

## Moments

**Jessica Pisano**

*Reflection: When I first learned I would have the opportunity to teach first-year writing through my university's prison education program, I challenged myself to chronicle and reflect on my experiences each week for the entire semester. As a full-time lecturer, writing program coordinator, and mother of two, it's hard to find time to write unless it's sanctioned like this, scheduled into my weekly routine. This piece emerged from the tenth of what ended up being twelve narrative reflections. In all honesty, I have mixed feelings about this project. While it has been personally fulfilling and revelatory, it also highlights the privilege with which I am able to write about the prison system from such a safe distance. This narrative is very much the story of my own growth, not the story of my students', as I could never begin to speak for them. I want to be cognizant of the ways in which I, like so much of our nation, profit from their incarceration, in my case through the publication of this piece. My purpose for publishing—and for continuing to teach reading and writing for almost twenty-three years—is rooted in a deep desire to promote understanding and foster conversation about important issues through the sharing of stories.*

"It's a beautiful day," I said, walking from the gatehouse towards the prison entrance at noon last Thursday. "Too pretty to be inside all day." After weeks of teasing us, appearing here and there sporadically, spring had finally, as my dad would have said, decided to take off her coat and stay a while. The guard walking in with me, a man I'd never seen before, agreed, "Too pretty to be in *here* all day." He chuckled, and I wondered about his joke.

I had been teaching first-year college writing in a medium-security men's prison for almost three months, but I still found interactions with the staff more challenging than with the students. I couldn't help but think that my students were always in *here*, snow, rain, or shine. Perhaps that was the joke. I smiled and shrugged, excusing myself to the restroom labeled "Females."

I have to be honest, just thinking about the day ahead was exhausting: thirteen half-hour writing conferences were more than I would typically schedule in a single day on campus, but the hour-and-fifteen-minute drive out to the prison made it a necessity. And so, steeling myself for eight hours in prison, I finished in the bathroom, picked up my box of donated books, and headed through the double metal doors and up to the education wing.

The first seven conferences went well. The students were engaged, excited to talk about their projects, to tell me the stories that motivated their research. Before the end of the second conference, I knew there was no way I'd be able to stick to my thirty-minute limit. By the fourth conference, I was running half an hour late. The seventh conference ended only minutes before the hour-long "break" I'd scheduled my-

self should have been over. As Slate and I finished, I asked him to tell Barrington to come on up while I ran quickly to the bathroom.

As I buzzed to be let into the staff area, a maze that led past offices to a unisex bathroom whose door was perpetually propped open because it locked as soon as it closed, I heard a voice rumble over the loudspeaker. There were often garbled, almost unintelligible announcements during class. I knew there was a list of codes posted somewhere in the classroom, but typically I would just ask the students, "What was that?" And they'd let me know it was a code 3, code 4, whatever. "It just means we need to stay put," someone would tell me. "Not like we're going anywhere anyways," someone else would laugh. So I'd learned to ignore the announcements. I figured if it were something important, Johnson, the education wing guard, would let me know. I figured if something went wrong, we'd all know about it before long.

When I returned to the classroom, I was surprised to see Slate, still sitting there in his usual spot, grinning back at me. "Code 2," he explained. "We gotta stay here."

"Huh," I said. "What's code 2?"

"Count. They've gotta count everyone. Make sure they know where everyone is."

I nodded. While I might not know the codes, I did know that this wasn't the regularly scheduled evening count. Most nights, we'd see Johnson's face appear in the window of the classroom door around 6 p.m., silently counting the students. It startled me the first few weeks, but it had become routine. So many things about teaching in prison had become routine. The whole rigmarole in the gatehouse: clear-plastic bag, pockets emptied, metal detector, cell detector, pat-down, driver's license, sign-in. The invisible door guards hidden behind one-way glass windows, determining my every entrance and exit from on high. The weekly clearance by administration of every item I'd need to bring into the classroom. After a few weeks, I remember telling my husband who also taught at the prison that I'd started getting used to it all, that it wasn't as big of a deal as it had been the first week. "I know," he said. "But I don't want to get used to it. I don't want to accept that this is just the way it is."

But now, there was nothing to do but accept the moment. There was nowhere we could go, nothing we could do. I thought about the irony of the situation: after class, if a student needed to talk with me about an assignment, he'd ask a friend to hang back with him so we couldn't be accused of "undue familiarity," an accusation we all knew could jeopardize the program. But now, because administration had called count, Slate and I were supposed to sit in the classroom together for... how long? Who knew? And it was all fine, because they were calling the shots.

Slate had opened his laptop and was starting to work through the revisions I'd suggested on his research essay. I fumbled through my clear plastic bag, searching for something to occupy my time. If I only had my laptop, access to all the emails and grading piling up online. But of course, I had nothing other than what had been approved on this week's clearance list, and there was no internet. I found a piece of paper and started making a to-do list.

"What's your perspective on prisoners?"

I looked up and realized Slate must have stopped typing.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"I mean, what do you think of us?" he asked.

Of course, I knew what he meant, but answering him would mean giving away a piece of myself, something I'd been told not to do. It's not like I'd been able to follow the advice we'd received from the prison administration during our training. I'd slipped so many times already. Once I'd said something about having kids. Another time I'd mentioned driving to a conference in Pittsburgh. The first time, I remember being worried. I'd fucked up. Given away too much. But then I realized the reality of the situation. There was no other faculty member with the same last name at my institution. If any one of my students wanted to learn my first name, where I lived, the names of family members, they could find out in a matter of days just by having someone on the outside do a quick Google search. In fact, I realized, they probably already knew.

So I took a deep breath. "I don't really have an opinion on prisoners in general," I started, "but I think there's a lot more people in prison than there should be. I think that if we really cared about rehabilitation rather than retribution, there'd be a lot more people in rehab and counseling and lot fewer behind bars." It felt good to say these things, things I wouldn't say to colleagues who would find them obvious, things I couldn't say to so many others without having to defend myself. "I think there's a problem when the majority of people in prison are people of color, people living in poverty, veterans. I think that points to something wrong with our country, that we'd rather pay to lock people up than make sure everyone has the support and opportunity to be productive members of society."

Slate nodded. "Yeah, I want to do something when I get out of here. I want to talk to people back in my community. Help them do something better." He smiled and shook his head. "You know, back when I was a kid, my step-mom, she used to try to keep me straight. She'd tell me what to do. I thought she was trying to change me, to make me different from who I was. Huh." He snorted and grimaced. "Man, I wish I'd listened to her."

I shrugged. "That's how most kids are."

"How old are your kids?" he asked. And there it was. I'd slipped once—he'd heard and remembered.

I tried not to skip a beat. "Twelve and nine," I admitted. "How old are yours?" Slate not only bragged about having nine children, but he'd covered the sides of his brown accordion folder with their pictures.

His grin widened to a smile. "My youngest is two and my oldest just turned ten. I got her a locket for her birthday. A locket with my picture inside." The smile faded as he looked down at his hands. "She doesn't have it yet. It's in the mail." A moment passed. "I hate being in here, not out there with them."

"I can't imagine how hard it must be," I offered.

He continued looking down. "Twelve..." he nodded. I realized he was talking about my son. "That's how old I was the first time I got locked up. Juvie. Been in and out ever since."

I couldn't help but think of my son, a kid who could get in his own share of trouble, locked up.

Slate broke through my thoughts. "This class," he said, "this is the first time I've really tried to do something different. Make a change. Man, it's hard. I never finished the seventh grade. But I'm really trying."

"I know you are."

Slate nodded, and returned to his laptop. I wasn't sure I could leave the classroom, but, even more worried about accusations of undue familiarity now that I'd just spent thirty minutes alone with a student, I decided to chance it.

"Hey, Johnson," I called, approaching his desk. "Any idea when this code might be lifted?"

"Nope," he said. "You never know."

I started doing the mental math. My conferences were close to an hour behind schedule. It would be at least nine o'clock before I finished. Then an hour-and-a-half before I made it home. And that's if I didn't stop and grab dinner. "Well, I guess I'm going to be here for a while tonight."

Johnson nodded slowly as he often did before responding. "I'm gonna make some coffee. You want some?" he offered.

"That would be amazing."

As I started back to the classroom, the loudspeaker came to life: "Code 2, cleared." Slate passed me at the door. "I'll tell Barrington to come on," he said.

Fifteen minutes later, I sat back down at my desk in the classroom, sipping black coffee from a Styrofoam cup. Still no Barrington. I walked back out to ask Johnson what was going on.

"I'm not really sure," he shrugged. "I called 'em."

I was starting to feel annoyed. Trapped. Caged. With a tinge of guilt I realized this was barely a taste of what my students must feel on a daily basis. I took another sip of coffee and tried to relax.

Suddenly, a soft melody drifted from the classroom next door. I thought I was hearing things, but no, a light, clear woman's voice sounded again, singing some old hymn I'd never heard. It was beautiful.

The prison chapel was at the other end of the education wing, and sometimes, towards the end of class, I would hear piano and voices lifted in praise and consider the contrasting redemption offered at opposite ends of the hall. But it was too early for evening service, and this music wasn't coming from the chapel, but from the classroom next door. Then I remembered the woman from the local community college who taught career exploration and whose class had just switched rooms.

"I hope we're not too loud," she'd laughed when she warned me about the move. "We can get pretty loud. Sometimes we even sing!"

But I hadn't heard her. Not until tonight. (My class could get pretty loud, too.) As I listened to her song, I wondered what her students thought of her, this tiny, middle-aged country woman, singing to them. I wondered if it felt patronizing.

Her song in the background, I scanned the classroom shelves now filling up with donated books. At the end of a long semester, all I wanted was an easy read, nothing I had to think too much or too deeply about. My students were devouring the books, every carefully crafted sentence, every intricate detail. Earlier, after describing himself

as “you know, that little Chihuahua who’s so excited to see you he pisses himself?”, Samson told me that while he was enjoying all the books he’d read so far, his favorites were the ones by female authors from other countries. “I get to hear other perspectives, you know? Hear about experiences I’ll never get to have. Visit places I’ll never get to go.”

Now, a mystery novel caught my eye. I remember bringing it out to the prison, placing it on the shelf and realizing that my mentor, a beloved friend and former professor now retired, had recommended the author. As I reached for the book, a new voice sounded through the wall. This was a slow, deep rendition of “Achy, Breaky Heart,” a song I never could have imagined sounding this tragic, this pained, this beautiful. Perhaps my colleague’s students didn’t find her songs patronizing after all.

The novel hooked me right away. Mysteries have never been my favorite genre, but I was enjoying this one. Perhaps it was the moment. A few pages in, “Achy, Breaky Heart” dissolved and was replaced by “Amazing Grace,” now swelling with the sound of multiple voices.

I closed the book and sat listening. Yes, it was a beautiful day outside, and yes, I had spent most of it inside a windowless prison classroom. I hadn’t told Slate, but today was my son’s birthday. Today he turned twelve, the age when Slate was first sent to juvie. I remember the days leading up to his birth. Storms raged outside the window of my hospital room. I watched the rains, the wind, the thunder and lightning from deep within a storm of my own, a storm my son must have been struggling through, too. Sometimes, as he and I continue to struggle together through this life, I wonder if that storm ever ceased. I remember someone delivering the newspaper under the door of my hospital room and seeing the headline: “Thirty-two Killed, Twenty-three Wounded in Virginia Tech Shooting.” I remember being relieved when I realized he would be born after midnight. The next day. Not the day of the shooting or during the candle-lit vigil for those killed.

Earlier in the semester I joked about dragging some of my outside students towards the finish-line. This morning, in an impromptu meeting with the prison program’s director, she suggested a more apt metaphor: “It’s like giving birth,” she laughed. “It’s painful every time, but after it’s over you forget, and you start a new semester, and every time you misremember just how hard it’s going to be and do it all over again.” I hoped that I could embody her metaphor. That I could exist in the moment with all of my students without the realities of our divergent realities, realities shaped by systems of power and control, ravaging those moments of connection.

Sometime after “Amazing Grace” had ended, after I’d returned to my novel and finished my now-cold coffee, Barrington burst into the classroom, followed by Hanson and Kellog. It was almost two hours past his scheduled 5 p.m. conference, and he was pissed. Johnson had called him as soon as the code was cleared, but the guards had laughed at him, told him it was almost time for shift change, and he’d just have to wait. He’d tried to explain that I was waiting, that I’d spent my whole day conferencing with students, that it wasn’t fair to me. The guards wouldn’t budge. And then it was shift change and scheduled count—absolutely no movement. As I sat peacefully in the classroom, my students had been frustrated, harassed, detained. Like so many

times this semester, I felt helpless and useless. I questioned my effectiveness, the effectiveness of the program in the face of such blatant abuse of power, such disregard for human dignity. I questioned my ability to connect with my students, to even begin to understand the ways in which the institution of prison had shaped and was shaping their existence. But I had to try. I listened to Barrington. I told him I was sorry, that I'd report it to the program director. He showed me notes he'd taken, documenting the times Johnson had called him, the times he'd asked to leave.

By 7 p.m., he'd persevered, made it through the storm, and was reading me his essay. Separated by the mandated bulk of my instructor's desk, we leaned towards each other, discussing opportunities for revisions, losing ourselves in his ideas, his research. By the time we finished conferencing, Barrington had regained his usual demeanor, a relaxed awkwardness barely hiding a tendency towards serious intensity. Hanson joined me across the hulking desk next, then Kellog, each one of us struggling through our own storms, sometimes together, sometimes alone, always searching for those moments of calm and connection.

### *Author Bio*

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