Letters to a Young Inmate

Matt Malyon, Teaching Writer

On November 7, 2017, Underground Writing visited the Community Integration Project. This group is made up of formerly incarcerated people who are now pursuing educational pathways at Skagit Valley College in Mount Vernon, WA. It’s a beautiful and hope-filled group, and we were honored to facilitate a creative writing workshop with them.

In addition to our typical interaction with literature and writing, the group discussed an idea generated by one of their leaders—writing letters to those still on the inside. The discussion was
brief, but everyone was interested. We made a note to do something like this in the future.

Today, February 28, 2018, the Community Integration Project hosted us again. And this time I arrived with literature in the form of two letters—the first letter of Rainer Maria Rilke’s Letters to a Young Poet, and a letter written to a young man in prison by an older woman/family friend.

After an initial free-write, we shared what we’d written by summarizing or reading our pieces aloud. The students jumped right in, courageously willing to share from the get-go. The man to my right finished his summary by quoting his final sentence: “I hope Matt doesn’t ask me to read . . .” There was laughter around our U-shaped group of tables, all thirteen of us relaxing into things.

We read Rilke’s letter together and talked about his clarion call to the younger poet: “No one can advise or help you – no one. There is only one thing you should do. Go into yourself. Find out the reason that commands you to write . . .” One student commented about the irony of Rilke’s refusal to give advice when, in fact, he gives lots of it. Another student commented on the beauty of not looking to external sources for one’s validation. After the discussion was finished, I asked the students to think of someone they knew personally, someone they could talk directly to in a mentoring way. Now write them a letter, I said.

[Underground Writing’s Juvenile Detention workshop site]
Our next reading, a letter to a young man in prison, solicited a variety of responses: good content at various points; a bit judgmental; good only if there was a pre-established and long-term relationship; a result of our current society’s assumption that pulling one’s bootstraps up is a solo activity. We talked about the need for a community to surround someone who’s struggling to survive and change. Everyone agreed on the essential role this plays in such matters. I connected this back to Rilke, too. For all his supreme artistry, his poetics often seems to suggest that true art can only be made in a solitary space, seemingly without regard for—or in need of—community.

Our last prompt: write a letter to a young person who is incarcerated. I encouraged them to write whatever they felt like saying. “These first takes aren’t going to anyone on the inside. These are to get the ideas flowing. We’ll work on this again.”

Like a good letter, the workshop went deep relatively quickly . . . and without the end result fully known. *Underground Writing* has been invited to return quarterly. We plan to keep writing such letters, grouping them together, and aiming to find a way to use the wisdom, hope, and advice contained therein to help those on the inside. I believe our letter writing will be stronger for having been created in this particular community. I trust the recipients of the letters will be stronger for the same reason.

Other Updates . . .

- **Underground Writing in the news:**

- **Our first-ever news & photo page:**

- **Upcoming Pre-publication Book Reading event for WHAT NO ONE EVER TELLS YOU**: Sunday, March 18th at Village Books in Bellingham, WA - 4:00-5:00 p.m. More information:
  http://www.villagebooks.com/event/underground-writing-031818

- **Plug for our friends** – the Migrant Leaders Club: *Hidden*
*Truth* is returning to the Lincoln Theater in Mount Vernon, WA. A great event, an important event. Tuesday, March 13th at 7:00 p.m. More information can be found here: [https://lincolntheatre.org/performance/hidden-truth-unmasked](https://lincolntheatre.org/performance/hidden-truth-unmasked)

[Students from the Migrant Leaders Club]

Our newsletter is published every other month. For 2018, we'll be sharing stories/essays written by our faculty of Teaching Writers, featuring our various workshop sites in Skagit Valley, Washington.

**Underground Writing sites:**

**Skagit County Juvenile Detention** (Youth)

**Migrant Leaders Club**

(Youth - Mount Vernon School District)

**Skagit Valley Recovery Community** (Adults)
YMCA Oasis Daylight Center (Youth)

*Beginning in 2018:
Skagit County Community Justice Center (Adults)

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