

# Honor

*By Dennis Kelly*

I felt well prepared to teach mindful writing in the county jail. After all, I'm a published author, I've taught meditation, and I studied with the godmother of mindful writing, Natalie Goldberg. Mindful writing is a healing practice that provides the freedom to express one's deepest thoughts and feelings. A cathartic opportunity to put some distance between the writer and their story, opening space for objective reflection.

However, shortly after I began facilitating in-jail writing sessions, something felt off—an inadequacy on which I couldn't quite put my finger. Maybe it was the disquieting environment: the probing metal detectors, stark concrete walls, clanging of gray steel doors, pervasive cameras, and the headache that always ensued from the absence of windows and the flickering brightness of overhead lights.

Or perhaps, it was the alarming in-custody stats. Suicide rates among jailed detainees are three times higher than those in the prison population and over half of the jail suicides occur within the first week of incarceration. The sheer gravity of these stats weighed on me, as did the mission I carried. That is, "to reach jailed detainees at a crucial time in their lives, in an environment that otherwise provides no emotional wellness programming or outdoor activities, while they await oft-delayed court dates."

The mindful writing sessions are held in a classroom on the perimeter of the detainees' living quarters, called quads. Each quad has twenty electronically-controlled cells that house two people. The detention officers' video control station is in the quad's center.

Attending a mindful writing session is voluntary; most participants show up the first time just to break up the boredom of their listless routine. At first glance, the detainees appear

indistinguishable . . . depersonalized . . . clad in loose-fitting orange pajamas and plastic orange Crocs. I make it a point to quickly learn their names. Newbies are mixed in with repeaters who know the system and routine. Repeaters hate county jail; they say prison has better food and more to do. Ninety percent of the attendees are people of color, which is perhaps not surprising, but is very discouraging. One in five Black people born in Minnesota in 2001 are likely to be incarcerated in their lifetimes, compared to one in ten Latinx people and one in twenty-nine white people.

After a brief introduction, I explain the mindful writing concept and that it starts out with a prompt. The prompt is the writing subject that launches a five-minute writing exercise. Examples are: *home, family, I'm from, I am, letters, jail, freedom, broken, do over, and help*. Everyone writes using the same prompt.

Participants are allowed to write anything that comes to mind related to the prompt. They are encouraged to simply keep the pencil moving. “Just let the writing do the writing. Be honest. Be true to yourself.” To begin, the writers are asked to take a deep breath, be present, and write freely from a place where it’s “safe to tell you story.” At the end of five minutes, everyone is invited to read their writing aloud.

During an in-jail writing session, shortly after I began teaching, a detainee asked (more matter-of-fact than a threatening), “So, tell me, what you got for me, NOW? Something to help me on the street? You want me to pull a poem out my pocket up against a nine-millimeter Glock?” The other detainees laughed and waited to see my reaction.

There it was—the question that had been rolling around in my head from the start. I had a list of post incarceration resources available, that included access to free education, vocational, opportunities and addiction programs. As well as, the location of community mindful writing

programs. But the question was, “What can you offer me, now?” Not a week from now, or in a month, or when I get out, but right, NOW?”

It was an immediate question for me and an urgent question for society at large. Many of us never really *see* incarcerated people. We’re distracted by ‘get tough on crime’ taglines or the bitter debate about the efficacy of social programs.

The detainees stared at me blankly and waited for my answer. They didn’t want some social theory; they wanted something actionable. I knew the therapeutic power of mindful writing, but in a transient jail setting, did it have legs? Could it propel hope and fortitude going forward?

I felt trapped. The room spun and my throat went dry. Sweat sprang from my face and soaked my collar. The detainees were giving up on me and starting to talk amongst themselves. Then, I heard a word from somewhere within the chatter and spontaneously plucked it out.

“Honor,” I said out loud.

The men looked at me curiously as I repeated the prompt. “Honor. You have five minutes; begin.” To my surprise, their heads dropped and pencils raced across the page. I had no idea what to expect.

“Time’s up, who wants to read?” I held my breath.

A hand went up. Interestingly, the volunteer was the detainee who had put forward the question I’d been unable to answer. As he read, his sparse words cracked open the siloed bravado of jail habitation that gives no quarter to vulnerability.

*“I honor all the people who had my back—my two best friends shot down for nothin’, my brother who don’t think straight from getting hit in the head, my mother for working two jobs to get us through only to have me disappoint her, my grandfather who bought me football shoes that he couldn’t afford. The homeless lady who slept in her car and gave me a ride to school every*

*day. A cook at a fast-food place who tried to get me off drugs. I honor all the victims who've been pushed down and come right back up and help you. Honor all I got."*

The room was silent, as if taking on the solemnity of a church. Then, someone snapped their fingers . . . then another . . . then everyone, the snaps falling into synchronous rhythm, breaking off into claps.

I listened to the reader's words intently, aware that the man was helping me so we could better help each other. It was honor, yes, but not a flag-saluting tribute. This was honor, whose special context had eluded me but now filled me with gratitude. This was honor from the point of view of incarcerated people and their inherent struggle. Honor: The quality of having respectability, worthiness, a sense of hope and pride, and the ability to pick ourselves up no matter how many times we've fallen and carry on. Honor: The platform from which human beings can rise again for the benefit of themselves and others, on the street or wherever their journey takes them.

Other participants raised their hands, eager to read. With raw honesty and a sense of purpose, their fear, regret, loneliness, sadness, joy, and hope were laid bare for all to witness. Their words vibrated with the movement of life. They presented stories with amazing creativity, poetic rhythm, compassion, remorse, and humor. The stories and reflections were palpable; they cut to the bone and opened the heart. The stories taught the writers and informed all of us who cared to listen.