

# **Rewriting, Redefining, Reclaiming Identity**

## **Creative writing from workshops 2, 5, 7 & 8**

### **Workshop 2**

#### **Image of the Word group poem:**

##### **What we saw, what we felt, all inside**

So, there was this girl who always sat on her bed,

Jy kom sit hier soos iemand wat vooregte het.

Die issie jou ma se huis nie.

Are you insane or are you lame?

Is it a shame to make the same mistakes again and again? Wake and please refrain.

Trying to write just a letter.

Damn, I should have known better.

To attempt to do it in here,

But my response is coated with fear.

### **Workshop 5**

#### **Stories about violence in prison:**

##### **Participant C**

One day after our normal breakfast of maize meal and bitter coffee we went out for our supposed one hour of exercise. That was after three days without it. It was a Thursday at 11am. There we were enjoying the sun and the company of friends in the 'neighbourhood' who were in different rooms. We were sitting, talking, and smoking, and in the middle of the courtyard was a game of soccer. Playing were the inmates with three of the wardens. I decided to take a walk around the courtyard for a few laps. When I got to my third lap, walking nice and causally,

the ball got kicked in my direction. According to one of the wardens who was coming after the ball, I was obstructing the play of the ball. He said something like, “you stupid fucking *bandit*”. I was surprised and shocked. I replied by saying “sorry, but there’s no need to swear at me”. He asked me “what did you just say”. According to him I was disrespectful. The head of the section along with all the other wardens called me, by that time exercise time was over. It hadn’t even been an hour long. They called me, gathered around, and told me to explain what happened. As I was done explaining the truth, they felt I was wrong and totally abused their authoritative power by beating me. They beat me with a cricket bat over the bum like a naughty school child, all while I was saying this was wrong. But they just kept on saying I should keep quiet and take my *pak* like a man. They carried on with the beating. The more I spoke up for myself, the angrier they got. This happened in front of the whole section of inmates returning to their rooms.

### **Participant D**

There was one Wednesday morning when I had just finished Andrew Murray Bible Study and had decided to stay behind in the dining hall. I had my flip file with me, inside were my letters, envelopes, and stamps that my mother brought me during her previous visit. I was sitting in the dining hall about to pack up and head back to my cell when two gang members, Tak and Bo, came inside. The one grabbed me from behind with his large arm around my skinny neck. That’s when I noticed they wanted the stamps in my file. Tak tried to grab the file out of my hands, but Bo just tightened his grip around my neck. Tak eventually got the file and removed the stamps from the sleeve. He and Bo made a run for it. I was left gasping for air. The official found me and asked what’s wrong. I explained what had just happened, that they robbed me of my stamps. He called them in, and they got a beating. I feared for my life as they were two known gangsters in the prison.

### **Participant A**

One morning we were woken up by screaming and shouting. I checked my watch with my lighter, 3 am on a Sunday morning. The whole room was awake. Through the windows we saw members running across the courtyard. Then the taskforce appeared. The screaming continued. Other than that, there was an unnatural, deathly silence in the prison. Then the news came. One of the maximums had waited for everyone to fall asleep and then stabbed a rival with a modified coke can. She just missed the woman’s eye and the femoral artery, but the damage was still

bad. She also attempted to throw a full flask of boiling water over another woman who had witnessed everything.

This was my first real exposure of violence in prison. It was surreal, we heard the screams, we heard the stories. We knew the story, but we saw nothing. The attempted murderer who already had a total of 76 years was put in a single cell and the two victims were sent to an outside hospital. Reality hit home for me that night. You were never safe. Not ever. The women that were fighting had left the prison more than two years previously and these two had actually been friends and were on speaking terms. The perpetrator had plotted and planned for 2 years before making her move. I realised that safety was just an illusion, a concept you constructed to convince yourself and others that you were okay. You can never be safe in a place filled with people who have been stripped of their dignity and human rights.

### **Identity map poem:**

#### **These lines on my hands**

#### **Participant C**

These lines on my hands....

Make me think of all the hurt I've caused through the crimes I've committed.

I'm glad to say out of my life it's all been omitted.

I feel that I could've done better,

But in my heart, I wrote them all a letter.

I also believe I've been forgiven,

By my father in heaven,

And all the people I've left grief stricken.

I also imagine what my hands could've done,

If I chose another path with good to begin.

### **Participant A**

These lines on my hands...

Are the lines of my life.

It depicts the joys, the tensions,

The sorrows, the strife.

How far I have come,

Since those days of risk and fear.

Since that feeling of hopelessness,

Since the nights of silent tears.

But I've grown,

I am free.

I've embodied a new one.

What the future still holds though,

Is a mystery you see.

### **Participant D**

These lines on my hands...

I see it as.... thinking of how different things could be.

I feel I am blessed for growing within myself thus far.

I believe I am able to do anything I put my mind to.

And I imagine a better way of life for me from this day on.

## **Workshop 7**

### **Healthcare**

## **What the news says versus reality:**

### **Participant B**

They say that South African prisons are in need of more doctors. Fact is, they do! I'm not sure of facts but I can agree that there is 1 doctor for every 14 thousand + inmates. Prisons differ. In Pollsmoor you get to make an appointment and have to wait for 3 to 4 weeks to see the doctor because it's overcrowded. You could see an orderly every second week, but only once a month per inmate. TB patients are treated much better as they have special treatment.

### **Participant D**

They say that prisons need healthcare services and that they are working on how to get it. This is not true as the post remains empty. They need to get more doctors into the prison as the inmates have the right to proper healthcare. They need to get doctors and nurses that know what they are doing and how to work with people.

They say the doctor is there for one day, but in actual fact, the doctor only stays for an hour or two. Not even half of the prison population could see the doctor in that time even if you are on the list, because chances are they don't even come.

TB and HIV patients are their first priority and have some privileges when it comes to getting their medication. But nevertheless, prisons remain a breeding ground for TB because of overcrowding.

### **Participant C**

They say that there is 1 doctor for every 14 545 prisoners. Is it possible to treat anyone with that ratio of patients to doctors? Can that relationship be successful? And are the wardens doing their part in giving access to such healthcare on a daily basis as to what should be done.

### **Participant A**

The article claims that doctors visit the prison at least once a week but obviously don't get around to seeing all of the patients because of the high doctor to patient ratio. My own personal experience negates this as I only ever heard of a doctor coming to Worcester every few months.

Another fallacy is that the prison tries to address the needs of inmates. This is only true up to a certain point. When a prisoner gets really ill the officials will try and avoid sending the inmate to an outside public facility for as long as possible. For the simple reason that it complicates

their own lives. A member/official has to accompany the inmate and if they stay in hospital, they get handcuffed and have to be guarded for 24 hours, meaning that the guards are hugely inconvenienced.

### **What the news should be saying:**

#### **Participant C**

What the article should highlight is the abuse of power exercised daily and how people are treated by fellow humans. They may be criminals or prisoners, but they are still humans. Everyone needs to be given a fair second chance in life to be rehabilitated and re-entered into society as better people. I believe that all wardens should have the equivalent qualifications to that of social workers when they apply for or take on the role of a warden. Because it is the wardens who work with inmates on a daily basis and spend most of their time with them at their jobs.

#### **Participant B**

We are the property of the state when we are incarcerated. The question is, how do the state staff view the world? What do they see as humane? How should prisoners be treated? How should they be living? The article should be exploring the facts of both the prisoners and DCS. They should write about how overpopulated the prisons are and how only certain people with special medical needs, such as special diets, are seen to whilst incarcerated. Prisoners have less rights according to the constitution and the bill of rights. But are any of these rights even being followed? No! The article should exclaim that the fear of exposure causes members of DCS to sweep things under the carpet and instead paint the “right” picture for the media. The article should also explore how many prisoners, or how few, are being treated medically according to their medical history. Those who develop genuine illnesses in prison, and those who fake illnesses to get better treatment. Only then will it raise facts on how health and safety is seen in prison. Then only would one be able to establish how many medical staff are needed and what the budget would be. Instead of presenting a face that praises all the good that DCS does.

#### **Participant D**

The reality kicks in when you experience the prison system, experience how the rights of inmates are violated, and experience how some see it as a non-violation. When you know the protocol and how the system should work, you see that it is a violation of human rights. Every prisoner has the right to proper healthcare, and healthcare facilities. Whether inside, outside,

on remand or awaiting trial. They should be treated with respect and human dignity and should be seen to like a human being. Doctors on the outside show proper interest in their patients, diagnose, and prescribe accordingly. This is what inmates should be getting too. It doesn't mean that since they are incarcerated, they should be getting less treatment than required. We know that there is a demand for more doctors inside, but it is also about the living conditions that determine how healthy people will be. If they become ill, then they should be treated accordingly. With proper healthcare in place and with qualified individuals who know how to work with patients, they may achieve this. They should still be treated with the same dignity and respect, whether it's just for a pain in the chest or a headache, they should still be seen to as human beings, like anyone else.

## **Workshop 8**

### **Open letters about prison living conditions:**

#### **Participant D**

To the Department of Correctional Services,

I would like to request the following on behalf of offenders across SA. The living conditions within certain prisons are inhumane and given my experience something should be done via DCS. According to the White Paper on Corrections and the Bill of Human Rights, inmates have the right to proper living conditions, however this is not the case. If there could be a weekly distribution of detergents for cells and inspections done weekly this will provide order and clean facilities. If there were a larger supply of toiletries every month or possibly fortnightly, it would make inmates feel better about themselves. If every section could have a laundry section where inmates could wash their clothes and bedding twice a week, the problem of rodent infestations would minimize, and the environment would be cleaner. DCS is responsible for making sure that these things are delivered to inmates and not turn a blind eye on the living conditions of inmates. They should be teaching them that even though they are being punished they can still take care of themselves and their environment because that's their home for the period of their sentence. I'm urging you to make the necessary changes with immediate effect as this could make a huge difference within your system.

#### **Participant C**

To DCS,

I was detained at Pollsmoor maximum for about eight months. When I arrived, the conditions of the place were repulsive. Upon arriving I was told that I should ask fellow inmates for soap and toothpaste as there was nothing they could issue me with at the time. I had to sleep on the floor on a broken mattress and blankets because the sponge was broken up to use in the toilet. That caused a smell to come from the blocked toilet bowls. Showers had broken tiles with only cold water. Inmates had open wounds and even mouth sores and diarrhoea from the food that was rotten. We were also kept inside that cell without exercise.

### **Participant B**

Dear Mr Van M,

Incarcerated people have the poorest living conditions where the mould on the walls create infections and other sicknesses and diseases. The undercooked meals are less than what prisoners have the right to, and it affects their wellbeing. Expired dry ingredients and food infested with worms, are a violation of the human right of adequate living conditions. No proper ventilation for over-crowded communal cells and broken windows calls for proper maintenance, especially in winter. No immediate medical attention for those in need, nor for those suffering from serious medical conditions. This requires upskilling for the department of DCS and psychological training. I urge, not only the DCS, but the government, both local and provincial, ward councillors and other unions and organizations to implement further health and safety interventions. Humans should come first.