

Walking the ethical line: Remote therapeutic work for women in prison amidst a pandemic

Toril Pursell

Abstract

These de-identified poems were written as personal responses to therapeutic phone and video sessions with women and gender diverse clients in prison during the Covid-19 pandemic that coursed across Australia and worldwide in 2020–21. Covid-19 is a many-edged sword that offers opportunities to reinvent established criminal justice systems and highlights disparities for vulnerable and isolated communities. Last year, the number of ‘women behind bars’ dropped dramatically (for example, in Victoria there was a 22.6 percent drop over five months) – with most of this unprecedented decrease due to a fall in those on remand (charged but not convicted).¹ Now incarceration is generally on the rise and prisons are expanding, rather than more comprehensive early prevention, restorative justice and holistic community initiatives being established. These poems acknowledge those who are criminalised and/or work in the system. The third poem is a personal reflection on ‘leaving’ the prison space daily.

Keywords

Women, prison, trauma, processing, pandemic, creative writing, Australia.

This being human is a guest house.

Every morning a new arrival.

– Jalaluddin Rumi²

1. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-08-09/remarkable-declines-prisoner-numbers-coronavirus-pandemic/12533218>

2. Rumi, J. (2004). *Selected poems* (Barks, C., Moyne, J., Arberry, A.J., & Nicholson, R. Trans.) Penguin Books. (Original work published in the 13th century).

I.

It is the first time we speak
and I am reminded of how strange
this whole exchange is.

She's never spoken
to a counsellor before
but does want to
'get a few things off my chest'..
She says distraction works –
watching TV and reading
autobiographies –
well, it works some of the time
at least.

She's been keeping to herself
isolating in her cell,
doesn't dare trouble anyone
with the sadness and the worry.

Sleep isn't easy
so she's on 'night meds'
which are labelled with big words
that can't be recalled.

When I ask if there is someone
now or before that she trusted
and could confide in,
it is an older sibling.
But they are on the 'outside'
And she doesn't have their number now.
They'll talk when she's out.

We dance around the subject
of death and grief.
Her voice begins to crack
and the loss is palpable
filling and weighing down
sound bites in the phoneline.
She might very well hang up.

There is a birth-day coming up
and I'm thinking about
how we are in the first days of winter.

She doesn't know how long
this grief will take.
How long does grief take
and when does it start giving?

I step carefully into the land
of remembering with her.
We try to stay with the good memories
that are no doubt bitter sweet.

Without much effort
she drops back to her younger self
and recalls,
'When I was a kid
we used to go on walks
and he'd put me on his shoulders...
other times I'd fall asleep
and he'd carry me to bed.'

She's thinking about her own kids a lot
and working on a colourful painting
of sea creatures.

The background is black
and the figures – blue, orange and pink.
When she paints she feels connected
with her children,
even if they are not in her care.

I say that she is speaking
to a stranger and that I am
no stranger to grief.
I tell her too that I have heard
many sad stories
and I am here to listen to hers,
if and when she is ready.
Our time has run out
so we make another
in two weeks to yarn again
and we each hang up
the phone.
Click.

II.

And in the same breath she said,
'I headbutted my sister'
many times...[with a scar to
show for it]

I listen and exhale;
trying not to judge,
attempting to empathise
on some level –
to understand the profound rage
and impulse.

But if I'm honest
it falls a bit flat
because the experience
is so far from where I am at.

I can't bridge the divide,
but I can hear that familiar
echo of trauma
and appreciate her brutal honesty
which is like fresh air
in a stale space.

And then she says,
'We all want to be cared for
and loved, right?
... I'm just passing time
and waiting for bail.'

III.

Tonight in this reclined quiet
the wind amplifies and I imagine
that glimmer half moon glimpse
while carrying our tired baby,
resting their head, heavy and secure
in the nape of my neck.
A fully trusting weight
up winding carpeted steps.

Now that most everyone
in this house drifts into
sleeping rhythm,
the dense layers of exhaustion
and gratitude land firmly
on the breast and collar bone,
and arc out in all directions.

I envy those who drop
into deep sleep with ease,
and wonder what dreams
might pay visit before light.

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