

# **WHY I GO TO THE JAIL**

An Essay by  
Jane Ellen Ibur



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“So?” Rich Breunderman (Volunteer Coordinator for the St. Louis County Department of Justice Services) asks as I slump into a chair in his office. We do this routine after each creative writing class. I shake my head slowly. “Like that huh?”

“It’s unbelievable. I just don’t understand it.”

“How long’s it been now?”

“I don’t know, 18, 19, almost 20 years. I’ve lost count. But it’s the same every time.”

“That good?”

“Better. Amazing. Magic.”

“And you’ve never had one bad class?”

“Never.”

Rich doesn’t know exactly what I do. No one does. What I do is revolutionary: honest talk, honest writing, two hours a week for what grew from an 8-week class to a 25 – 30-week class, sponsored through the West County Family YMCA, funded continuously through the Regional Arts Commission, as a community outreach program. I arrive each week with a plan, something like an exercise in sonnet writing, but then I start talking about what’s on my mind at that moment, or I’ll take the emotional temperature of the class and ask what’s on their minds and we talk. We talk, we write, we read aloud what we’ve written in an atmosphere of acceptance and support because writing is dangerous and courageous and any exercise can access your stuff. The truth can make a grown man cry.

Tim came to class one day telling me people were always afraid of him. “Okay,” I said shaking his hand. I’m not afraid and for some reason never have been since I began working first with women, then juvenile males for 7 years, then adult men and for the last several years male class A felons, the toughest guys.

The afternoon Tim came I was teaching sonnets. I assigned each man to write one sonnet for the next session. My schedule got interrupted the following week; I had a guest coming to record poems from three men who’d studied with me for months, the CD to be played on my literary radio show. I told Tim he couldn’t participate since he’d only attended one class, but he could return the next week. “Figures. Whenever I find something, it never works out. I’m probably gone by next week anyway.”

Turns out he’d written seven sonnets, beautifully horrific poems about childhood sexual abuse by his mother and daily beatings by his father. I called Rich and said, “I’m breaking my rule. Give my home phone number to Tim. He’s going back to the penitentiary any second and I’ve got to speak with him first.”

When he called I said, “Tim, I hear you. I understand why you’re a violent repeat offender. But it’s not serving you. You’ve spent over half your 35 years locked up. Maybe you can break the cycle by telling your story.”

Over the next year, he sent me over 60 stunning sonnets. He called me, 3, 4 years later. He’s been out since May. His mother and stepfather (his father is dead) said poetry was supposed to be beautiful and his work was ugly and crap. He shared two poems with a woman he met; she called him an artist. Then he remembered me, called, wants to find an open mic to start reading in public. His parents told him that if he read his poems in public he could not stay with them any longer. He’d spent half his life in the penitentiary as a

violent repeat offender, but reading the sonnets out loud in public was where they drew the line.

Tim met me at Christ Church Cathedral on a night I was giving a poetry reading. After I started I invited him up to read a few poems. This tough guy read in almost a whisper; he was shaking. He received a standing ovation. It blew his mind. I wish I could add the story has a happy ending, but our last contact he was back in prison for violating parole. He said it was easier for him on the inside after so much time. He was also diagnosed with lung cancer, 38 years old. He's my friend.

My job is giving people their voices. Most people have not been involved in creative process. I tell them, "They can lock your body down, even forever, but your mind can always be free, always growing. You can spend your time doing nothing or you can, as Anne Sexton says in her poem 'Kind Sir: These Woods' '...Lost and of your same kind/ ...I am afraid of course/ to look – this inward look that society scorns -/ Still, I search in these woods and find nothing worse/ than myself, caught between the grapes and the thorns.' You can be more than a prisoner doing time. You can go on this amazing journey through art, with writing, and find things that surprise, amaze and excite you, you can find yourself."

Here's what Deano said when I asked him to write an evaluation of the class: "I look forward to your class. It is the highlight of my week. When I'm in class I'm not in jail. I have gotten in touch with many feelings that have been suppressed. Without this class I would not have known about the talent of my peers. I didn't even know of my own writing ability. I have discovered that I really enjoy writing.

"Because of your class I have found an area to bond with my father. Our relationship has been different to say the least. He's been in and out of my life regularly, tried to shoot and kill me twice. But now because of this class I've

found a side of him I've never known. He's a writer, too. This bond takes away some of my animosity towards him.

"I feel high when I come out of your class. My emotions shine during class. I look so forward to your class that on Tuesdays I feel so anxious till you get here. This class has sparked something in me that I plan to pursue to my fullest abilities.

"I've enjoyed learning sestinas and sonnets. I like finding what you call "good verbs" and bringing them to class.

"I know I will always cherish the days spent in your class. It is the starting, the birthplace, of my very own writing adventures."

These men are my friends. It's crazy. Maybe it's because I grew up in a neighborhood of all boys, playing football and baseball and being a tomboy who liked being dirty and one of the guys. I feel like one of the guys.

Edward Albee says in *Zoo Story* ... "sometimes you have to go a great distance out of your way to come back a short distance correctly." Me too, and definitely these guys. A few things I knew for sure at a very early age: I was other, and those things that made me other were not okay, not okay for me to know, to discuss, to have a voice for – so I didn't know till I met my partner 35 years ago that I was gay, wouldn't say aloud till recently I live with the parasitic twin of depression, that I am also woman and Jew and none of those things were okay. I also knew I was a poet, that poetry, both reading and writing, saved me, so I was driven to write, to make art from a damaged life and passionate to share my lesson of the transformative affect of art, particularly poetry, on the spirit and how finding a voice through the writing of

poetry is finding a deeper way to breathe. I see the other others and to them, I'm a voice teacher, and through some stroke of luck, I'm a magical teacher, teaching through digression, humor, stories, authenticity, shock, singing, torture, prodding, cursing, cajoling, and downright lying. But I worried: was teaching radical enough? The way I teach, yes. I can make anyone write something that will surprise them, something better than they've ever written before.

I am a wounded teacher, and those wounds help me see and speak a language that connects me to the men because I understand suffering. Our backgrounds are often wildly divergent, from me starting out upper middle class, to their living on the streets as young teens hard scrabbling to survive, but we find a way to connect and it is that point of connection, that relationship that develops from my open sharing and listening that is powerful and transformative.

“In the St. Louis County Justice Center we were held as society's trash in a lawless landfill, but Ms. Janie recycled us through writing. . . . There was so much inside me that needed to be released. There was so much pain that needed to be converted. There was so much negativity that needed to be turned positive.... Ms. Janie helped us all reach deep down inside ourselves and reveal the true us to the many facades of hip talkin', gold teeth, tattoo wearing, tough guys that really needed a road to redemption. That road was writing and

Ms. Janie pointed us in the right directions, but it was up to us to take that first step.” Alex is my shining student, whose smile lit up the room. Every week, no matter what the assignment, if it was formal poetry, no matter how difficult the form, Alex amazed us all with his mastery. We got to the point where we looked forward with anticipation to his walk to the front of the room, his pause while the room fell silent, his delivery, then his grin as the room filled with applause as he nailed it again. What a great time it was for almost a year and a half! And I miss my friend; we’re exchanging poems through the penitentiary, so it goes on. Almost 20 years of teaching there, and a couple penpals.

Quote: Pierre Reverdy says “...without doubt, a poet is not by definition one of the most perfect social beings, and if (s)he does not adhere to the order and if its injustice wounds the poet and throws (her)him outside of the degrading rights of society, (her)his work, which is a means of inserting and incorporating h(er)himself socially, recaptures for (her)him definitely a place in this society.”

That’s why I go to the jail.

**Jane Ellen Ibur** is a poet, writer, teacher, and community artist with almost 20 years of experience teaching creative writing and literacy through writing programs in jails, housing projects, homeless shelters, residential schools, and other community settings. She is the Lead Faculty for the Community Arts Training (CAT) Institute in St. Louis. In 2008, she was Grand Center Visionary Award Recipient as Outstanding Arts Educator.

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