as therapy, although perhaps not with much support. She also implied that a prompt to write personally wasn’t the same as license to write freely: “When I got here, they used to tell me to journal. I was afraid to put my feelings down on paper. I was afraid that I’d make people mad. Putting it down, I get bogged down in the details, the sentence structure – it doesn’t come out like a fire hose, it trickles. Yes. This is skill-building.” Rouse went on to wonder if strong or “dark” feelings might make readers uncomfortable: “I still have a little bit of fear of pissing people off or showing my real feelings. I believe in optimism but there are times that I feel pretty grey. It’s supposed to be sunshine and light.” Brown wondered if memoir might be an unsuitable genre for a writer struggling to convey traumatic experiences – or if it were even suitable to present stories about violence and addiction to a public or literary audience: “Well, my memories are horrendous. My memories wouldn’t be appropriate for this.”

Chris described the class as emotionally intense by design, which she valued: “Scared, Hard, Fear, Struggle—those emotions are growth, they’re not negative. We have emotions and those emotions were allowed. You let us have emotions, be open and be

free—that’s probably the most positive thing about this class. Without that, we’re stagnant and it helps us learn how to cope with it, instead of having a meltdown and panic attack.” For LeBeau, having a space to hold these emotions seemed like it would be helpful for her in the future: “I’m so scared for when I leave... and now I have another tool, a coping mechanism, instead of breaking down.

Pierce recounted a complex interrelationship between sorting and resolving emotions and refining writing. Her lack of confidence in her writing ability made it difficult for her to speak with authority about her feelings. Developing as a writer allowed her to feel more confidence about her perspective and her future: “I thought I’d healed, but it was more healing. I’ve been depressed. I thought my heart had hardened but it hasn’t; I’m still the same person. I was afraid from the very beginning that I didn’t have the education. I don’t think of those words. If you’re proud of me now, you’d be really proud of what I wrote this morning. I took what I’ve written before and changed it to be more like this [i.e. her memoir]. I’m just really happy. You’ve given me back my life. I’ve got something to do and something to look forward to.” Lujan agreed, connecting her lack of confidence to her background, and a lifelong sense that she wasn’t capable of intelligent writing: “I had a problem with that too. I always thought I wasn’t intelligent enough. Growing up in the ‘hood, I think a lot of kids think that. I’ve learned that I am more intelligent than I thought.”

The women described the mechanics of writing as intricate, especially for autobiographical narratives that might not fall into a straightforward linear shape. B.D.K. said, “Writing is the easy part, it just doesn’t stack the way I want it to.” LeBeau described the workshop as emotionally draining: “Overwhelming – I felt like quitting. But I prayed about it, prayed about it, prayed about it, and I came to the conclusion that if I’m gonna give up on myself that easy, I’m never gonna make it. I wrote it all down—I didn’t need to add any more or any less. And some things are just mine. And I didn’t want to do more damage to myself. That way it was more

healing. It was a really good experience and I learned a lot. I'm smarter than I thought and I am a good writer."

Bueller wished she had tried to incorporate a longer sequence of events into her memoir: "When I sunk my teeth into it, I didn't realize how hard it was going to be for me. I signed up for [this class and] I wasn't really sure what [it involved], just knew writing was involved. I can't say if I would take it again. For me, it was this big bang in my timeline. ... It's my story. ... I wish I would've wrote about more of what I've done to get there and what I've done now, like getting my son back. It was a journey. I wish I wrote about the journey and not just a snapshot in time...I would have like to encompass more of myself—write about all of it."

The women also discussed some of the common subjects in their own work. Several noted trauma; as Brown said, "Abuse, a LOT of abuse." LeBeau expanded Brown's comment into themes of self-harm and cycles of violence: "Self-abuse, or other abuse received or created." For Brown, this theme was part of the value of the work for readers: "I think that will help them understand and that we're not alone, at least I have." Bueller noticed that her story was more eventful than she had realized before setting it down: "I was gonna say that I didn't have a theme, but if I did...This woman's life is full of action, and not even action, just like in this 12-hour period... a lot of STUFF."

Motherhood was another recurring theme in the women's narratives, but for diverse reasons. Brown said, "I love hearing stories about motherhood because I didn't get to experience it." LeBeau responded to say that motherhood is "why I didn't completely give up...If I couldn't have my kids, life without my kids, life wouldn't even be worth living." Chris, who had lost custody of her children, described the pain of separation, which was aggravated by thoughtless comments about hope and the possibilities of the future: "Having to wait until they're 18 to find them... But there's no guarantee. I may never see them again! My son lived five blocks away from me, and I couldn't see him! My first daughter died! There's no guarantee! And when people say

things like that, they're trying to be nice—I get it, but it's hurtful; it doesn't help! I may never see them again!"

For some of the women, the workshop was a stark contrast to the disrespect and silencing they felt they suffered both within the prison system and from society in general. Horn felt that working in a classroom setting with university students constituted a form of recognition: "Being able to pair up with some from the outside, we're able to see that we're people too." Rouse saw a certain level of denigration as inherent to the structure of incarceration: "By the nature of the beast, as convicts (derogatory) we are less than. And it's just part of it." A few of the women listed derogatory synonyms for prisoner: "Uneducated, drop-outs, losers." Pierce reflected that she herself had bought into stigmatizing attitudes toward incarcerated people before becoming one herself: "I was that way before I came to prison...When [my brother] went to prison, I disowned him."

Although the women consistently cited honesty as crucial to valuable writing, they defined it as a complex obligation, one which intersected at multiple institutional and social levels, and which had consequences stretching beyond the confines of the workshop and the prison. LeBeau referenced prior experience with memoir writing, but in a context far more explicitly tied to recovery: "How hard it was at the beginning. I wrote my autobiography, shame, drugs & crime, I wrote a lot in [an onsite treatment program for addiction]." Bayne described writing and publishing as a way to feel less hopeless about her history and incarceration: "For a long time, I felt so worthless. It really destroys us. I will never be able to do what you're telling me to do [to succeed in life]. It really took me going to prison to feel okay as a felon. Writing helped me because it helped me to realize that I was judging myself under that microscope, maybe more so than others actually do." Lujan said that her identity had been constrained long before coming to prison: "On the streets I was always perceived as who I was on the streets, those that knew my name."

The women agreed that they fought against the assumption that, as inmates, they were untrustworthy. A few women connected their time in prison with a more assiduous commitment to the truth as well as extensive experience with self-reflection. Chris said, “In reality, inmates will be honest.” LeBeau agreed: “If you want an HONEST answer, go ask an inmate.” Bueller positioned inmates as people under heavy obligation to be honest: “I think we’re more honest than people who are out on the streets.” Empathy – recognition of the humanity of inmates, recognition of incarceration as a circumstance and not a trait – were also recurring themes in the focus group discussion. As Hart put it, “*everyone* has a reason for being here.” The women in the afternoon class wrote a list of important ideas for readers to take away: “What People Need to Know: 1. Don’t be so judgmental 2. All the women (inmates) just want to be heard 3. I’m still a woman! 4. More access to the outside (cost of calls) 5. Don’t forget me! 6. It takes the same level of dedication on both ends (those inside & those outside) – Thinking it’s better beyond here—I can go out and be like you all.”

Many of the women were veterans of in-prison training, rehabilitation, recovery, and educational programs. They saw this workshop as part of that programming. As Rouse explained, “This is the best thing we’ve had here—I’ve done a lot of programs. This is one of the best ones. Others are for paperwork, checking boxes. Go to prison; change yourself.” The women described stigma that extended even into recovery and education programs: “I was worried that you’d judge us. Some have to put gloves on to touch us.” Bayne described rehabilitation narratives as part of a process of positioning oneself as an inmate and convicted felon, implying that writing as an incarcerated woman meant writing under genre conventions: “There’s a sellable angle about your rehabilitation: the classes I took, the nature of my crime, and what I’ve done since... what it means to be a drug addict and their perception.” Lujan complained about the rigidity of writing and speaking in treatment programs: “This allowed me to be more expressive than ITU [Intensive Treatment Unit].”



Chris referenced her own desire to speak openly about her experience: “Honestly, I’m happy with it. I’ve been kicked a lot in my life and I don’t think they could do much more. That doesn’t change who I am. I reflect daily and if I didn’t feel okay with it, I would have stepped out. If anyone picks up this book, they’ll know something. I’m an advocate, so if I didn’t publish this, I’d be a real hypocrite. I mean people need to know what goes on here.” Bueller said she felt more comfortable writing pseudonymously: “I think I’m good since I came up with a good pen name.” Chris added that the capsule nature of the class made it easy to be candid, at least with visitors: “I was my weird and wacky self anyways because after this, I’m probably never gonna see any of you again.”

However, inmates were also conscious of reactions from readers. Brown, who like many women chose to use a pseudonym, was worried about her family reading her account. Bueller knew that her memoir would be revelatory: “I’m scared for my dad to find out that I did that. He’s gonna be like what were you thinking. He just found out the other day that I was a felon. My family doesn’t understand the severity of my crime and drug use.” Bayne wanted her family to read her memoir: “I’m sending home a copy to my husband and my mother. And that I agreed to publish it. I mean that’s like ripping out my heart and handing it to you. It’s really where I’ve put all my time, my feelings, my thoughts.” The women debated whether to use pseudonyms in lieu of their own names and the names of family members. Bueller said that she wished she had been more open: “I would ... not be a people-pleaser. My whole story is pretty dramatic and I think it could help. A lot of stuff did happen.” Rouse, in contrast, said that her family enjoyed hearing about her – including any words from the students teaching the class: “My god-family loves me and they really love hearing what other people think and say about me. Like how your parents love it when neighbors tell them how great their child is.”

The women had strong opinions on different components of the class. Several women mentioned that they enjoyed the workshop, both as a creative process and as a cooperative activity. Pierce said, “It gives me hope—I have *so much* hope right now!...I

just hate to see the day end!” In general, the women enjoyed in-class writing exercises and any exercises that involved daily practice or inspired divergent creative elaboration, such as creative writing prompts. Since the class operated on such a compressed time frame, and since the women had such a short time to draft and refine their work, they saw prompts as helpful for facilitating writing outside of class. Exercises allowed some women to write in different modes; Rouse said that the daily exercise made “new furrows in my brain.” Hart agreed, describing new license to write in different modes: “I’m not that sensitive... and I sent out a fluffy poem.” Rouse added that the exercises were inspiring: “There’s some things I wrote that I wouldn’t have done without those exercises.” She also praised the reading selections: “It’s only because of this class that I’d even be interested in reading something as descriptive as this—broadening my reading horizons.”

The autonomy included in the idea of creative writing was a big selling point for some of the women. Several women described the class as a positive experience because their work was self-directed, allowing them more autonomy than usual. As LeBeau said, freedom is the antithesis of prison: “Getting to *choose* what to write about... This is what I want to do and have never been allowed to do before.” Independent creation represented an achievement: “Getting to create something we’re proud of—something to accomplish.” Several of the women said that they were intimidated by the idea of writing a memoir, and would have felt better to know in advance that there were more options; although the class was designed to be open-ended, the women had not all seen it that way. Bayne recommended that independence be foregrounded in class materials: “Call it ‘self-express writing’ —let them pick what to write about and publish.”

The women saw the class as a bonding experience, distinct from daily routines and interactions in the correctional facility, where women were not encouraged to socialize freely. Hart said, “I liked that I could have some fun with my life. Like giving everyone [in my memoir] pet names.” The women described a

sense of camaraderie in the class, one that grew on a sense of fellowship: “We’re really energetic in church. We come from a place that we’re at the bottom but we’re excited and just looking up... *gratefulness*.” DeeDee said, “I liked all the different personalities.” Bueller agreed: “I felt like I was in the presence of awesomeness and just so impressed.” Pierce described a sense of commonality with a classmate: “Her and my life have been so similar... To me, divorce is worse than death. They’re still out there; you still see them; in my case, with another woman... I don’t think people are born doing bad things. If I had stayed with my grandparents, there isn’t a doubt in my mind that I would’ve turned out like y’all [i.e. the University of Wyoming students]. They had money for college.”

Several women noted the social distinctions between University of Wyoming students and inmates, arguing that the former group had a significant amount of power to effect positive change. As Pierce put it, “You’re on the outside. Your word is more valuable. The orange suit says *a lot*. You’re young and in college, that says *a lot*, but *opposite*.” She went on to object to the idea that she should feel stigmatized, or condemned, by her status as a prisoner: “I will not be an inmate forever.” Pierce was impressed that the UW students committed to working with the class: “The first day you ladies came in, you were all a bit skittish but then you *came back*.”

Rouse said that the women’s incarcerated status created bonds: “We’re all sisters; we’re all in the same boat; we’re all in prison.” Horn added common history to common circumstances: “We all come from the same kind of hell—I’m not on that island by myself.” Functioning in prison meant managing a complex set of social relationships. Hart talked about the intense intimacy created by prison: “We have nothing but us. We’re hyper-aware.” B.D.K. added an example of the common preoccupation created by that intimacy: “Everybody in the facility noticed [Rouse] cut her hair.” Rouse agreed: “Well that was drastic. If I walk around here not smiling, everybody [notices]!”

Some of the women described the compressed course schedule as a useful nudge, even if it was tiring. Bayne described absolute focus as an antidote to self-consciousness: “What I liked about it being 3 weeks was it didn’t give us time to mess around. We couldn’t procrastinate and changing it too much—more time gives more time for doubt and second-guessing. I think 3 weeks was amazing... but I am *drained*.” Bueller described the workshop as immersive: “I wrote in my sleep, I wrote in the shower, I wrote everywhere.” A few of the women said they had big plans to continue writing: “I’m excited. I wanna read more than ever before, like I was when I was younger. I mean a book discussion was new for me and seeing how everyone thought about it. Everyone can look at the same sentence in a different way.”

When we asked the women what they would change for the next class, Rouse suggested more time: “Longer classes – more weeks.” Pierce chimed in with, “I don’t see any reason why y’all can’t stay longer!” The women also pointed out that a longer class would have allowed for a more structured approach, with more in-depth writing exercises and more polished essays. Hart mentioned the possibility of smaller groups for a longer workshop: “Split us into groups with those who were finished and we could divide the work accordingly. *Teamwork* gets us to life out there—interactive and sociable, expressing ideas.” For Lujan, a longer class opened up the possibility for inmates to take a lead role in designing and co-creating the class: “I’d like more of our voice to come out. In here, locked up, we don’t share and talk like on the outside. Have inmates lead reading discussions and take responsibility.”

The women also wanted more diverse samples for class discussion – and they were interested in engaging with the work in different ways. Bayne suggested a more participatory, performative model: “Get up and *read* the homework to us,” saying that this would be more theatrical. Add more different styles—add art with the literature.” The women shared consensus that it would be a good idea to open class with some discussion of the writing process, and perhaps write about the process to get the class going.

To conclude the focus group, the moderators asked the women if there were any questions they wanted to ask the UW students. The women were curious about the lives and motivations of the students who had chosen to attend the class. Rouse argued that the UW students were also engaged in an introspective and transformative process, “I’m curious about how you all live because I want to live there too...It’s interesting to us about what you all do...Your perspective of us on who we are and what you’re taking away. Walking into a prison, you had your own idea of what you were coming into. You can change your perspective and it’s neither true or false.”

The women also interrogated the narratives that the UW students had carried into the facility with them, wondering what they had learned. The students’ answers ranged from a heightened awareness of the constraints of incarceration to the diversity of experiences among the women to a greater sense of confidence in themselves as readers. Students shared consensus that the class had offered them a new perspective on writing and collaborative learning. Bayne was interested in the shift in perspective itself, asking students about the point when their expectations of the women and the class yielded to firsthand experience: “What was your ah-hah moment, when you realized your perception changed? When you had to re-think everything you knew?”