Ben Clarke

Writing in Community

The Tenderloin Reflection and Education Center (TREC) is a unique community-based learning and resource center that works with homeless people and residents of a low-income inner city San Francisco neighborhood. Our writing program provides a successful example of how creativity, in this instance, writing, can often help to break down isolation, empower participants, and challenge social oppression. The writing program has three primary parts: workshop, performance, and publication. The three facets of the program work together in a cycle that aims at bringing together individuals and their creations into a stronger fabric of urban community. Throughout the development of the programs we have tried to encourage participation in all phases of decision-making, to do justice to people’s writing with a consistency of aesthetics, process, and product.

In October, 1987, we started a writing workshop for women facilitated by Martha Nichols. Twenty-five people attended the workshop in its first few weeks. Eventually the group settled down to a core of about a dozen, with six to ten participants at any given meeting. As the women’s workshop developed it began to provide support for these writers who were confronted with many problems associated with urban poverty: homelessness, slumlords, drug dealing, prostitution, and crime. The writing in the group reflected these concerns, but just as often it dealt with the experiences of people’s inner lives, their memories, pasts, and their fantasies. Salima Rashida, a participant in the workshops, described her experience this way: “Writing’s the great healer. I used to hate a lot. Now I don’t waste my energy on hating. I’d rather put my energy into writing about things that have happened to me.”

The excitement of the work cried out for a wider audience and we held our first public reading in June, 1988. In accordance with a methodology based on Paulo Freire’s literacy work in Brazil, written of in Pedagogy of the Oppressed (Freire, 1970), the group chose certain themes that they felt would relate to the larger community. We called the reading “Survivors,” and the women presented work that showed the interconnectedness of personal suffering and social oppression of women. Janice Mirikatani, a Japanese-American poet and President of the Board of Directors of Glide Church in the Tenderloin, joined us at the reading.

Over the next year we held three more readings, each time tackling a different theme that had emerged in the writing: “Daily Life,” “Undoing Violence,” and “African-American Artists and Activists.” We also began holding special focus workshops on writing and culture. Writers from Central City Hospitality House, another community workshop center in the Tenderloin, a TREC Bible study group, and others, joined together to create materials collectively for performance.

As the body of work grew we began to publish it in our journal, Tender Leaves. For the readings focused on “ Undoing Violence” and “African-American Artists and Activists,” we dedicated issues to the same theme. For “ Undoing Violence,” we invited Daniel Berrigan, the well-known Jesuit priest, social activist, and poet to join us in group reading on violence. Berrigan focused on his experience of being in jail and on the violence of the larger social order. That struck a resonant chord with group members. For example, when one writer, Alice Olds Ellingson, was mugged, she wrote a cycle of poems working through the pain of the experience: from the harsh moment when she smells the mugger’s breath as he pushes her to the pavement, through her recuperation and then to the “Hall of Justice” where she describes the smell of the bathroom. We printed the following pieces:

After the Mugging

After the mugging, I took to my bed, holing up
my sores with the unguent of self-nourishing;
I slept with the dream of feathers and fur
and clean soap. From time to time I awoke
and would feel guilty for taking so much
space just for myself. I might die from
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the poison of too many sleeping pills;
it was pathetic.
What can I do? Become a policewoman?
Catching the man who got away?
Get him like the mugger goes to court.
I slept 'til Monday, a bear
sleep, forgetting.

The Hall of Justice

It has an odor. Its bathrooms have
slammer intelligence and holier-than-thou
district of attorney alcoves, though
I distinctly detect a noseful of democracy
in the sand-colored and glass architecture.
Also, ask the criminals about the roses.
Nobody brings them any; the smell is too
good. Here comes the victim/witness.
She thinks the bathrooms have a murder
smell and that the criminals are slimy
in their redolent leggings of not-at-all,
I-didn’t-do-it.

Cultural work in the Tenderloin confronts the
immediacy of social oppression. There is no
need to look to distant lands or abstract
causes to find injustice or its results. The
dynamic intermingling of participants from cultures as
far apart in place and background as a Boston water-
front Irishman and the black great-granddaughter of a
Mississippi slave make the struggle very immediate.
Personal attacks, violence, and insults sometimes
surface in the workshops. There are casualties. Members
sometimes drop out angrier than before; homeless
people disappear; jail and drugs reach out again and
clap others. But the survivors develop the group dis-
cipline necessary to move past this violence into a
stronger sense of solidarity with each other. Ground
rules are created to meet the need for safety of group
members. Each day in discussions and writing circles
we reveal to each other the real activity involved in
surviving on the streets, overcoming addiction, and
breaking down barriers toward social change.

Identifying the nature of our injuries, including specific
persons and institutions that have contributed to them,
accepting the grace of creativity, the inspiration of
those who have gone before, and the support of our
compañeros is part of the process of moving from the
role of victim to survivor and then from survivor to
artist, writer, teacher, or worker.

The process leading to our reading on “African-American
Artists and Activists” began with a workshop
called “Telling Your Story,” a time for people of the
neighborhood to gather to hear the stories of writers
participating in the writing groups and then to be
inspired to share their own. First time writers worked
together with others who have been writing for twenty,
three years or more. People told the story of their art.
Mary TallMountain talked about the inspiration of her
early experiences in Alaska, Rhett Stuart about how
music shaped his poetry, Salima Rashida about the way
racism drove her out of the South and later into writing
and performance.

The sharing of these experiences led to further discus-
sions about race and culture. The inspiration of Salima
Rashida focused the energies of the workshop on black
culture and black nationalism. We decided to study the
artists and activists who had inspired us.

Listening to tapes of Malcolm X, reading the speeches of
Sojourner Truth, and luxuriating in the poetry of the
Harlem Renaissance, the group created its own inter-
pretation of the bigger social history and their personal
histories within it. Individuals shared the pain, the
anger they felt on both sides of the racial divide, and
came to recognize the pervasive nature of racism in our
country. It was only after we accepted that we live in a
racist society that we were able to celebrate our own
identities, brokenness included. By accepting this we
began individually and as a group to change. We
presented the results in a Black History celebration of
original performance, poetry, art, and song attended by
over 175 people. A good example of the work read and
published is “Sojourner Truth” by Myrnelene Nabi. It
begins:

Wherever we are blacks childrens, close to de erf
We can see the same stars
No matter how they cut our hearts, pull our arms apart
Our togetherness is measured in God’s heaven
Starseeds so vast, so numerous, sprinkled far
We can never be obliterated by whip, guns
Or treacherous cussedness

and in the final stanzas:

My mirror sees me tall and black,
Strong from hard labor, blood stained back
Backlines line my face, 40 years used, abused
Plain clothes, rough caress my frame
Head wrapped, modesty proclaimed
Traveling days, years,
Speeches, tears, pleas, cheers
Love seeking to smother hate
Go Sojourner, speak the Truth
Members of a Tenderloin writing group

Lawdy, imagine my black feet in the White House
Newspapers all declared her sybil fame
Wise, witty, timeless master of repartee
Applauded by amazement, jeered by fools
Great white audiences held by dark, magnetic power
"Why I felt so tall within,
I felt as if the power of a nation was within me."
See our destiny? Sojourner Truth.

Our goal in another TREC performance day workshop was to "Name the Demon." Racism, violence, unsafe and unhealthy housing, the threat of police harassment, and other "demons" which surround life for low income urban residents were dramatized in performances, poetry, and song, and then shared in a public gathering we called "Spirit of the Streets." The day allowed Tenderloin citizens, artists, and activists to rededicate themselves to their collective and individual projects. Jerry Miley, a homeless man, member of our Bible Study Group, and frequent contributor to Tender Leaves, presented "Story as Poem," which follows.

I heard a simple voice laugh
in conjunction
and the steps of two people,
walking past a hill where
a poor man lay hoping not to be discovered.
They were people who were
making a living,
they could afford to laugh,


In our most recent event dealing with the theme of forms of "Exile," Native American Tenderloin resident Mary TallMountain conducted a workshop on her exile from Alaska. She gave us this piece for Tender Leaves called "Listen to the Night":

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Out of the dark behind twin peaks
San Francisco bursts up, a
mass of diamonds, flowing, winking through shreds of
mist.

Listen I hear
many murmurs of a long-gone people,
Ohlone Indian families
lived in neat low tule tents,
round, well made, in rows
between fertile marshlands where now
condominiums throw tall dark shadows.

Listen I hear
the mourning cries of children
searching grassy places for their play.
I hear canoes draw up, paddles lapping
against clean, pure water.
Their fathers greet them in
comforting low tones.

Listen I hear
Coyote's sharp complaints
from the far foothill-asking
where is the brother who sang with them?
the coyotes evening song: when the Bay
was pristine
long before land-fill.

Listen I hear
songs, softly pleading, the ancient
fear songs of hunters
asking deer ceremonially to give
the gift of his life's breath
Deer hooves
softly rustle through the brush.

Listen I hear
forgotten cries from the island of alcatraces, those fabled
pelicans who thronged the barren rock.
Their cries were silenced long since,
but not in the hearts
of us who loved them all.

A collection of Mary's work, The Light in the Tent Wall,
was recently published by University of California at

After the success of the local readings the women
writers workshop began a "road show." New collec-
tions of the writers' pieces are being presented at places
such as bookstores, colleges, public libraries, and on the
radio. Video and audio tapes have been made of the
performances and we hope eventually to use them to
create another kind of documentary record.

Two writers in the women's workshop, Myrnalene
Nabihi and Salima Rashida, have founded a newspaper
called Homeless Times. Crammed with writing from
people on the streets, the paper addresses social service
agencies, the general public, and homeless people. It is
a mixture of poetry, scathing editorials, critical descrip-
tions of food, shelter, and services. It offers encourage-
ment as well as appropriate denunciations.

The three aspects of our program, workshops, perform-
ance, and publication work together to strengthen the
writing, build community, educate the public, and
provide a process of dialogical education that brings
Latin American concepts of pedagogy, such as those
practiced by Paulo Freire, into the pluralistic culture of
United States urban life. The participants in our work-
shops become subjects of their own activity, persons
whose creative pursuits are as valuable and worth-
while as any. A position of social advocacy combines
with a growing atmosphere of community, trust, and
celebration of the creative process in the heart of the
brokenness of the city.

References

uum Publishing Corp.

Ben Clarke is a co-director of the Tenderloin Reflection and
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formation on the Center, or to become a subscriber to Tender
Leaves, write to: Tenderloin Reflection and Education Center,
135 Golden Gate Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94102 (415-
558-8759).

READING RESEARCH TO BE TOPIC
OF MAY 5TH CONFERENCE

The Center for the Study of Reading Association
announces the eleventh Conference on Reading Re-
search (CORR11) to be held the Sunday before the
annual convention of the IRA (Sunday, May 5, Las
Vegas Hilton). The day-long conference is a forum for
the presentation of important new findings in reading
for researchers, classroom teachers, reading specialists,
and textbook publishers.

For more information, contact: Ellen Weiss, University
of Illinois, Center for the Study of Reading, 51 Gerty
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