

# WOMEN ON THE INSIDE: A YEAR OF PAINTING WITH WOMEN IN PRISON

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*The following is a chronology of the author's experience as an artist in residence in a women's prison. The purpose of this narrative is to illustrate how this experience changed the focus of her research. This experience shaped the author's views on teaching, collaboration, and the importance of constructive, positive programming in women's prisons.*

Each week I go to prison. I go there not as an offender, but as an artist in residence and researcher. Almost all of the prisons I have worked in have been for women. This work has changed my life, teaching, thoughts on collaboration, and view of the importance of art and community. When I started in 1993, I had no idea that a small volunteer opportunity would become such a meaningful, extended experience.

Now, almost every Monday, I drive 96 miles to a women's prison in the middle of Iowa. I started driving to and working at the Iowa Correctional Institution for Women (ICIW) over two years ago. Before I moved to the Midwest, I worked with incarcerated women in Florida. I drove sixty miles to Jefferson Correctional Institution, a large women's prison in Monticello from 1993 until 1997, to teach art classes. While collecting data for my dissertation in 1998 and 1999, I drove six hours each Thursday to Taycheedah Correctional Institution in Taycheedah, Wisconsin. These long drives have become part of my research. On most of these drives I think about things that are pressing: I work out problems or ideas, and I think about the women whom I am going to visit. Their voices are often the ones that I think about the most. When I leave the prison, these drives are like a coda at the end of each experience. I have used them to try to analyze the events of the evening, my feelings about my experience at the prison, and my life as a young assistant professor.

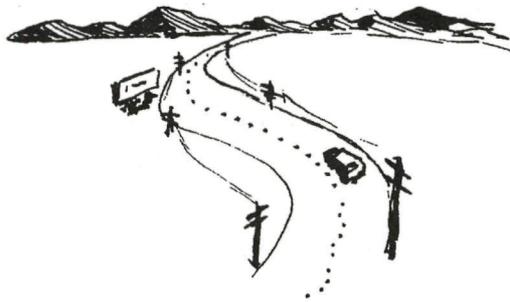
It is not surprising to me that life skills are an inherent component in most arts in corrections programs. The success of this combination is what drove me to continue my



work in women's prisons and to finish my doctorate in art education. My previous academic education was strictly in painting and drawing. While working at a prison as an artist in residence, I found that through the act of creating a visual image women could build their self-esteem, gain skills they could later use to earn a living inside and outside of the prison, and discover a way to reach beyond the prison to their family and friends through the gift of something handmade.

There has been little research on the arts in prison. Most scholars that do approach this subject are psychologists, art therapists, artists, criminologists, art collectors, or critics (Brandreth, 1972; Cleveland, 1992; Durland, 1996; Fox, 1976; Gibbons, 1997; Harrington, 1997; The Home Office Standing Committee for Arts in Prison, 2001; Kornfeld, 1997; Liebmann, 1994; Maizels, 1996; Williams, 2000, 2001). Studies have shown

that arts in corrections can reduce recidivism, create a decline in violent incidents within the prison, aid in the teaching of new vocational skills, improve literacy, reduce stress and tension, build a climate of community support, and improve overall mental and physical well-being (Durland, 1996, Gibbons, 1997; Harrington, 1997; Liebmann, 1994; Williams, 2000). While all of these things are motivating, they are only a small part of the reason that I continue to work with women in prison. Working with these women has become an integral part of my daily life. I look forward to seeing them and to hearing about their lives. I look forward to our camaraderie and to our small accomplishments each week. Most of all I look forward to the weeks when I learn that some are going home. After that I look



forward to their phone calls, especially the calls when they tell me that they are doing well.

This narrative account is the story of the most recent project at ICIW. Most of it was mentally written while driving home at night from ICIW. The story itself is interspersed with the voices of incarcerated women talking about not only the project, but also aspects of their lives. I do not use their real names because of principles related to confidentiality and because many of them have children and will return to their lives after their sentences are over. They do not want the residual stigma of incarceration to haunt them forever. This article ends with the beginning of some ongoing reflections about working in prisons and working with women.

I have tried to use the structure of a journal in order to depict the chronology of the project and also of my interactions with the women. This chronology is approximate and most of what I have written is based on my memory, tape recordings, and a small collection of written notes. This account is written using the present tense because I found that it was more appropriate when I began to decipher my notes, transcribe my tapes, and sift through my memories. In writing this account I hoped to gain some insight to my experience and motivation and to give a glimpse of prison work to others who may wish to pursue similar endeavors.

### **The Mural Project: Working with Women of Strength**

#### *April 2000*

This is my Monday routine... driving to the Iowa Correctional Institution for Women (ICIW) in Mitchellville, Iowa, listening to National Public Radio, and eating Starlight Mints for 96 miles. Mitchellville is a rural town with a population of 1,670. I am not sure if this number includes the 400 women incarcerated at the prison. I am nervous because I have a meeting with Kelly from the Arts Council and a woman at the prison who is going to help me gather data related to a program evaluation for Heartland Collaborations, an arts-in-corrections program that has three sites across Iowa. ICIW is hosting the dance program. On the way to meet Kelly at the prison, I keep eating Starlight Mints to distract me from thinking about what I am going to say to this new person. I am nervous because I need the help of the already overworked prison staff to collect a large quantity of data. The woman that Kelly is introducing me to will oversee this process. My teeth are beginning to feel fuzzy.

I have been going to ICIW for over a year to collect data about the arts in prison

culture. Working as a researcher I often find that in the early stages of data collection, the staff is generally distrustful and sees me as a general nuisance and a warm body that they have to monitor. ICIW seems different from most of my experiences, though. The administrator of the prison is new and is a woman. She seems very progressive and concerned about the women in the prison. Her presence has made a real difference in the atmosphere of the institution.

Even though I am familiar with most staff members, I have never heard of Jane Parsons. When I meet her I sense that she is going to be someone that I like very much; she is different from the other prison employees I have worked with in the past. She has on baggy pants and a man's tweed jacket. The collar is trimmed in lace that was sewn on by hand; her sneakers offset the entire outfit. When I ask her about the jacket she says it had been her father's. She added the lace from one of her old white shirts to make it more feminine. Through her explanation of the creation of this jacket, I get the impression that she is sentimental, practical, thoughtful, and attentive to aesthetic issues.

Her "office" is a big empty room in the education wing. There is a blackboard and a clock. After introductions, Kelly, Jane, and I



sit down at a long institutional table. It looks like the tables I associate with public school cafeteria food. Jane laughs when I ask her why the pale Formica top is divided with masking tape into squares. She explains that the institution hired four curriculum counselors, including her, and has no space for them to have offices. The solution for the moment is

for each woman to have a square on this table for a desk. I notice that none of the squares are labeled and there are no signs that the table has really been used. Jane said she and the other counselors float from room to room. None of them have walkie-talkies or telephones yet. The institution's administration knew they needed to overhaul their treatment and education programs by hiring some counselors, but they were not prepared for how this would impact the prison resources.

We talk about the dance project and data collection that Jane is overseeing. By the end of the conversation, Jane and I are talking about art, dogs, and weird jobs. As the meeting concludes, I tell her that I am interested in setting up a painting and drawing program. She finds the idea exciting.

### *June 2000*

While driving to the prison for the last time this summer, I notice that the sky is growing dark. I have an appointment with Jane and an interview with Katie, a female inmate who has lived in the Iowa prison system longer than any other living female inmate. Katie has been painting in the activity room for many years. Much of her work is based on still-life images or the Madonna. She sells her paintings and donates the money to the chapel building fund. Just this year she has donated \$1,200. Katie is part of an effort to continue my ongoing research about the arts in prison culture.

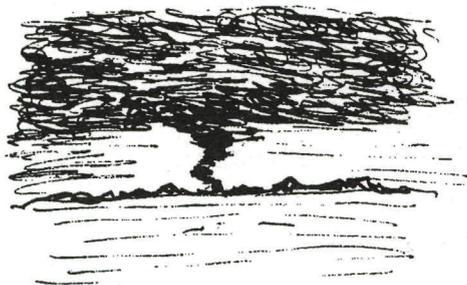
I have been talking to women in Iowa for almost a year. Time after time I find that while the role of art in corrections is interesting, my research interests are slowly being drawn more and more towards how these women deal with the deprivation of incarceration, their isolation from their children, and their history as victims of physical and sexual abuse. These topics are much more interesting and, I feel, will probably be more helpful in terms of improving the correctional system and helping women to recover from the stigma of prison.

I have also begun to note that not only are the lives of the women and their victims damaged as a result of their offense, their children's lives are also turned upside down. Women in prison are mothers to over 1.3 million children (Greenfeld & Snell, 1999). I want to learn more about these things, listen to the women, and try to find ways to improve their situations through education, through community-based options for corrections, or even through their treatment by the justice system. As a tenure-track assistant professor in art education, pursuing this would be outside of my discipline. My peers have advised me that I need to publish things related to my discipline if I am going to successfully gain tenure.

By the time I pull into the prison parking lot, I have worked myself up to a point of almost panic thinking about the entire situation of going up for tenure and creating a relevant research agenda. My breath is cool; my tongue is busy prying the last lump of a Starlight Mint stuck to my back molars.

Katie is waiting for me in the room adjacent to the volunteer coordinator's office. I usually meet with women in this room because it has a bathroom, because it is located in a housing unit and therefore always has an officer nearby, and because the volunteer coordinator is my contact person. The weather is getting worse. I open up my notepad and start talking to Katie about her art.

After a few moments an officer interrupts us. He tells us that we might be evacuated to the basement. A tornado has been sighted moving in our direction. Katie and I abandon our discussion and walk over to the window.



We watch as a bench tumbles across the yard. The sky is green and hazy and the trees are blowing back and forth. I tell Katie that I am really frightened. I have never been in a tornado.

At this moment in the prison, all I can picture is a sepia-toned memory of my grandmother as a girl. My grandmother's house was torn apart by a tornado when she was a child. She remembers hiding under the dining room table, the back door flapping and the ceiling of the house being torn off and repositioned. After the cyclone giant had passed, her mother spent hours picking glass and debris out of her hair.

Katie maternally comforts me and tells me that in all of her years as an Iowa native she has never worried about tornadoes. We watch the wind whip around and strain to listen for the warning siren. Soon after a second bench rolls across the yard, the wind dies down and it begins to rain. Our interview slot has slipped by and Katie has to go to the dining hall.

Jane meets me at 4:30 and we walk over to her new office, a partitioned space in the basement of one of the units. Her new office has no windows and smells somewhat damp. In spite of the setting, signs of activity abound. The new counselors have decorated their cubbyhole spaces with pictures, plants, piles of books, and even office jokes. Jane tells me that she has started a new round of classes and that things are going great. She misses the Heartland Dance Project but has started a drawing class. Her supplies are limited, but the women love it. We talk more about a project on which we can collaborate. Finally we decide to do a series of murals. I look at my watch and realize that I am supposed to leave. We agree to meet again in late July.

### *July 2000*

This time as I drive to the prison I notice that most of the wildflowers are beginning to turn brown and their stems are starting to

shrink and harden as autumn approaches. Soon they will be sticks and the corn planted on either side of the highway will be nothing but stubble poking out of rich black dirt. School is going to start in a week. I have spent most of the drive singing to Patty Griffin's album *Living with Ghosts*. After hiking for a month in the mountains of North Carolina, I think a ghost is what this mural idea seems like.

Jane greets me at the prison gate with her walkie-talkie slung low on a man's belt around her slender waist. She usually has a cigarette in her hand and tennis shoes on her feet. Beneath her dark brown shoulder-length hair are two long narrow braids that reach past her chest. On the ends of the braids are colorful beads that bounce against her body when she walks.

I get through the gate and Jane immediately says, "Let's get out of here and go to Des Moines for lunch." We drive into Des Moines and I tell her about our trip. She loves the outdoors and likes to hike in Minnesota and Colorado. We pull into the parking lot of an old drug store. This was one of Jane's hangouts as a teen-ager. There is still an old-fashioned lunch counter and soda fountain. Over grilled cheese and tuna fish sandwiches we talk about the grant. We decide that we need almost \$1,000 to create these murals. I tell Jane about Faith Ringgold's story quilts and we decide that instead of making large wood-framed canvases for the murals, we will do them on loose canvas and frame them with a quilted border. This idea seems more feasible and less awkward with regard to supplies, restrictions in the prison, and our limited resources. Our conversation is easy and our discussion lends itself to the creation of mutual goals and a singular idea. As I leave with the notes I need to write a grant to the Iowa Arts Council, I am almost giddy with excitement at the prospect of this project.

### *August 2000*

As I listen to the phone ring through the receiver pushed against my ear, I read the sticker stuck on the desk lamp that I inherited with my old office in North Hall. It reads, "Today is only a figment of your imagination." I felt that way when I opened the letter from the Iowa Arts Council. They gave us \$500 for the mural project. It was much less than we asked for, but much more than we expected. After navigating through the institution's automated answering system, I reach Jane to deliver the news.

### *September 2000*

The supplies that I ordered for the mural project have finally arrived and we are ready to begin. I look at the end of the giant cardboard box bouncing along next to my head as I drive down Interstate 80. It has made driving a little tough because it obscures the view from my passenger window. I am so excited about starting to paint.

For the past few weeks Jane and I have met with a group of interested women to plan these murals. The group has remained fairly stable. This is a good sign that we have gained their commitment. The women have decided that they want to depict famous women who have succeeded in changing the world. They have done research at the prison library and I have sent my research assistant looking for more information at their request. We have found photographs and even looked at the site where the murals will finally be installed. I think the combination of library materials from the university and seeing the unit where the finished pieces will hang has really motivated them to get excited about the project.

There will be four murals: three will be portraits of individual women; the fourth will be a collection of images chosen by the artists. The three women we have decided on are Nilak Butler, a Native-American activist,

Clara McBride Hale, the founder of the Hale House in New Haven, and Mother Teresa.

Jane meets me outside the gate to help unload my old jeep. There are three women on the other side of the fence who are going to help us carry everything to Unit 2; the room in which I used to interview people has become the new art room. In the past it was used as a chapel. Jane is slowly filling the walls with the drawings of her students. The atmosphere of the room is transforming from an empty generic space with a single strip of green carpet, to an active studio.

When we begin to unload the large box of paint and brushes, the officer in the control office starts to shift back and forth in his chair behind the glass window. When the large, long box that is our giant roll of canvas appears, we can tell that his curiosity is really piqued. He stops us as we drag the boxes up on the curb to tell us that all of it will have to be inspected. This is no surprise to Jane or me. Because of safety, everything that goes into a prison must be searched and accounted for. I have had experiences in other prisons where the search of art materials becomes a huge ordeal and even a power struggle. Here at ICIW, I sense none of that. When the officer sees that none of the supplies have been opened, he lets us pass through the gate without any trouble. With the help of three women we make our way to Unit 2. The women in the yard crane their necks to see what we are carrying to the art room. Jane and I decide that this curiosity might be a good way to get more women interested in the project.

Jane picks up the intercom phone and announces that the mural class is open. In ten minutes a core group of women is gathered around the boxes. With anticipation the women rip through the cardboard and pull out the newsprint packing. I am glad that I did not open the boxes; it is great to watch the women count the paint and feel the new soft bristles at the end of the brushes. After

opening the second box, the women are all surprised to see the giant roll of canvas because until this moment the size of these murals was hard to imagine. We place it at one end of the room and roll it out. It follows the green strip of carpet that used to be the aisle in the old chapel. There are 18 feet of unspoiled primed canvas. Everyone pauses for a moment just to stare at the starkness of the canvas. We cut it in three places for the murals. Two will be seven feet tall and one will be four feet tall. I realize that we need more canvas to finish the project.

The next step heightens the magic in the room. The women asked the week before how we were going to paint the images on a surface that large. We decided that the best way to accomplish this task was to use an overhead projector and a photocopied transparency. We stand on two tables and tape one of the canvases to the wall with masking tape, cross our fingers that it will hold, and then turn on the overhead. As we slowly bring Nilak Butler's image into focus on the canvas, it seems as if each woman is holding her breath. Finally, Nilak Butler's image is projected, like the head of the great and powerful Oz.

Perhaps because the canvas is so pristine, or because the process is so intimidating, no one wants to begin to trace the lines of Nilak's image. I step over and show the women what it will look like. After a few moments of drawing, I ask Vera to turn off the overhead. When she does Nilak's eye appears alone in light graphite lines on the canvas. After this, Vera, Ruby, and Sara take over the tracing without hesitation. Our murals have begun.

### *January 2001*

Now that deep winter has settled across most of Iowa and there is nothing but snow and ice for miles, my drives have become even more meditative. I spend most of my trip thinking not about the mural project, but about my research. I have talked with many of the

women as we paint side by side. Over the course of many months I have come to know each woman as a friend; most have told me about their families, their circumstances, and their lives before prison. These conversations have made me even more convinced that I should shift my research focus in spite of my discipline and tenure pressures.

I think about tying art making to the creation of a space for normalcy and conversation. These spaces are rare and reassuring within the prison. We have painted each Monday night and laughed, compared stories, sang to the 80s music on the radio, and talked. The women have said that being in the art room on Monday nights makes them feel human again and not like they are in a correctional institution. Each woman has become committed to this project not only because the project itself is compelling, but also because they have become part of a community. They have built a supportive atmosphere and have reached out to help one another.

I think this supportive space has been opened because the murals have been such a collaborative effort. It is like almost every person has painted every part. There are layers and layers of paint underneath each image that would reveal the history of the entire process. During this creative process the images have changed, been muddled, been beautiful, and even been completely painted over. They are organic, growing and changing each week.

One night, Nilak's face was finally complete, but her neck looked disconnected from her head. Ruby, Katie, and Sara tried to "fix" the problem. By the end of the evening Nilak looked like E.T. In spite of this, the group pinned her up and stepped back, and everyone laughed at the mistake until tears were streaming down faces. Ruby, Katie, and Sara were surprised at how the image looked hanging on the wall versus lying flat on the table. During the next class the problem was

corrected, and Ruby and Katie especially seemed pleased that they had worked through the process.

In hindsight, I think our humor was an unusual response to a mistake. Typically, mistakes in prison, even if they seem trivial, are accompanied by severe consequences. For example, Sara, who works for a private industry within the prison, builds office furniture. One night she accidentally left with two screws in her shirt pocket. Before leaving she was searched; the screws were found and she was disciplined by not being allowed to leave her cell for a few weeks. Her mistake was honest, but unfortunate.

The muddled process of trying to fix the disjunction between Nilak's head and neck produced a visual mess. In spite of this, the group's reaction was so human and normal that the mistake became trivial. As I drive to the prison in the late afternoon, I think it must be comforting to find places within the prison where mistakes are treated as a normal part of human process and not grounds for punitive action.

The holidays in prison are always difficult. It has been two weeks since the New Year was celebrated. When classes resume, it seems almost as if the women are relieved. Their lives are back to normal, and they don't have to be reminded that they are missing their family celebrations. No matter how adjusted the women seem to prison life, it is easy to see that living at ICIW is a constant struggle. Tonight I sit next to Ruby.

Ruby is fit and lean with shoulder-length light brown hair. She has light blue eyes and a fantastic laugh, and she moves like a dancer. Her thick, inner city New Orleans accent draws attention to her immediately. She is very well read, extremely humorous, and always has high standards for herself as well as others. She started in Jane's drawing class and has steadily progressed as a portrait artist. When I ask her about this she says:

*I really like people and I wanted to draw faces with emotions and wrinkles. I think I have gone from drawing stick people to being able to put down an emotion on a paper. I am giving myself five years to learn how to draw.*

When I ask her why she has continued to be involved in art classes and the mural project, she tells me that it is because they are positive.

*Things like this really help. You have to run after the positive... you have to cling to it and grab on to it like it is going to fall off the face of this earth because you will get caught up in the negative. There is no gray area; yes you will turn to the negative if you don't look for the positive. I mean I got lemons and I am going to make lemonade and not only that I am going to make pink lemonade!*

I ask her how she thinks people will react when these murals leave the prison and people on the outside say to themselves, "Oh, women in prison did these murals. Does it matter?"

*I think it does matter. I am perfectly aware that I was not a bad guy until I did my crime and now I am a bad guy. I used to view that as, 'I don't care if they are hungry, thirsty, sick, cold, I don't care. You did your crime, and now you are paying for it...' This project shows people that we are kept busy in here. We have jobs, we do projects, we go to school.*

Ruby's experience in prison has really changed her political views about crime and people who are in prison. She insists that people who are in prison should not complain.

*If you don't like it in here, don't complain... you should not have committed a crime!*

I ask her about the mix of people in our mural class, noting that we have people who join us one night and then don't come for six weeks. Overall, we have a core group of people that have become friends; I wonder how the women view these stray painters. Ruby says:

*In this class we get all kinds of different people. People who would not mix at all. For sure not mix, they just hang around with different people, live in different units. Especially in the wintertime... we all hibernate. We all get cabin fever. And you are not seeing that here. You're not hearing the bad things, you are hearing the positive stuff come out of everybody's mouth. It's not like, that stinks, it's like, whoa let's try this... doesn't that look good! There are different groups of friends and that mixes it up in here... Some days are so frustrating and you come in here and just mellow out.*

I look around the room and notice that it has been totally transformed. There are drawings and paintings everywhere. The Mother Teresa mural is hanging across a curtain rod on one wall. The women are all sitting in small groups, painting and talking. It is very different from the way that it looked when I did interviews last year. I see very little at the prison besides the yard, Jane's office, and this room, so I ask Ruby how this room is different from other rooms at the prison.

*It's not like being here for a while. When we have to leave, Jane practically has to force us out. Some of the rooms (at the prison) are really, really small. Our rooms are our bathroom, our bedroom, our laundry room...I love this room. I love to see what other people are working on.*

On my drive home in the dark, I turn my

car heater to high and think about Ruby's comments. I take for granted the normal space of the art room. To me it seems like any other makeshift community setting where adults are making art. After my conversation with Ruby, I see the room differently, as a rare place for normalcy. For Ruby, it seems that there are few places and ways in the prison to feel normal, and this project offers her one opportunity.

### *April 2001*

I am eager to get to the prison tonight. In two days I leave Iowa to speak at the National Art Education Association Meeting. I submitted an abstract from my paper about this project. I have been writing and rewriting for the past few days, but I know that there is another world of important data related to the women that I have left out. It has nothing to do with art. These data relate to how the women function as mothers, daughters, sisters, friends, and partners. The other side of these data is connected to their institutional journeys. The journey begins with their pre-offense lives in the free world and moves to their offense, then to court, and then to prison. When I sat at my computer this morning finishing up my notes for New York, I thought about the importance of making people understand that most of these women are going to go home one day; they have the same needs and desires that all humans share. Art is one way to address some of these things, but more information needs to be available to people in the community and the correctional system.

After class has started and the familiar hum of conversation, low music in the background, and the feeling of a studio space is visible, I sit down to talk with Vera. Vera looks almost like a doll. She is petite with large brown eyes, rosy round cheeks, shiny brown hair, and smooth pale skin. She is vivacious and intelligent. Tonight, instead of working on the mural, she is painting a plaster

cast of two fish. The small sculpture is for her son's ninth birthday. I can tell she has been working on these fish with meticulous attention to detail. She is in the process of dry brushing the scales to make them look iridescent. "My son knows more about fish than any eight year old should."

In the course of our conversation she tells me that she has two children, a daughter and a son. The daughter, Katherine, is in the midst of puberty and having a hard time without her mother. They talk every night by telephone. Vera said when she saw Katherine during her weekly visit two months ago, they decided that she should start wearing a bra. Vera wanted to be the first person to buy her one. She ordered one from Sears and then later found out it was on back order. In the end Vera's best friend took Katherine shopping. Vera said the entire experience was heartbreaking because she wanted so much to make that time in Katherine's life special and filled with mother and daughter moments of sharing. Vera thought she would be home by now, and hopes that during her parole review in late summer she will receive some good news.

Lucky is sitting across from us; she has been listening while she paints. Her daughter is 14. Lucky looks older than she is. She has shaggy hair and bright blue eyes. Her voice is soft and husky; when she speaks it is gently with a neutral, midwestern accent. She first came to our mural class late in the fall. She was the first woman to paint a flower on the mural of Nilak Butler. Until that moment she didn't realize that she could paint or that she would enjoy creating fanciful flowers with a brush. After her first night she was hooked. Since then she has come to every mural class.

Like Vera, Lucky is not working on the mural tonight. Instead, she is painting on a small, cardboard canvas. The image is familiar. She has painted several variations of a heart and cross. Love and faith are the two things that she considers most important when she

returns home.

This is her second time in prison for drug use. Soon Lucky will be released. She is planning a huge reunion with her son and daughter; both are teen-agers. The last time she returned home they were angry with her and had lost all respect for her as their mother. She said she felt as though she was losing control over the entire situation.

"My second time in prison seems different." Lucky feels as if she is going to be successful at staying off drugs this time. Her daughter is older and their relationship has grown stronger through letters, phone calls, and visits. Her son is still distant, but she hopes that she can somehow regain his respect. Lucky said she is really nervous about returning home.

When Lucky returns home she plans on going back to college, taking care of her children, and getting a job so that she can support her family. She is nervous about all of these plans. The transition from the prison to the free world is often a time of high anxiety. It seems as if painting helps Lucky stay focused. Working in the art room every night that it is open helps her keep her mind off her worries until she leaves. She says that these images of the cross and heart serve as reminders of the goals she has set. As we talk, her hands start to shake ever so slightly and her eyes turn glassy. Both of us pause and realize that if we talk more, it will be very emotional. I sense that Lucky is just trying to hold all of her feelings together and that she would rather not cry in front of everyone.

Tonight I can hardly bear these conversations. For some reason they overwhelm me, and I don't want to get upset in front of these women who seem so strong. I walk over to the sewing machine where Lilly and Sara have been working for weeks on the quilted borders. Each session they lay out a swath of colored cotton squares, label them, and then sew them together to make fantastic patterns for the borders of the murals. They

have been working since early this afternoon on one border so that it might be finished in time to travel to New York. The chance to show off these murals at a national conference is exciting for them and for me.

Over the past few months Lilly has slowly taught Jane and me how to make quilts. This project has given her a sense of purpose. She and Sara are the only ones who feel confident enough to tackle this portion of the murals. Their contribution has been extremely important, and they realize that these murals would never have been completed without their dedication, knowledge, and hard work.

When the night is over, the group helps me roll up the murals and I leave with them. I promise over and over to make sure that they don't get lost at the airport. I promise to bring back pictures of New York and the murals.

### *June 2001*

Three of the murals are finally finished. They have traveled to conferences in London and New York. They have hung in a gallery in Iowa and a museum in Florida. In the Fall, we will hang them permanently in Unit 9. Today I will work with the women for the last time this summer. I am leaving this week to work for a month in London with women in Holloway Prison. I am hoping that the lessons I have learned here at ICIW will help me to work effectively as a teacher and to further develop my ideas related to research. I am curious about the differences I will encounter between the women in London and the women here. I also wonder if the prison will be different. I am sad that I will not see these wonderful women for eight weeks. When I return we are going to plan a dedication ceremony for the murals. We want to invite women in the prison and people from outside. The last mural is almost complete. It is filled with images of mothers, movie stars, activists, songwriters, and women who have survived oppression and racism. The women have all worked on an image for this final mural. We

have decided that it will not be hung permanently and instead will travel outside the prison to help educate people about arts in corrections and the potential of the women who created it.

### Final Reflections

For me, this experience speaks of women set apart by acts of violence, poverty, destruction, defense, circumstances, addiction, and necessity. These women have experienced a space where they can forget they are prisoners and instead become women artists sharing stories, ideas, and four murals. In the process of writing this narrative, I have been able to see how this project has helped me to formulate a new research agenda that focuses more on the seldom heard stories of women in prison and less on their art. It has also helped me understand more about the role of art education opportunities in prison, as well as the importance of a community space where the women have a chance to feel "normal," interact with each other positively, and create things that are valued and beautiful. Through this project I have been rejuvenated as an artist and a writer. I have already started to think about our next project together.

The mural project created a common bond among women who would never have interacted. Their positive attitudes and willingness to engage in a process of collaboration over the course of many months strengthened this bond. In the process of making these murals and spending time together in a relaxed atmosphere charged with a singular purpose, a community of support has been created.

Prison is a place where deprivation, oppression, and disenfranchisement take place. Due to limited resources, the chances for personal renewal and transformation are bounded. Art offers an outlet for inmates to channel individual expression, human feeling, and creativity while dealing with the frustrating

and depressing experience of being incarcerated. It also offers a portal that leads to an in-depth understanding of the symbols and objects that have power within the cultural collective. These symbols and objects can help community members like Lucky understand, define, and confirm personal belief systems and social functions for successful day-to-day living. Art making also presents a way for women like Ruby to control and create personal connections to the universe through the manipulation of materials (Dissanayake, 1992).

Suzanne Langer (1962) states:

*It may serve somebody's need for self-expression, besides, but that is not what makes it good or bad art. In a special sense one may call a work of art a symbol for feeling, for, like a symbol, it formulates our ideas of inward experience, as discourse formulates our ideas of things and facts in the outside world. (p 90)*

In this narrative I have tried to depict both the process of art making and the importance of discourse. I have tried to combine these two things in order to shed light on the world of women's incarceration, their experiences, the art that they produce and the daily routines and frustrations they encounter, as well as the positive outcomes that are possible. I have also tried to better understand my reasons for working with women who are incarcerated and how they have impacted my life as a teacher and a researcher.

### Post Script

Recently, Lucky called me to ask for a letter of recommendation to a local business school. Later I found out that she had successfully enrolled in classes and that her children were living at home with her. Vera was paroled on work release and will be reunited as a normal mother with her husband and children in a matter of weeks. The prison

is in the midst of serious budget cuts and Jane has learned that she might be one of the twenty people laid off.

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