



# 13

## A Sense of Belonging: The Walls to Bridges Educational Program as a Healing Space

Shoshana Pollack and Denise Edwards

### Introduction

In *A Hidden Wholeness* Parker Palmer speaks of the healing power of ‘circles of trust’ in which communication is about reflection, collaboration and listening, rather than explaining, advising or helping (Palmer 2014). This basic premise underpins the Walls to Bridges (W2B) program, a university-based educational program in which incarcerated and non-incarcerated students study together for semester-long courses in a correctional setting. Courses are for-credit and are offered in a variety of disciplines such as Social Work, Criminology, English Literature, Sociology, Urban Studies, Philosophy and Gender Studies. W2B is an experiential learning model designed to create spaces of analysis, reflection and action within university classes held in prisons. While not a

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‘therapeutic’ service, both incarcerated and university-based students report that participation in this program cultivates a sense of personal ‘voice’ and agency and creates a community of learners that feels personally healing and socially transformative (Pollack 2016).

This chapter is a collaboration between Denise, a formerly incarcerated alumna of W2B classes and Shoshana, an instructor of W2B classes and the director of the National W2B program in Canada. In this chapter, we explore several aspects of the W2B program that students experience as healing and transformative (Pollack 2016): these include W2B’s commitment to destabilising power in the classroom, avoiding stigmatising labels and categories, and developing a classroom space in which ‘difference’ is valued. In keeping with W2B principles that honour lived experiences as sources of knowledge, we have written this chapter using first-person narration to explore the transformative impact of W2B classes. Shoshana begins the chapter by outlining the central components of the W2B program pedagogy and how it differs from both conventional university education and correctional programs. This is followed by Denise’s account of the ways in which race, class and gender dynamics shaped her experiences of (un)belonging in Canada (which were then reproduced while incarcerated) and her contrasting experiences of being a W2B student. In this chapter, we discuss how lived experience, non-stigmatising discourses and practices, and mutually reciprocal relationships are crucial for cultivating mental health for incarcerated people.

## **The Walls to Bridges Program: Creating a Learning Community Within a Prison Classroom**

Based on the U.S. Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program, the Canadian W2B program shares many of its practices and premises.<sup>1</sup> I (Shoshana) took the seven day Inside-Out instructor training in the United States in 2011. Although we have made changes to suit the Canadian cultural and correctional context, pedagogically we use a similar teaching model as described by Lori Pompa (2013), founder of the Inside-Out

Prison Exchange Program. Inside-Out and Walls to Bridges classes are not about students from the ‘outside’ helping, researching, or mentoring incarcerated students; but rather all students study academic material together within the context of a classroom in a prison or jail. Further, the instructor of a W2B class is considered a facilitator of the learning process—she or he does not lecture but through a variety of teaching techniques holds the space in which students can explore complex and challenging ideas from a variety of perspectives, lived experiences, and contexts.

For many instructors, this can be daunting as we have been trained to consider ourselves experts and to think of education as only effective if delivered through the ‘banking model’ (Freire 1970) in which we ‘deposit’ our knowledge into the minds of students. Both Inside-Out and W2B consider the instructor a facilitator and develop teaching tools that help to destabilise power relations between professor and student and between students themselves. The Canadian W2B program has been influenced by Indigenous Elders and Indigenous scholars such as Dr. Pricilla Settee, Larry Morrison, Gayle Cyr and Dr. Kathy Absolon, all of whom participated in circles with us, and provided teachings on Indigenous holistic ways of knowing. The use of learning circles, in which participants take turns speaking while others reflectively listen, is integral to Indigenous ways of learning and healing (Hart 2002).

Participants are encouraged to listen openly and reflectively to the perspectives of others and to their own inner dialogue. In W2B classes, this fosters a classroom climate that values different perspectives and supports an understanding of self as situated within the contexts of gender, race, class, culture, sexual orientation and other forms of othering. Such an approach is particularly well suited for working with students who may be living in very different contexts, such as those who are incarcerated and those who are not. Incarcerated students enter into W2B classes feeling concerned that the university or ‘outside’ students will look down on them, judge them as stupid or as ill-equipped for university level studies (Pollack 2016). A pedagogy that explicitly values all sorts of knowledge, including lived experience and emotions, creates an inclusive learning environment.

We have also been influenced by Parker Palmer, a U.S. Quaker and educator. In *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward An Undivided Life*, Palmer (2014) outlines principles and guidelines for creating a community that fosters a space in which authenticity is encouraged and valued; in which a ‘whole self’ is permitted to emerge. In W2B, we do this by explicitly valuing emotions, spirit, body, and mind as legitimate forms of knowledge and by creating in-class activities that foster reflective listening, rather than debating or competing for the ‘right’ answer. Instead, as Palmer (2014) writes:

We speak from our own center to the center of the circle— to the receptive heart of the communal space— where what we say will be held attentively and respectfully. This way of speaking differs markedly from everyday conversations in which we speak from our own intellect or ego directly to the intellect or ego of someone on whom we hope to have an impact. (p. 118)

Not only is this a countercultural approach to conventional university teaching but it also deviates from most correctional programming. Correctional programming is typically cognitive-behavioural, explicitly designed to change thinking patterns and behaviours considered to be criminogenic. The facilitator is considered the expert on the material and the very purpose of such program is to impact/change participants’ selves (Kendall and Pollack 2003). If participants fail to adopt the discursive framing of crime and criminality promoted in these programs, they are considered to be ‘engaging in “techniques of neutralisation” which Sykes and Matza (1957) describe as the discursive methods through which individuals justify their delinquent or illegal actions’ (Fayter 2016, p. 60).

People experiencing incarceration are rarely considered ‘knowers’ or as having much to contribute to understandings of mental health, crime, addiction and other social issues. In contrast, all students and instructors in W2B classes are considered both teachers and learners who have intellectual, experiential, academic and emotional knowledge important for the exploration of course content. As it is a university-class, not a correctional program, there is no focus on criminogenic

factors, changing behaviour, or labelling. In fact, our classes adopt Palmer's suggestion that there be 'no fixing, no advising, no setting each other straight' (2014, p. 115) so that we can foster an environment in which students collaboratively explore the course materials from their own unique perspectives and contexts, without fear of being admonished or diminished.

## **Narratives About Criminalised Women and Mental Health**

I worked as a psychotherapist in a women's prison before I became an academic. I worked with a group of feminist psychologists and social workers to provide trauma counselling, group work, and advocacy for the women inside. These early experiences form the foundation of my commitment to shared work with criminalised women, challenging professional (correctional, psychiatric, psychological) discourses that decontextualise lived experience from social structures; and promoting continual reflexivity in practice and research. The W2B program contributes to destabilising public, legal, correctional and academic discourses that pathologise women's mental health by individualising behaviours without placing them within the context of lived experience of poverty, gendered violence, racism and colonialism. In W2B classes, we do this in part, by valuing incarcerated students' own analyses of what they have experienced within the criminal justice system and in their lives more generally. Although no student (incarcerated or otherwise) is expected to share any particular aspect of their lives, the circle process and small group activities allow opportunities to use course material to reflect on lived experience; therefore, personal stories are sometimes shared in the interest of developing a more robust understanding of course content and academic scholarship.

Over the past 27 years, I have been to countless conferences, have read hundreds of articles on 'female offenders', and have seen endless and repetitive statistics on the mental health, substance use, mothering, and behavioural problems of criminalised women. Yet, only on

the rare occasion are the subjects of all this analysis and intervention given an opportunity to represent themselves and their own perspectives on crime and punishment. Of course, there are occasional opportunities for incarcerated people to share their stories at some criminological and/or correctional conferences and workshops. Nonetheless, how these stories are shared and structured is typically shaped by the agenda of those who are putting on the event, and thus they often take the predictable shape of a reformation narrative, identifying low self-esteem, faulty thinking, and poor choices as criminogenic factors. The hegemony of this narrative frame means that alternative ways of constructing self and experience are rendered unthinkable and thus unspeakable. As a researcher and scholar, I have examined the ways in which criminological and correctional discourses obscure social context and promulgate the subjectivity of women in prison as cognitively deficient, difficult to ‘manage’ and mentally unstable (Pollack 2007, 2009, 2010, 2012). Reflecting upon this, Tiina Eldridge describes the way she experienced and responded to correctional discursive framings while she was incarcerated. She writes:

I regurgitated my story over and over and molded my life to fit the shape of the correctional discourse to explain how I was broken and a risk to society but how—by accessing prison programs and education—I was being “fixed” and it would soon be safe to return me to society... Now, having been free for almost two years and having had the opportunity to study and analyze the gendered scripts women prisoners are required to perform, I feel somewhat differently. I actually feel a lot of guilt and shame about being brainwashed into being a correctional puppet. (Pollack and Eldridge 2015, p. 135)

As Eldridge’s analysis illustrates, simply providing opportunities for narratives of ‘lived experience’ to be included in discussions about mental health and prisoners is not sufficient. The dominant framework for how lived experience of mental health problems is narrated is so rigid that it has been called ‘patient porn’ to signal how personal narratives can be exploited in order to promote and validate a given treatment method or program (Costa et al. 2012).

W2B aims to disrupt ‘canned’ and official versions of who a criminal ‘is’ (and other categories such as gender, race, and mental health that rely upon binaries and labels) through several means. Firstly, in class activities designed to facilitate relationships and mutual exploration of course content, a process that ‘outside’ students attribute to dispelling assumptions and stereotypes about imprisoned people (Pollack 2016). Secondly, if students or instructors are sharing personal experiences, it is done largely within the context of the course material, to shed light on the theoretical or practice concepts being illustrated, rather than as a way to ‘tell a story’ about crime, addictions or mental health. This helps to mediate the reproduction of dominant discourses in narrations of self. Finally, a number (8 so far) of W2B undergraduate and graduate alumni are contributing to the literature on education and criminal justice (as is the case in this current chapter), thereby redefining the scholarship on criminalised women from the perspective of lived experience of incarceration.<sup>2</sup>

The following section is written by Denise, in first-person narrative form, in keeping with her choices for self-expression. Denise writes about the challenges of growing up in a white settler country that privileges those with white skin and middle-class status and the relationship between feeling excluded and being criminalised. She sets this context to illustrate for the reader the powerful impact of W2B. While in prison, W2B classes reduced her need for psychotherapeutic medications and helped her feel accepted and valued, resulting in feeling a sense of community connection—of belonging—for one of the first times in her life. Since being released from prison, Denise has continued working with W2B to conduct workshops and trainings and to spread the word about this innovative pedagogy. She is also a published fiction writer.

## Denise

School began as the place my siblings and peers absolutely had to reach every Monday to Friday between the hours of 8:50 a.m.–3:20 p.m. come sun or snow. It was a trek of four city streets from my front door to the school’s main entrance. It was the place we would spend most of

our productive hours. At school, we would concentrate on the three Rs even though in essence there was only a single R in the equation. There were thirty of us in my grade three class. Room 303's wooden desks served as our storage for school supplies: pencil crayons, text books, the odd contraband of an assortment of candies and bubble gum, along with empty crinkly wrappers. Life was hard enough at seven, eight, nine, ten eleven years old. In those days, we lived by two universal rules: (One) Try to obey your parents as much as possible as to not have to experience the adage of 'If you can't hear, you will feel'. And trust me, you didn't want to feel whatever that thick brown leather belt felt like on your butt. (Two) Try to obey your teacher as much as possible so as not to warrant them calling your parents; again, so you don't have to experience Rule Number One.

My conscience dramatically shifted early one Saturday morning while I was in the eighth grade. Rather than sleeping in for the weekend I arose early and tiptoed into the kitchen and poured myself a bowl of cornflakes before I settled in front of the television to watch some of my favourite cartoons. I heard the muted echo of my father's trumpet in the den and I made a beeline to greet him. He immediately felt my presence and stopped blowing. The angle of the rising winter morning's sunlight gave him a lift to his six feet two-inch frame.

'It's Saturday morning, remember?'

'Morning', I replied

'Isn't this the day regular teenagers slept in?' he asked sarcastically. We exchanged friendly banter while I ate my breakfast and I then I remembered my cartoons. I was appropriately clad in hunter green flannel pajamas for the fast approaching merriest of seasons and before I had a chance to completely exit in thick woollen socks my father asked me what I thought was a strange question.

'Hey, who's your ultimate hero or heroine? Everyone has at least one person who has challenged them in one way or the next to be the best person they can be. And by the way, your answer can't be an athlete or an entertainer'.

'Hmm?' was my response. My fourteen-year-old brain didn't want to ponder over the question. Besides, the answer was cutting into my cartoon time.



*Who do I admire to the extent that I'd like to mirror my life's mission in their shadow?* The only person I thought of was getting impatient with me. I watched as his grey eyes shifted from me to his metronome where he adjusted the speed to a slow-paced beat. He was working on the scales to a Chuck Mangione song? *Feels So Good*. It was the instrumental that made me feel as good as the title suggested without any crooning.

'So who is it?' He queried once again.

'What if I was to tell you that its...you?'

'Apart from your mother or I. As a matter of fact, why don't you narrow it down to someone who looks like you and has made a significant positive impact to the world'. *Is there such a person?* He was making it harder for me to answer him every time he opened his mouth. My father removed his bread and butter from the stand and before he brought the instrument to the middle of his lips he looked at me once more and reminded me our conversation would resume at a later day. My father planted a seed in my head that many years later, a stranger by the name of Parker Palmer, would help to fertilise.

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Innocence lost is never found and some children strive better in a balanced setting of the so-called traditional nuclear family structure or else they test every boundary imagined. I'm not knocking single parenthood or any of the other forms of parenting and making a family. Love is love, period. My family dynamics were changing but so was my body. It started playing some serious tricks on me that I didn't appreciate. Ever the athletic type, my initial resistance to accept(ing) *the* 'achy growing glands' deep in my chest with an odd contraption called a training bra empowered me. Despite taking many a basketball and volleyball assault tossed in with the odd deliberate elbow blows to that danger area, I'd cringe and in true teenage sportswomanship fashion, keep on.

When Mother Nature threw this late bloomer the ultimate dreaded period, I reluctantly threw my hands up in the air. I didn't want to but I had no choice but to surrender. There was no getting around that one. Just when society and church were finally kind enough to allow women of child bearing age control over their reproductive system with

the simple act of swallowing a pill daily, why couldn't somebody, anybody, some capital hungry pharmaceutical company, find a tablet to rid me of the biggest interruption at probably the best phase of my life? Accepting the commencement of that era was the hardest part my being had to accept. While other girls I knew were happily jumping around embracing the inevitable inconvenience, I kept my hatred for it to myself. My teenaged world was getting complicated. Despite openly pining away for my father, my trust for him was getting scarcer than my mother's single paycheck's ability to continuously provide for four children the way their combined incomes used to. Ripple effects confirmed our family fears that 'change was "ah comin"'. First, in a world where cellular phones were still unthinkable, there were the subtle signs when our single stationary landline lacked incoming calls to my popular father. His absence was felt as he came home every few days and then by month to month. The weaning process was obvious. His unpicked-up mail with the deceptive title of *Mr.* typed in bold black letters reinforced our perceptions of societal norms that we might lose *our* ever-important Alpha patriarch. If I was still in denial, a classmate's snide remark proved a reality check: 'How come your father doesn't pick you guys up from school anymore? Where is he? Blah, blah, blah...' Being privy to the growing number of mother-led homes contributed to a bitter burning from deep within because compliance to the lowered notch on the student social totem pole was standard. *The new normal*. I used friends, music, books and for the most part, school to fill my days. '*...someone who looks like you and has made a significant positive impact to the world*'. Still, I missed my father.

It was right around that time in my life when I started processing what I was being taught in school. I was new to high school and a new-found self-awareness sparked questions about my place in the world and the skills necessary for me to successfully navigate that world. By the tenth grade, it was getting harder for me to see a place in the world for myself and the dread of my grades falling further to the rear than my designated seat in the back of the class was real. The disconnection of my intellectual, emotional, physical and spiritual selves was fuelled by the disillusion of memorisation and regurgitating one-dimensional information. But hunger was my cruel taskmaster and since I had

acquired a taste for knowledge, I'd forge my own path to find answers to questions not readily available in any textbook I ever opened.

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Down in the dimly lit basement another world existed. There was fierce competition for available personal space. There was not even any elbow to elbow movements, it was standing room only. The struggle for air, respect and concrete space for our feet to balance intensified as the drum and bass transformed ordinary strangers into a frenzy of tribal camaraderie. The music spoke to us, through us and for us. Of the four walls, three were occupied by couples intertwined and gyrating to precisely timed beats. The fourth wall was specifically reserved for the several turntables and an array of records. Crates of prized forty-fives and thirty-threes were balanced on long banquet style tables awaiting their turn to alter the many moods music was guilty of creating. Once the selector's gifted fingers instinctively plucked a vinyl disc, the patrons showed their approval by slapping any available surface with open hands or pleaded with the appreciative cry of 'Wheel and come again, selector'. It took me no time to realise the phrase was meant as an encore.

It didn't matter that my fresh chemically relaxed hair, European straight only several hours prior, had kinked up in an undesired afro. Nor did it occur to me that the visibly older man who had me pinned against 'our' slice of the wall had managed to rub some of his blue denim dye onto the crotch area of the cream coloured skirt I snuck from my older sister's closet. The cigarette and marijuana scent wafted in the hot, damp air as naturally as if it had all the right to.

Reluctant as I was earlier to sneak out with my best friend Jo-Ann, I didn't want the night to end. And end it did with the threat of two women promising to crack open the others' head with empty Heineken bottles.

The scent of some type of curried stew greeted me before I came to the top of the main level and I would have joined the line-up for a large portion except my dancing partner was intent on getting me out into the fresh morning air for the chance to exchange landline phone numbers. It is still hard to understand how people courted pre-cell phone days.

Several weeks of stimulating conversations with my father-figure lover-man and a mother who couldn't control me led this barely seventeen-year-old to believe I was a grown woman. My West Indian mother was firm and under her roof, her authority was law. My options were limited. They were to listen to my mother or leave her abode. In a heated argument over some trivial matter, I grabbed an overnight bag and headed to notorious Jane and Finch (a low-income neighbourhood in Toronto, Ontario, Canada) where I was sure I'd be the mistress of my own destiny.

The next seventeen years saw me through an array of emotions and experiences I assumed were only privy to people who looked like me. The constant battle with my partner's 'baby momma' drama; witnessing the startled look on strangers' faces whenever I informed them of my undesirable address; the anger of being trailed, monitored and followed in department stores by security and sales clerks regardless of my having more than enough funds to pay for any item I desired. The frustration of letting my mother down for not pursuing every immigrant's dream of their children attaining a higher education. But those feelings paled in comparison to the feeling of not being included in the only country that I knew.

The deep void my heart felt at my father's abandonment fuelled my every justification. When a loved one is lost, there is a void that seems impossible to fill. Yes, I sold drugs. If I didn't, someone else would. I'd purchase stolen goods from anyone skilled enough to get away with it. Those were just the tip of the iceberg of some of the shady things I did. So when the long hand of the law caught up with me and I was sentenced to do a federal bit at Grand Valley Institution for Women, I hunkered down to finding out about myself in a world that I thought considered me invisible.

Blog entry published on December 9, 2014 on the Center for Courage and Renewal website, the organisation run by Parker Palmer (<http://www.couragerenewal.org/listening-truth/>)

**To:** Parker Palmer

**From:** Denise, Grand Valley Institution for Women, Kitchener, ON

Dear Mr. Palmer, you see, I was unsuccessful in my quest for higher education. The conventional classroom/lecture setting did absolutely

nothing for me. The deliveries of the teachers were impersonal and sometimes I was strategically seated at the rear of the class. There was such a separation with regards to me, the teacher and the students. I felt disconnected and the experience became too overwhelming for me to enjoy learning. I will confess that I was not successful in acquiring the needed credits to pursue my ultimate dreams of a degree in Sociology or Humanities. So, broken, I dropped out of school.

I am currently incarcerated at a Canadian federal institution for women. The last thing I need is sympathy. What was meant to break me has turned into the biggest blessing of my life.

I was introduced to the Walls to Bridges Program where I learned about you and embraced circle pedagogy. Initially, I avoided your material like the plague but once I did accept it, I was hooked on your concepts. *'No fixing, no saving, no advising, no setting each other straight'*. In this information age we are living in, I could not have imagined that suggestion being passed along, much less adapted.

Stubborn as I am, I did not want to confess that a white upper-middle or upper-class man has impacted my way of life. You have taught me how to trust my inner teacher and most of all to speak my own truth. Black, female, and to further add to my intersectionality, I am a federally incarcerated student at Grand Valley Institution for Women. And I have learned the value and importance of listening to the truth of myself and others like you suggested. Had I been schooled in the circle pedagogy model from the elementary level I know it would have tremendously impacted my life in a positive, holistic way. I feel some unpleasant events I went through in my life might have been eliminated due to lack of support where my opinions were not valued. Because of circle learning, I am more aware of my feelings and fellow world citizens. *We all have a story to tell and we should be allowed to voice our stories without fear of rejection.*

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Is learning and teaching in a controlled facility—a federal penitentiary—worth any purpose other than the passing of some *time* while tax payers paid the bill? Why should *normal* people waste their time in such an abnormal place? Was it game on for the *othering* techniques to begin since I deliberately set my mind on being in a constant offensive state?

After all, wasn't this one of those very places built for the monsters who should have no part of a functioning society? Well, since the larger portion of citizens apparently looked upon this alien of an *inmate* that way, I was mentally, physically and emotionally prepared to protect my fragile shell. From the very beginning, my first session with the outside students from Walls to Bridges was an interesting mixture of 'me too' and 'really?'. In that sacred space, in the most unlikely of places, a group of ten inside students paired up with the same amount of outside students, realised they had much more in common than not. For the first time in my adult life, I was able to naturally fight off the seasonal misfortune of winter blues. Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) was as real as my charge but for some reason, this season was not as gloomy as seasons past. Could I place a definite finger as to the diagnosis for the change in my so-called chemical imbalance? Not yet. 'Well, if you'd like, maybe we could place you on another anti-depressant. Stopping cold-turkey is never a good idea and besides, there are other brands on the market'. That was the response I received from one of the nurses at the institution. Actually, that was the same response I got from another nurse, for to get such needed advice from the doctor meant submitting an institutional Request Form and patiently waiting for the doctor's once per month or so visit. My life, my prison sentence forced me to take matters into my own hands. I decided to self-medicate with my weekly blister pack. Instead of popping the prescribed one tablet per day, I'd crack my hope in the form of a tablet in half. Each morning I'd separate two sides of the pill evenly at the score and wash it down with strong, hot, unsweetened black tea.

That winter, despite a severe ice storm and brutal winds enveloping our section of the true, north and free landscape, my moods were chipper. I had my readings to look forward to, my assignments and most of all I had a support system that I was very much a part of. It was at this point that I came to the conclusion that a chain really was as strong as the weakest link. You see, the more I reduced and boiled my observations down to the gravy of it all, I was sandwiched into an interconnectedness of being. There was a simple sharing with my classmates that brought about a profound uniqueness and acceptance.

By the fifth Walls to Bridges class, I was totally weaned off the medications prescribed to me with no sight in the near future of returning to them. Again, I must stress the fact that Walls to Bridges is not a form of therapy nor do I believe they'd want to take on such a monumental mission. There was no denying that my once-per-week class played an integral part in my decision to hop off the normal vs. not-normal, me vs. them, us vs. them mentality. Having the opportunity to teach and learn in a circle pedagogy made a difference. The breaking down of walls where traditional modes of teaching and learning were challenged by interjecting respect for one's whole self, made all the difference. Once one sits in a circle environment and finds it in their heart and head to scrutinise their surroundings by claiming their voice, one will find that there truly is no 'inside' or 'outside'. Once there is a Wall, our combined hearts and heads will move into the construction business of building *bridges*. Midway through my very first Walls to Bridges course, I grudgingly yet gingerly succumbed to the fact that the wonderful plethora of individuals I was blessed with teaching and learning with were in fact just like me. At the end of our magical time I met people I never would have thought experienced marginalisation or hurt. Despite their White privilege, I was privy to the world where cheques didn't seem to balance. Week after week, I found out that despite one's outward appearance, even with the blondest and bluest of some of their privileged eyes, being 'othered' was unavoidable. For the people who shared my weekly sacred circle, their gayness, queerness, dis'ability-ness, trans-ness, the sheer *otherness* of it all was reason to come to the conclusion that we were all a part of a mysterious whole and without us, well, we all might as well blend into the bland, grey canvas that dictated the Canadian horizon from September to April. Our uniqueness was an added bonus since we were allowed to embrace it all without fear of shame. We harnessed parts of ourselves that refused to reveal only segmented portions. We sought out to teach each other and in return, to learn from the other. We willingly gave whatever we had and accepted every other gift someone presented us with.

I did return to the institution's Health Services for their assistance but not for any 'head stuff'. By that time, I had successfully rid myself of the little oval tablet that was part of my daily ritual for the better

part of a half a century, I was also a half credit closer to the rest of my life. Talk about killing two birds with one stone because that was the closest I'd ever come to whatever rehabilitation Corrections Canada truly had to offer; plus that half a credit opportunity opened doors with 'options to offenders' engraved in gold. I had the choice to continue and add more university credits to my name or chuck the entire Walls to Bridges as an experience while in prison and something to pass *time*. In time, one half a credit led to one full university credit... and then two, and three and so on. The sheer act of building bridges through learning and teaching in any environment, whether controlled or not: priceless!!!

## Conclusion

The kind of education and community-building that occurs in W2B is instructive about the role that relationships, destigmatisation and collective critical analysis can play in enhancing well-being and mental health. Plenty of scholarship has documented the fact that a very high percentage of women in prison have histories of childhood sexual abuse and male violence against women (Balfour and Comack 2014). Scholars have also illustrated how prison power dynamics reproduce those inherent in abusive relationships (Pollack and Brezina 2007), and the racist and colonial processes of white settler states (Razack 2015). While there are clearly power differentials between instructor and students, W2B instructors work collaboratively, drawing upon the gifts, knowledge and experiences of students to explore course material and create an equalitarian learning environment.

The integration of circle processes is pivotal in reducing power dynamics, in that group protocols allow for individual perspectives to be shared, drawing upon a 'full self' which includes intellectual, spiritual, emotional and experiential knowledge. Because W2B classes are university-based, they are not part of the correctional apparatus and thus are not required to scrutinise or assess for criminality and risk, thus



allowing incarcerated students to just be students. The experience of imprisonment is one in which labels and categorisations pervade daily life, and spaces in which prisoners can interact with non-incarcerated folks as ‘themselves’, without being diagnosed, assessed, classified or otherwise judged, can be liberating. W2B works towards avoiding conventional dichotomies and labels such as criminal/law abiding, mentally ill/mentally well, addict/not an addict, and abnormal/normal. Fayer (2016) a W2B student who was incarcerated when she published an article on W2B states:

I have been labelled an ‘addict’, ‘drug dealer’, ‘criminal’, ‘inmate’ and ‘convict’, and a ‘danger to the community’ by guards, parole officers, and others within the criminal justice and correctional system. Many people I know have been called much worse. Eventually, we begin to view ourselves through this lens...the W2B class is the single most humanizing and empowering aspect of my incarceration, replacing these negative labels and stereotypes with positive ones. (p. 59)

W2B’s focus on dispelling stigma and stereotypes and developing authentic connections with people on both side of the wall leads to transformation and a sense of belonging (Pollack 2016). As Denise states, in W2B classes:

there was an honesty about us. Our differences yet our sameness rendered us naked. The kind of stripping away that came with vulnerability, except there was no one to judge our rawness. For the duration of our studies we *reclaimed our whole selves*.

## Notes

1. For information on the Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program, see <http://www.insideoutcenter.org/>.
2. This is similar to the emergence of Convict Criminology (Newbold et al. 2014).

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