



Homelessness:

What is Lost?

By Gail E. Catlin

My shoes get muddy as I walk across Friendship Park. It has rained in the early hours of the day and the park is damp, muddy, and cold. I can see everyone's breath as they speak. I pull my sweater around myself closer and I realize that, even though this park is intended to be a safe place for those who have no home, I feel threatened by the drunkenness, mental illnesses, and anger that lurk in some of the faces.

This place was designed so that law enforcement personnel wouldn't constantly harass homeless families as they made it through another day, waiting for showers or a meal at the shelter, or applying for aid or services. However, like my students who spend time in that park every day, I am "on alert." I think how impossible it would be to embark from here on the journey back to self, the journey of a lifetime.

I am headed to the classroom, where I teach journaling to homeless women. It feels like another world when I walk through the door into the temporary building classroom—quiet, carpeted, adorned with flowers on the table, and decorated with an "altar" in one corner that has precious reminders and mementos. On the walls are posters of courageous women who have changed the world—Sojourner Truth, Rosa Parks, Florence Nightingale, Delores Huerta. This is a safe place; something different can be born and grow here. I have become increasingly aware that only when we are safe can we grow, change, and be transformed. The gift of sanctuary is the greatest gift we can give one another. This is a lesson with which I am familiar, from a different set of circumstances.

When I was six I admired my schoolmate, Adele. She had a beautiful name and long looped blonde curls that bounced off her shoulders. Every day at school she wore beautiful party dresses and patent leather shoes. I was more scattered, attired in flannel-lined dungarees and plaid blouses, my hair looking like flyaway feathers. Although Adele looked assembled every morning, I was lucky if my shoes matched. I was new to the school and desperate for Adele to be my friend. Much cajoling and planning with my mother landed Adele at our house one afternoon. I was pleased in spite of the fact that having friends in my chaotic household was risky because I could never be certain of my mother's emotional state.

Adele asked to go upstairs and see my sister's hamster. We vowed to my mother that we would not take it out of the cage. But once upstairs, Adele was relentless in her pressure to "keep a secret" and hold the pet. In an effort to secure her friendship, I agreed. When we returned downstairs, for some odd reason Adele immediately told my mother. I could see the heat rise in my mother's face and that "we'll see you later in my room, little girl" look in her eyes. However, for the moment, she was the sweetest of hostesses, sending Adele on her way with compliments about her dressy ensemble, shutting the door hospitably, and then turning suddenly on me. What happened next

isn't something I can detail publicly even yet, but it is an experience that has taught me about the importance of safety.

In those minutes I became aware of why I could never have patent leather shoes or dressy dresses. Attention to and maintenance of such things was too time consuming and would take attention away from the greater endeavor to keep myself safe. Self-nurture was not a privilege I had. I needed to wear dungarees and tennis shoes because hyper-vigilance and survival are costly and any distraction might have forced me to miss a clue that could have become a blow.

This isn't easy to confess, but in doing so I locate myself in the same neighborhood as the homeless women I teach. We share the tenuous and fragile realm of finding quiet both deep enough and safe enough to hear our hearts beat. We are struggling to release the frightened alertness in our heads, trying to heal and become strong once more. Within our circle there is little distance between physical and emotional homelessness.

In our classes we journal our lives in an effort to grieve our losses, retrace our steps, make meaning of our lives, and craft a future that reflects us. Each woman receives a "travel pack" as she embarks on this courageous path, complete with journal, glue stick, scissors, eraser, colored pens, and pencils. I share with them how journaling has been my way back to myself. It is through journaling, and the safe place it creates, that I have authenticated my life, found my voice, and retrieved my life's work of teaching and writing.

Many women who have faced hardship have turned to journaling as a solace and salvation. Anne Frank wrote her diary during the Holocaust. Little Zlata Filipovic wrote her diary as the war in Sarajevo raged outside her door and destroyed her community. May

Sarton wrote her diary to stay alive when depression knocked at her window. In this private and often invisible place we find ourselves and then turn to contribute to the world. Women's journals are a place of power.

It has proven the same for this women's circle. The

retrieval of voice in journaling has helped the students realize that "they are not their trauma" and that their selves are distinct from their circumstances. This fact is difficult to believe and feel when the world around them judges them harshly. Some folks who hear about the class wonder why the women are worth the effort. They see homeless women as lazy, undisciplined, and unmotivated, deserving of their circumstances, dependent on handouts, and begging for more welfare.

These are not my students. True, they arrive in class fresh from addictions, jail time, and protective custody hearings. But they have only found their way into those places from deeper wounds of incest, molestation, rape, domestic violence, death, abandonment, and neglect. They are all ages and all races. They come from private as well as public schools, affluent neighborhoods, as well as urban ghettos.

They show up every day for two months to "go to school." They learn computer skills, job skills, anger management, and budgeting, as well as journaling, sculpture, and

collage. Almost 90 percent of the class members leave the program with housing and a job. Women from this class are like those in every other women's group I've taught and they are just like my students at the university. The difference is that they are engaged in the battle of a lifetime.

The transformative property of journaling is that it provides a means to recover dreams and imagination, the

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Blue Suede Skirt

By Pamela Cullen

The cowgirl wore a blue suede skirt
Dripping with white heavy fringe
That swooshed when she walked.

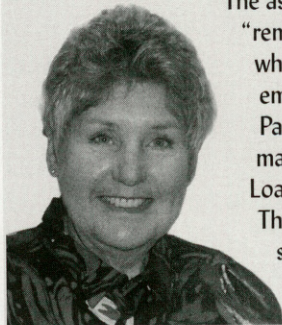
Her boots had silver buckles
That rang like a dinner bell
When she pranced in the dirt.

The six shooter on her hips
Gleamed in the noonday sun
As she aimed at the target.

Pamela found herself homeless almost overnight after the death of her husband. At middle age, she never expected to be living at the Salvation Army Shelter, her belongings in a storage shed. This poem about her childhood was her first entry into the journal for her class at the

Women's Empowerment Program.

The assignment was to "remember a time when you felt empowered." Today Pamela works in management at the Loaves and Fishes Thrift Shop, a position she has held for more than a year.



Can You Imagine?

By *Claudia McKinney*

Can you imagine a young girl with a heroin addiction?
Can you imagine her sleeping with different men just for the attention?
Can you imagine drugs taking her into jails and institutions?
Can you imagine her lying, stealing and even prostitution?
Can you imagine her thinking about her life being so off track as she sits in her cell?
Yet the first thing she does is get high once she gets out of jail.
Can you imagine her loved ones dying and the ones no longer in her life?
Can you imagine her a woman a mother a wife?
Can you imagine her pain being hooked on drugs and feeling so all-alone?
Can you imagine being raped and being left for dead?
Can you imagine all of the ugly things that now live in her head?
Can you imagine her days turned into years?
Can you imagine her heartaches can you imagine her tears?
Can you imagine her cheating death after getting a hot shot?
I ask you again can you imagine it or not?
Can you imagine the guilt can you imagine the shame?
Can you imagine having no one else but yourself to blame?
Can you imagine a woman fighting what seems to be a losing battle deep down within?
Can you imagine the same woman going from 280 to 110?
Can you imagine the bruises, the scars that her body bears?
Can you imagine the glances or the looks she gets from people as some may stop and stare?
Though every ones bottom is different and so is their perception
Can you imagine her bottom being seeing her own reflection?
GOD finally intervened and said, "Enough is enough"
He said "I told you I'd be here for you when things got too tough"
Can you imagine her learning how to live at age 45?
Can you imagine her now waking up now thanking GOD just to be alive?
Can you imagine being given a second chance at life in one lifetime?
I don't have to imagine it cause the woman is me and the story is mine.
All those things I swore I never would do.
My addiction to drugs made all those things come true.
And I pray every day never to return there again
And pray no one else will ever have to if they
stop and imagine.

Claudia McKinney wrote this poem while a student in the Women's Empowerment Program. She now lives in Quinn Cottages and works for Harm Reduction Services. She is pictured here, in the middle, with two of her classmates, LaShawna Clark (left) and Donna Gates (right).



building blocks for these women to become participants in the creation of their own lives. When we are not safe, we lose much more than only security. We lose our resilience and internal ability to envision our futures. We lose the gift of imagination. Understanding this has given me a new appreciation for the importance of "home," as well as the violent implications of "homelessness."

The courage that my journaling friends have is immense. Once protected here, they must write and discover some of the most difficult things. They must reclaim tragedy and horror to move beyond. One woman in my class can only write in the dark because "she cannot read yet what happened to her as a child." This woman sustained rape and incest and has longed to tell her story, but has never had a place. Each night she writes in the dark and admires herself because "at least now I'm writing it. Later I will read it."

Some women have lost children to protective custody battles or families to their addictions. Some women have lived with secrets until they are mute. Our society is loath to forgive them, but these women must forgive themselves in order to heal, move on, and contribute once more to their communities.

I admire and respect this arduous task and have learned many things. I have learned that no souls are lost, only hidden. I have learned that making meaning

of experience is the first and requisite step in moving forward. I have learned that compassion is much more powerful than justice and judgment. And I have learned that in spite of outward appearances, we are all engaged in keeping our flame alive.

When she received her journal packet, one of the students started weeping and said, "I'm so touched and thankful. I thought the world didn't think I had anything worthwhile to say." In my mind, a true community does not settle for such "acceptable losses." All efforts are made to retrieve those who are struggling. Two of my students had to drop out of class last session. They both have young children and the overflow housing facility in our city was closed because April marks the end of the "rainy season." I know these women now spend each day keeping their children safe on the streets. Their recovery of a future is over until they find shelter again.

This is a precious place of safety and security—an unconscious privilege to those who have it, and life-giving water for those who don't. In a safe place, a girl can wear patent leather shoes and keep them clean, seeing her reflection in their shine.

Writer and teacher Gail Catlin lives in Carmichael, California. She volunteers at Mary House, a division of the nonprofit, nondenominational program Loaves and Fishes, which provides services for homeless people in Sacramento, California.



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