Woman is the Word
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“Woman is the Word” Instruction Manual

By Courtney Polidori and Samantha Zimbler
with support from Dr. Michele Lise Tarter
The College of New Jersey

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To Everyone Interested in Teaching in Prisons:

If you believe that writing can heal, then we invite you to teach memoir-writing inside a prison. Your students will read autobiographies from across the ages, and then they will write their own life stories. Tenacious students, intimate conversations, and brilliant insights are just some of the rewards.

This journey will not only transform your own life, but transform the lives of your students. You will put Audre Lorde’s imperative to transform silence into language and action into practice. For example, after she was silenced by her lawyers during her trial, one of the women in our class found her voice by writing a book-length autobiography. Another participant found the courage and strength to finish her memoir, even though she had been locked away in solitary confinement. After giving one class member her memoir, she confessed with glowing pride that this was the first thing she had ever completed in her lifetime. And another woman in the class, who began the workshop as a silent bystander, wrote more than 100 pages in a single night, standing so she could write by light from the hallway. These women participated in what bell hooks refers to as the process of re-membering, releasing, recovering, and reuniting with their pasts by writing autobiographically. Writing is healing, and in the prison system there is such a dire need for healing.

So if you are interested in teaching in a prison, we strongly encourage you to do so. The goal is to get the students writing autobiographically, and there is no magic formula for doing that. We will share our story with you, and then offer you some tips for developing a course that works with your schedule, resources, and budget.

In the spring of 2013, Dr. Michele Lise Tarter, an English professor at The College of New Jersey, English graduate student Courtney Polidori, and English undergraduate student Samantha Zimbler taught a memoir-writing class, called Woman is the Word, at Edna Mahan Correctional Facility (EMCF) for Women in Clinton, New Jersey. Dozens of women signed up to take the class, but 13 were chosen by prison administration. Dr. Tarter respectfully refers to her incarcerated students as “wisewomen.” The class was held in the maximum-security compound once a week for two hours. We asked our students to read and respond to the literature we chose for the syllabus, though much of it was optional; respond to writing prompts during class time and share with the class; and write 5-10 pages of their memoirs for homework. Each week, they brought in folders with handwritten pages, which we brought to the team of typist-editors back at TCNJ. Throughout the 11 years that Dr. Tarter has taught this course, she has learned how to make it run a little smoother each time. In addition to teaching at EMCF, she also taught a companion class at TCNJ this semester called Women’s Autobiographies, so the students enrolled in that course could type and edit the memoirs of the wisewomen. By the end of the 10-week semester, each wisewoman wrote her memoir, and we took them to Kinko’s to get them professionally printed and bound.

We suggest that you set a budget of about $800 for the course. If you require your students to write a memoir that you will print and bind, it will cost about $400 (about $20 each for 20 students), and costs will go up if there are a lot of color pages (photographs, illustrations, etc).
In addition to the memoirs, you will need to budget for the following:

- Literature (anthologies, poetry collections, autobiographies): Discuss this with the education coordinator at the prison because the prison may have a supply closet storing books that you could use in your class. Also check your university for books that may be available to use.
- printing and copying handouts
- folders and notebooks
- pencils

There are several ways to fund these costs, such as asking the Dean for money, private fundraising, asking individuals for contributions, holding fundraising events, and making donation cards to hand out at any relevant presentations or conferences.

If you don’t have the resources or budget, you can still do 90% of the class activities. The goal is to get the students to write autobiographically because writing is healing. There are a variety of options and possibilities for autobiographical activities, such as one-page memoirs, in-class writing, short homework assignments, diary entries, poetry, and autobiographical readings. At the end of the course, you can hand the students a folder with all of their writing in it, rather than the bound memoir, if you don’t have the resources, budget, or team of typist-editors.

We did not get through most of the readings we originally chose for the course. Instead, we focused on memoir-writing. We found that short, intense poems provided bursts of inspiration and emotion to catalyze that writing. Although our class was geared toward teaching women, all of the readings and prompts can be adjusted to accommodate men participants, as well.

When in doubt, just remember that writing is healing, and as long as your students are writing, you are taking part in the mystical journey of healing. Your students will be so thankful that you are filling their lives with color and beauty. They truly value education. You’ll be surprised by their optimism. You will help them find their voices. You will empower them.

So look around at our course materials and use what you like. We hope that the readings, handouts, questions, and writing prompts will help you in your journey. Please let us know if you have any questions, and let us know how it goes.

Warmly,

Samantha Zimbler, Courtney Polidori, and Dr. Michele Lise Tarter
The College of New Jersey

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Woman is the Word

“Freedom. It isn’t once, to walk out under the Milky Way, feeling the rivers of light, the fields of dark—freedom is daily, prose-bound, routine remembering. Putting together, inch by inch the starry worlds. From all the lost collections.”
- Adrienne Rich, “For Memory”

Painting by Connie Minowa

Dr. Michele Lise Tarter, Professor of English, The College of New Jersey
Teaching Assistants: Samantha Zimber & Courtney Polidori

Course Description:
This program will celebrate the lives and stories of women across the ages. We will read a diverse selection of writings by women—ranging from early American women’s diaries, slave narratives, incarcerated women’s memoirs, and autobiographical poems and excerpts by many other contemporary women writers.

Together, we will read and discuss these stories, as we draw strength from women’s survival and empowerment throughout the centuries. Ultimately, the course will attempt to build community among women, a community that extends across lifetimes and centuries.

Class participants will be asked to complete all class readings and weekly writing assignments. Most importantly, each woman will also be invited to write her own memoir. Each week, after discussion of class readings, we will then turn to the ongoing memoirs and do writing and revision work.
CLASS TIME: MONDAYS 1:00 - 3:00 PM

DATE: READINGS AND ACTIVITIES:

WEEK 1

ICEBREAKER ACTIVITY

THEME: A Room of Our Own

PROMPT: A Special Place

* Margaret Atwood story in “The Power of the Pen”
* Norma Stafford poems: “I am smiling,” “tonight loneliness is my bed partner,” and “the contractions are coming harder now”

THEME: Language

PROMPT: Then and Now

* Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper”
* Audre Lorde’s “Transformation of Silence into Language and Action”
* Maya Angelou’s “I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings” (excerpt in Written by Herself, p. 98-110 and poem)

FURTHER READING:

* Nancy Birkla’s “Three Steps Past the Monkeys”
* Zora Neal Hurston’s “Dust Tracks on a Road” (excerpt in Written by Herself)

WEEK 2

THEME: Sisterhoods

PROMPT: Photograph

* Introduction to Wall Tappings
* bell hooks’ “Community: Loving Communion” from All about Love
* Norma Stafford’s “Woman Soldier”

WEEK 3

THEME: Love

PROMPT: A Moment in Time

* bell hooks’ preface to All about Love and “Justice: Childhood Love Lessons”
* Harriet Ann Jacobs’ Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl (excerpt in Written by Herself)
* Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Cottagette”

WEEK 4

MEDITATION ACTIVITY

THEME: Spirituality

PROMPT: Beliefs

* Giaconda Belli’s “And God Made Me Woman”
* Browning’s “XXII”
* Excerpt from Narrative of Sojourner Truth
* Paula Gunn Allen’s “Kopis’taya (A Gathering of Spirits)”
* Excerpt from Starhawk’s “Dreaming in the Dark”
* Dorothee Solle’s “Mary is a Sympathizer”
* Buddhist nuns’ “Songs of the Nuns”
* Excerpts from Hagen and from Kabat-Zinn’s Wherever You Go, There You Are
* Bonnie Foreshaw’s “Faith, Power, and Pants”
DATE: READINGS AND ACTIVITIES:

WEEK 6
THEME: Nourishment
PROMPT: Objects of Desire
* Diane Hamill Metzger’s “Tapwater Coffee”
* John Adams’ “Commissary Day”
* Christina Rossetti’s “Goblin Market”
* Linda Pastan’s “I am Learning to Abandon the World”

WEEK 7
THEME: Mothers and Daughters
PROMPT: Quest/Journey
* Edwidge Danticat’s “Nineteen Thirty-Seven”
* Maxine Hong Kingston’s The Woman Warrior (Excerpt in Written by Herself)
* Assata Shakur’s poems: “Sisters in Prison,” “Mother and Daughter,” “To My Daughter Kakuya,” “You’re Coming Home”
* Alicia Portnoy poems
* Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “Turned”

WEEK 8
MEMOIRS DUE
THEME: The Body
PROMPT: Proud to Be You
* Langston Hughes poems
* Marian Wright Edelman: From “The Measure of Our Success”
* Chasity West’s “Accomplice”
* Carolyn Ann Adams’ “Thefts”

WEEK 9
MEMOIR READING AND COLLAGE ACTIVITY
THEME: Self and Healing
PROMPT: Who Are You?
* bell hooks’ “Healing: Redemptive Love” from All about Love
* Diane Hamill Metzger’s “The Top of the Wall”
* Adrienne Rich’s poems: “For Memory,” “Diving into the Wreck”

WEEK 10
CERTIFICATE OF COMPLETION, FINAL ACTIVITY, PRESENTATIONS OF MEMOIRS
THEME: Nature
PROMPT: Where in the World?
* Willa Cather: From The Song of the Lark
* Diane Hamill Metzger’s “The Getaway”
* Marge Piercy’s “The Common Living Dirt”
A List of “Dos” and “Don'ts” for Future Teachers of This Course

Advice from Our Experience Teaching in the Prison

DO:

• Know your prison and study its history.
• Respect the guards and be cordial to all staff members.
• Wear conservative clothing and shoes with simple fabric—many shoes have metal on them or inside them without you knowing. Always have a backup pair of sneakers or comfortable, NON-open-toed shoes, because you need to clear security to enter the maximum-security facility. The policies are very strict about this, so be prepared.
• Bring a watch (but know to take it off for metal detectors—you'll usually be allowed to put it back on after.)
• Be flexible with the students’ responses to readings you teach and know that, especially for a non-college credit class, the class often has its most fascinating moments when you go with the flow of the texts to which the students respond most. If they aren’t getting into more historical women’s autobiographies, encourage them with different, more modern texts, like poetry from Andrea Gibson, an LGBTQ-activist slam poet, or Mary Oliver, a great nature poet.
• Understand the unpredictable nature of the prison system.
  • There is a lot of red tape, especially if you want to bring in supplies like magazines for a collage (but no scissors allowed), colored paper, etc. Make sure everything you bring into the prison has been cleared by the administration and that you carry all books and supplies in CLEAR plastic bags/totes or clear backpacks.
  • Always prepare for the unexpected—prison culture can be loud and distracting, but your classroom is the sanctuary.
• Keep a journal and write in it within 24 hours of teaching each class so that you do not forget all you heard and experienced.
• Do the in-class writings you assign and share your OWN original work with the students if you have any—lead by example.
• Remember to concentrate more on the memoir-writing than the readings and other assignments—that is the most important thing you want your students to take away from the course. Communicate the importance of the memoir-writing process throughout the class.
• In the first week, concentrate on students’ motivation for writing (self-discovery? reclaiming her story? writing for a certain audience?).
• Create a classroom of trust and respect.
• Use lots of quotes/visual stimulation(COLOR on the handouts you give your students, since they have very little color and nature in their lives.
• Talk with your students while waiting for everyone to arrive; always let them know how important their stories are.
• When editing, avoid any negative criticism; nurture the students’ writing with praise.
DON’T:

• Wear anything with metal—no jewelry, belts, underwire bras (wear a sports bra!).
• ACCEPT OR GIVE GIFTS.
• Ask your students what their crimes were—this is not why you are there.
• Take most of your notes in the classroom; this will distract students and make them self-conscious.
• USE THE WORD “INMATE” OR “PRISONER”—we called all our students “wise women.”
  Feel free to use “wise women” or invent your own name!
• Bring any cell phones into the facility or take any pictures. This is against the law.
Week 1  A Room of Our Own

“A woman must have... a room of her own if she is to write.”
— Virginia Woolf

Think of a place that is particularly significant in your life.
It could be somewhere you went often as a child,
some place you’ve seen in a movie or a dream,
or somewhere you have been just once.
Why is this place significant?
What does it say about you, or your story?

Texts:
• Margaret Atwood’s story in “The Power of the Pen” (handout)
• Norma Stafford’s “i am smiling,” “tonight loneliness is my bed partner,” and “the contractions are coming harder now” (Wall Tappings)
why do YOU write?

“I write to equalize the pressure from without and from within.”
~ Vera Pavlova, poet.

tips for successful memoirs:

1. UNDERSTAND YOUR MOTIVATION
2. IGNORE YOUR INNER CRITIC
3. USE MANY GRITTY, SPECIFIC DETAILS
4. FREE-WRITE TO ELIMINATE WRITER’S BLOCK
5. WHO WOULD CENSOR YOU? WHY?
6. WRITING = HEALING, UNDERSTANDING, BEING COURAGEOUS, EXPOSING TRUTHS
“You may ask, ‘What is my truth—and what will happen if I tell it?’ Think about what memories are hidden in the folds of your mind. How do they appear in dreams, haunt you, and invite you to take them from their hiding place? What family secrets make you desperate to find out more, those secrets that whisper the things you need to be able to know to heal the past?

“It’s important to begin with an understanding of the emotional motivation for writing your memoir. Do you want to set the record straight? Are you writing looking for love, forgiveness, or revenge? Perhaps you want to write the story of your spiritual quest or encounters with extraordinary events or people.”

- from Myers’ *Power of Memoir*

NAME 10 REASONS WHY YOU WANT TO WRITE A MEMOIR. WRITE 15-20 MINUTES EACH DAY. CAN YOU KEEP GOING? WHO WOULD TRY TO DISCOURAGE YOU? HOW MIGHT YOU DEVELOP YOUR MEMOIR ANYWAY?

*The only journey is the one within.*

—Rilke
Week 2 Language

“Writing Exercise: Then and Now

Imagine you are writing daily diary entries while the most important moment in your life up until now is occurring. How do you feel about the people and events around you? How would you narrate your experiences—would you feel emotionally distant/detached, or brimming with feelings? How would you write the same diary entry now? Notice what you would have focused on then and now. How have you grown or changed? (Remember, unlike many of the women of the past, you have no one to censor your writing. Don’t hold anything back.)

Texts:
- Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper”
- Audre Lorde’s “Transformation of Silence into Language and Action” (The Cancer Journals)
- Nancy Birkla’s “Three Steps Past the Monkeys” (Couldn’t Keep it to Myself 112-141)
- Maya Angelou’s “I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings” (Written by Herself 98-123) and poem (handout)

“I began to recognize a source of power within myself that comes from the knowledge that while it is most desirable not to be afraid, learning to put fear into a perspective gave me great strength.”
— Audre Lorde

“What is my truth—and what will happen if I tell it?”
- Linda Myers

Artwork courtesy of Connie Minowa
Writing is not a weapon

“My belief is that the memoirist can write the truth in a balanced way . . . so that the memoir is not used as a weapon. Just as easily, it can be a means for healing.”

~ Linda Myers, The Power of Memoir

* WRITING YOUR STORY MAY EMPOWER OTHERS TO SHARE THEIR VOICES AS WELL

* BY OPENING UP, MAKING YOURSELF VULNERABLE, YOU ALLOW READERS TO TRUST YOU

* YOU CAN SAVE OTHER WOMEN FROM FALLING VICTIM TO THE SAME SITUATIONS/FATE

* IT IS OKAY TO FICTIONALIZE CERTAIN ASPECTS OF YOUR STORY, OR TO EXAGGERATE DETAILS FOR EFFECT. IF YOU WANT TO EMBRACE A DIFFICULT EMOTIONAL SUBJECT, USE YOUR IMAGINATION TO HELP YOU GET THE WORDS OUT.
“What are the words you do not yet have? What do you need to say? What are the tyrannies you swallow day by day and attempt to make your own, until you will sicken and die of them, still in silence? … I am myself, a black woman warrior poet doing my work, come to ask you, are you doing yours?” — Audre Lorde

CONSIDER LORDE’S QUESTIONS ABOVE. HOW WOULD YOU ANSWER THEM? MAKE A LIST OF THINGS THAT DESCRIBE YOU (OBJECTS, PLACES, IDEAS, ETC. — WHATEVER COMES TO MIND) TO ADD VIVID DETAILS TO YOUR STORY. KEEP ADDING TO THIS LIST THROUGHOUT THE WEEKS.

We’ve been taught that silence would save us, but it won’t. —Lorde
Week 3  Sisterhoods

Artwork courtesy of Connie Minowa

Writing Exercise: A Photograph

Look at, or try to recall, a photograph of an important time in your life. Let the words come to you as you look at the people or objects in the picture. Allow the associations to come to you and free-write about what the picture calls up in your mind.

Texts:
- Intro to Wall Tappings (handout)
- bell hooks’ “community: loving communion” (All About Love)
- Norma Stafford’s “Woman Soldier” Stafford (Wall Tappings)
Week 4  Love

Writing Exercise: A Moment in Time

Look at, or try to recall, a photograph of an important time in your life. Let the words come to you as you look at the people or objects in the picture. Allow the associations to come to you and free-write about what the picture calls up in your mind.

Texts:

- bell hooks’ *all about love* Preface and “justice: childhood love lessons” (*All About Love*)
- Excerpts from Harriet Ann Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (*Written by Herself* 6-32)
- Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Cottagette” (“*The Yellow Wallpaper*” and *Other Stories* 31-39)
“I am grateful that love exists: familial love, (love between relatives), romantic love (a passion between lovers), agape love (divine love between God and friends), love of nature (the majesty of mountains, the lasting love of oceans) and the joy of laughter. We are stronger, kinder and more generous because we live in an atmosphere where love exists. I am grateful for that.”
~ Maya Angelou

“We can find the love our hearts long for, but not until we let go grief about the love we lost long ago, when we were little and had no voice to speak the heart’s longing.”
~ bell hooks

“I’d never been anybody’s sushi roll. / But she, has lips like wasabi. / My eyes water every time we kiss. / Makes me wish we had a porch swing / and a little home / Makes me wish I could right wrongs / instead of poems / The heart is a bullet that’s terrified of blood / Love is a windshield wiper in a hurricane / nothing is ever clear”
~ Andrea Gibson, “Wasabi”

“Reader, my story ends with freedom; not in the usual way, with marriage.”
~ Harriet Ann Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*
“I want to marry you, Malda, —because I love you—because you are young and strong and beautiful—because you are wild and sweet and—fragrant, and—elusive, like the wild flowers you love. Because you are so truly an artist in your special way, seeing beauty and giving it to others.”
~ Charlotte Perkins Gilman, “The Cottagette”

Take a close look at Connie Minowa’s painting on the Love handout. Notice details such as the sun and moon, trees, and the way the figures are connected. Notice also that the lovers can be a man and a woman, or two women. Connect the image of the lovers with an important relationship in your own life. Consider including these writings in your memoir if they help tell your story.

Harriet Ann Jacobs

Maya Angelou

Andrea Gibson
Writing Exercise: Beliefs

In what do you believe most powerfully? It could be a religion, or just a philosophy by which you live, or faith in something or someone that motivates you throughout your life. Use this belief as a main theme in writing your story. How has this belief inspired you, changed with you, or motivated you to become the person you are now? Do you still believe in the same things now as you did when you were younger? Write about what has changed or stayed the same.

Texts:
- Gioconda Belli’s “And God Made Me Woman” (From Eve’s Rib)
- Browning’s “XXII” (Wise Women 130)
- From Narrative of Sojourner Truth (Wise Women 125)
- Paula Gunn Allen’s “Kopis’taya” (Wise Women 257-58)
- From Starhawk’s Dreaming the Dark (Wise Women 307-14)
- Therigatha’s “Songs of the Nuns” (Wise Women 42-44)
- excerpts from Hagen/Kabat Zinn for Buddhist mindfulness
- Bonnie Foreshaw’s “Faith, Power, and Pants” (Couldn’t Keep It To Myself 185-209)
Week 6  
Nourishment

Writing Exercise: Objects of Desire
What is your most prized possession? Why is it important? How does it contribute to your story, or to who you are now?

Texts:
- Metzger’s “Tapwater Coffee” (*WallTappings* 115-22)
- John Adams’ “Commissary Day” (handout)
- Linda Pastan’s “I Am Learning To Abandon the World” (handout)
“My silence was destroyed completely, indefinitely.”
~ Edwidge Danticat, on writing her story

**WHAT NOURISHES YOU?**

- nature?
- love?
- writing?
- family?
- music?
- reading?
- style/hair?
- prayer/meditation?
- sisterhoods?
- food?
- what else??

**adding STRUCTURE to your story:**

~ “Select a... **theme** that runs through your life (food; travel; ... a phobia; etc.) and write the opening 2 pages. Read through what you’ve written and jot down ideas for how to link the different episodes you might add, how to divide the piece, whether it will be chronologically arranged [by time] or [by] some other pattern...”

*and remember:*

“The **details** can yield treasures.”

— Allan G. Hunter, *Write Your Memoir: The Soul Work of Telling Your Story*

~ “**Endings**...present a challenge to the memoirist. ...you will want your story to have some sense of resolution—as will your reader. The problem is that life is not usually tide/shapely... memoir doesn't allow you to manipulate events/characters into a satisfying closure. In searching for [closure], look at the shape of the whole; picture the work in your mind: Is it balanced? Is there an important underlying question to be revisited? Are there recurring images that you can use? Then read the last 1/2 aloud and try to hear WHERE IT WANTS TO GO in its final pages.” Don’t favor “completion over complexity. Don’t shortchange the reality of life... continue unfolding into the future.”

~ “Sometimes the form may seem to you like a container for the story—say, a pot. Of course you want the most beautiful pot you can make, as well as one that is the right size and shape for what it is to hold. However, you can't just go and choose a pot from the pot store. Rather, you must make your own vessel as your material begins to take shape; you must **work with it**, mold it as the story expands, and let it swell where it wants to, or taper down... when necessary. Other times, the form may come from the inside... When you find that sturdy trunk and some of the main brances, then the foliage shapes itself naturally.”

—Judith Barrington, *Writing the Memoir*
“And I wonder if Beethoven held his breath
the first time his fingers touched the keys
the same way a soldier holds his breath
the first time his finger clicks the trigger.
We all have different reasons for forgetting to breathe.”

— Andrea Gibson, “Birthday”

When we sit in silence, gathered in our sacred circle,
I feel the presence of God most vividly and poignantly.
Here, Goddess dwells.
She lives in-between us, through us,
surrounds and binds us.
We are a circle of wise women,
strengthened by divine spirit, power, voice.
We are poetry and light. We are peace.
Out there, outside, there is cacophony,
disorder, madness, men with guns.
In here, there is respect, rejuvenation,
restoration, gentle care.
The circle is cast, unbroken, far-reaching,
never-ending. Magic.

~ Michele Lise Tarter

consider the following as you read edwidge danticat’s (fictional memoir) “1937”:
* the relationship between josephine, her mother, and her grandmother
* how josephine’s story is told
* the significance of water/tears
* themes of birth, death, rebirth
* why is the doll important? what does it symbolize? can you find other symbols?
Week 7  Mothers and Daughters

Think of yourself as someone on a quest or journey.
What are you looking to find in your life? What have you already found?
What secrets have you uncovered, and what is left to be found?

Texts:

- Danticat’s “Nineteen Thirty-Seven” (handout)
- From Maxine Hong Kingston’s The Woman Warrior (Written by Herself 454-70)
- Assata Shakur’s “Sisters in Prison,” “Mother and Daughter,” “To My Daughter Kakuya,” “You’re Coming Home” (Wall Tappings 203-10)
- Alicia Partnoy’s poems (Wall Tappings 194-202)
- Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “Turned” (“The Yellow Wallpaper” and Other Stories 39-47)
Week 8  The Body

Writing Exercise: Proud to Be You

What makes you proud of yourself?
What decisions have you made or epiphanies have you had that make you proud to be you?
Write about what has given you a sense of purpose in your life.

Texts:
- Langston Hughes’ poetry (handouts)
- Marian Wright Edelman’s “The Measure of Our Success” (*Wise Women* 259-61)
- Chastity West’s “Accomplice” (handout)
- Carolyn Ann Adams’ “Thefts” (from *Couldn’t Keep it To Myself* 65-93)

Artwork courtesy of Connie Minowa
Week 9  Self and Healing

* Memoirs Due

Artwork courtesy of Connie Minowa

Writing Exercise: Who Are You?

Make a list of things that define you
(your upbringing, where you were born and/or raised,
influential figures in your life, who/what you cannot live without, etc.)
and write a “Where I’m From” poem or story.

Texts:

- Andrea Gibson’s “I Do” (handout)
- Adrienne Rich’s “For Memory” (The Fact of a Doorframe 173-74)
Week 10  Nature

*Certificate of completion, final activity, presentation of the memoirs

Writing Exercise: Nature?

Think about how you drawn nature into yourself while living in a concrete space. Where do you find nature? How do you connect with nature?

Texts:
- Adrienne Rich’s “Diving into the Wreck” (The Fact of a Doorframe 101-03)
- Metzger’s “The Getaway”(Wall Tappings 117)
- Marge Piercy “The Common Living Dirt” (Wise Women 252-53)
Optional Ideas for Additional Weeks

Week 11  Woman Warriors
Week 12  Freedom & Imprisonment
Week 13  Fairy Tales
Week 14  Women in Mythology
Sample Writing Prompts for In-Class and Homework Writing Assignments:

1. **A Special Place:** Think of a place that is particularly significant in your life. It could be somewhere you went often as a child, someplace you’ve seen in a movie or a dream, or somewhere you have been just once. Why is this place significant? What does it say about you, or your story? Do you have one here? Can you find one? Where can you go?

2. **Then and Now:** Imagine you are writing daily diary entries while the most important moment in your life up until now is occurring. How do you feel about the people and events around you? How would you narrate your experiences—would you feel emotionally distant/detached, or brimming with feelings? How would you write the same diary entry now? Notice what you would have focused on then and now. How have you grown or changed? (Remember, unlike many of the women of the past, you have no one to censor your writing. Don’t be afraid to go back to powerful and even scary emotions. Don’t hold anything back.)

3. **Objects of Desire:** What is your most prized possession? Why is it important? How does it contribute to your story, or to who you are now?

4. **A Moment in Time:** Focus on one particular moment in time. Make a list of all the sensory images (things you remember seeing, smelling, tasting, hearing, feeling). Go back and connect those images to what you were feeling or experiencing at the time and write a “vignette” or small scene about that moment. It could be a very simple moment that is emotionally charged (say you were sitting in a bathtub and having a revelation about life) or a more intense moment to which you are re-visiting with a new perspective.

5. **A Photograph:** Look at, or try to recall, a photograph of an important time in your life. Let the words come to you as you look at the people or objects in the picture. Allow the associations to come to you and free-write about what the picture calls up in your mind. Or if you could take a photograph of people in your life, who would be in it? (etc.)

6. **A Quest/Journey:** Think of yourself as someone on a quest or journey. What are you looking to find in your life? What have you already found? What secrets have you uncovered, and what is left to be found?

7. **Beliefs:** In what do you believe most powerfully? It could be a religion, or just a philosophy by which you live, or faith in something or someone that motivates you throughout your life. Use this belief as a main theme in writing your story. How has this belief inspired you, changed with you, or motivated you to become the person you are now? Do you still believe in the same things now as you did when you were younger? Write about what has changed or stayed the same.

8. **Proud to be You:** What makes you proud of yourself? What decisions have you made or epiphanies have you had that make you proud to be you? Write about what has given you a sense of purpose in your life.
9. **Where in the World:** Where would you be in the world if you could be anywhere? What would you be doing right now if you could choose? Why? Write about this place or experience and why it is important to you.

10. **Who are You?:** Make a list of things that define you (your upbringing, where you were born and/or raised, influential figures in your life, who/what you cannot live without, etc.) and write a “Where I’m From” poem or story.

11. **Dream Journal:** Keep a journal for one week and write in it every morning when you wake up, describing the dreams you had. What can you interpret from your subconscious mind?
**Texts to Use for WITW**

( * = Texts we assigned in our course)


* Angelou, Maya. From *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. Conway 98-124.

Ashbridge, Elizabeth. “Some Account of the Fore Part of the Life of Elizabeth Ashbridge.”


* Browning, Elizabeth Barrett. “XXII.” Cahill 130.


* Cather, Willa. From *The Song of the Lark*. Cahill 160-167.


—. “From bell hooks’ Breaking Bad.” Cahill.


   —. “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power.” Cahill.


Rowlandson, Mary. “A True History of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson.” *Journeys in New Worlds: Early American Women’s Narratives*. Ed. 34


Solle, Dorothee. “Mary is a Sympathizer.” Cahill 324-328.


* Therigatha. “Songs of the Nuns.” Cahill 42-44.


* Truth, Sojourner. From Narrative of Sojourner Truth. Cahill 125.


Memoir-Writing and Other Writing “How-To” Resources:


General Resources on Prison Education and Advocacy:


The New Jim Crow Project: Princeton, NJ.


*PEN America: A Journal for Writers and Readers.* Print.


*(The above link will take you to the page where you may purchase a handbook or receive a free copy for someone who is currently incarcerated.)*

<http://www.pen.org/prison-writing/>.


“Programs for Adults: Formerly Incarcerated/Prison Writers Workshops.” NY Writers Coalition. NYWC. Web. 13 May 2013.


May 2013.

