

After the Storm

School of Hard Knocks

by Constance Adler

COULD LITERARY ARTS HELP HOMELESS VETERANS?



On paper, this relationship never should have worked. Me, a dozen homeless veterans, and Emily Dickinson. My friend David, who cooked up the idea, called the venture “Creativity New Orleans.”

Randy Macabitas, director of the Volunteers of America shelter for homeless veterans, describes the transitional housing program as “re-payment from a grateful nation” to the men who served our country and now need help. Most of the residents are not combat veterans, he hastened to tell me so that I wouldn’t get any glorified notions. (Randy served in the Navy during Vietnam.) In addition to homelessness, the men face other challenges as well: debilitating illness, substance addiction, run-ins with the law. Their housing benefits last up to two years; after that, they’re on their own. Caseworkers at the shelter help the residents apply for permanent housing, but if leaving the shelter means living on the street again, so be it. During their stay, the men receive job training, life-skills classes, employment referrals, and use of computers. And now, with my arrival on the scene, a creative-writing class, too.

Although I had worked out my pedagogical philosophy by the time I arrived at the VOA shelter on Napoleon Avenue, this workshop raised a persistent existential question about writing: Why bother? In a class for homeless veterans, I was going to have to justify what I do as never before. I wasn’t sure if I had a good argument yet.

As soon as I stepped in the door, Randy called me into his office. He had some bad news and wanted to prepare me. One of the residents had been murdered in a drive-by shooting the night before. But he asked that the class go on as scheduled because it might help the men with their grief.

I was excited to see twelve students scattered around the room. Yes, some of them were asleep, but such a large turnout was thrilling. (I later learned that Randy had made attendance in the eight-week workshop mandatory.)

We met in the dining room. First, we had to find the remote control to turn off the gigantic television. Then I had to shout over the din of slamming pots in the kitchen to ask the cook, as politely as I could, if she would mind turning off her radio. In the relative quiet (the pots and pans still banging), the men had to listen to me. They sat with their notebooks and pens in front of them, and each folded his arms across his chest and looked at the floor. It was like standing before a room of human sculptures. The sweat rolled down my back into my shoes.

“You have to excuse us,” one man spoke up. “We’re not having a good day. We lost one of our friends last night.” I gave him my condolences. He nodded. No one else wanted to say any more about it.

I asked them to introduce themselves and talk about any writing they might have done previously. There was Gregory, who coached high-school football. Donald, who could hardly sit still for five minutes because he had so much work to do around the facility. Van, who leaned his head over the back of his seat with his eyes closed and didn’t say a word until the last day of class, when he delivered a lengthy exegesis on his belief in reincarnation. Keith, who was a glazier by trade, homeless by divorce, and unemployed by injury. Charles, who headed to D.C. after Katrina and published some articles in a newspaper for homeless people; he also wrote poems and political commentary for his blog. Warren, who was writing a book about his tour of duty

in the Vietnam War and his subsequent battle with PTSD. The mysterious Lionel.

I explained the class structure. We would read a poem together out loud with each man reading a couple of lines before I led them in a guided meditation that would prepare them for writing. As they came out of the meditation, I would offer a prompt—a phrase or image or half-finished sentence—to start them off. “As much as possible,” I said, “try to write without thinking. Let your pen lead your thoughts, not the other way around. Write the first words that come to mind, without questioning. Then write the next words, and the next and so on until I tell you time’s up. Just keep the pen moving, even if it means you write *shit, shit, shit* over and over. Eventually, some other word will occur to you, and you write that. Let one idea, one image lead to the next. You’ll be amazed what happens.” The men stared back at me.

They barely tolerated the first poem, Mary Oliver’s “The Summer Day,” although Donald held up his printout and asked, “This is mine to keep?” He tucked it into his notebook, and I thought, *Blessed Mary did it again.*

To my surprise, they really enjoyed the guided meditation. Perhaps they welcomed the stillness, the respite from the less than ideal outer world. I began with the simple invitation to “close your eyes. Settle your bones. Release your hands. Now turn your awareness around and sink into the darkness behind your eyes.” From there I improvised, encouraging them toward an inward investigation, keeping the focus on whatever we can know without effort, the movement of the breath, the clarity of the present moment. I was never sure what I’d say until I said it, because the class worked best when I followed the same invitation into spontaneity as the students.

At the prompt, they obediently picked up their pens and dove into their pages. This was going better than I hoped. Taking the time to meditate had chipped away at their resistance. While they wrote in their notebooks, I allowed my pen to lead me along the lines of my notebook, too. Every so often I’d look up and watch them, concentrating, frowning, but doing as instructed. It occurred to me that these men, trained in the military, were accustomed to following orders, maybe not from an airy-fairy English major like me, but an order was an order, and they did as they were told. When they started to lose momentum, I called time. Charles kept working in his notebook for several more minutes; he had a lot on his mind.

“Who feels like sharing?” Silence. I waited. Finally, one man stood up and read a piece about the cops who arrested him and his sister who told him he had to leave.

“Good. Thank you for reading. Now, who has a response to that piece of writing? What stayed with you? An image. A phrase. What did you like about it? Anything.” They refused to speak to one another or make eye contact. They had folded in on themselves and pulled up the drawbridge.

I was clearly going to have to model proper behavior. I told the man who had just read from his notebook what struck me as particularly good in his writing. (In my pedagogical philosophy, it is an article of faith that there is always something good, some blaze of vivid, fresh, memorable, worthwhile expression in every piece of writing.) We moved on. Keith stood up and read a piece about how hard it was to write when he didn’t know what to write. Still reading from his notebook, he concluded, “If I were teaching a class, I would first talk about

my training, and what did I do to make me qualified to teach this class.” Keith had set up an ambush to get my credentials. Fair enough. I talked about my experience, which seemed to satisfy Keith. No one else cared. This was a test to see if I would turn tail and run when challenged. I must have passed because Keith eventually became a big fan of the workshop. “This is not going to be easy,” he said before he sat down. “We are hard men.”

I’m a hard man, too, I wanted to answer but didn’t. Sometimes people don’t get my jokes so I’ve learned to squelch some of my more antic impulses with strangers.

After class, Lionel came up and asked, “Did it ever occur to you that not everyone wants to do creative writing?” Lionel is about six-and-a-half feet of dedicated belligerence. Even indoors, he wears two pairs of glasses at once, the dark wraparound sunglasses placed over the first. The smallest trace of light hurts his eyes.

“I think everyone can benefit from writing,” I answered. “It’s an experiment. You may be surprised by what you get from it. Sometimes you don’t know what you’re thinking until you see your own words on the page. This is a way of learning about yourself.”

“That’s not what I asked you.” He was fuming now and loud. “I *asked* did it ever *occur* to you that not everyone wants to *do* creative writing?”

“Yes,” I had to answer honestly.

“All right. That’s all I wanted to know.” Lionel walked off in triumph, and yet he didn’t skip a single class. He could have; others did. (The requirement of mandatory attendance wasn’t strictly enforced.) And every time Lionel arrived at class, he would demand a copy of the new poem I had brought that day. He collected them avidly, and he read out loud with enthusiasm. He seemed anxious that he might be left out of something important. But still, he hated having to write. Or so he said. I’ll never know for sure. Lionel remains a puzzle to me.

The class limped along for a couple weeks. I gave them a Kipling poem, “If,” assuming they would identify with its rousing theme of manhood. Bad idea. They hated it. I worried that they liked the meditation too much because it allowed them to retreat when I was trying to get them to come forward and write.

“I was in a lot of pain earlier,” Keith said. “But your voice took it away. I don’t know how it happened.” After a pause, he added, “I’m not going to pay you for the therapy.”

The toughest part was getting them to respond to their classmates’ writing. Finally, it dawned on me why this was such a problem. These men lived in a dormitory with other men. Undoubtedly, the close living quarters provoked conflicts. Men don’t want to live with other men. They want to live with women, right? They certainly don’t want to live in a shelter. They want their own homes and their own lives. Although they might be grateful for the help, they sure don’t like being in a position to need it. They were vulnerable and so wore thick armor to shield themselves. There must have been all manner of invisible resentments simmering by the time they got to class, and here I was asking them to open up and support one another. Forget about it. This was never going to work.

A palpable shift occurred on the morning of May 2. I arrived to find CNN blaring. The report was about Osama Bin Laden. “He’s dead! They killed him!” someone shouted. The air in the room had changed to something sharp, alive. A strange happiness surrounded us, not so much pleasurable as satisfying and deep. It was as though we hadn’t

known how acutely we had hungered for this resolution until it happened. “Our men in Afghanistan needed that,” said Warren. He was wearing his customary camouflage vest and rumpled Army-issue cap.

Sidney turned off the television. He liked punctuality, and it was time for class. The poem I had selected to pass around and have the men read aloud was Emily Dickinson’s “Tell all the Truth but tell it slant—”

Tell all the Truth but tell it slant—
Success in Circuit lies
Too bright for our infirm Delight
The Truth’s superb surprise

As Lightning to the Children eased
With explanation kind
The Truth must dazzle gradually
Or every man be blind—

In the past, these words had seemed fine coming from the delicate New England lady who wrote them. Now, in the rough voices of these grumpy men, the poem jumped from the page with a startling new force. They could hear it, too, and they all rushed to respond. Anyone who has taught for any length of time has experienced this phenomenon. Call it *mojo* or *simpatico*—I’m not sure what it is—but I can recognize those serendipitous, unquantifiable openings when the whole class surges to life. They effortlessly grasped the material and the process, and, inspired, they contributed their own ideas, everyone talking at once. I couldn’t take credit for it. Emily wielded the axe that cracked the men open.

They couldn’t wait to get to their notebooks and write. The exercise began with the phrase: “I have been living a lie by....” They had to finish the sentence and then continue writing. One man wrote about the power of listening. “Most things are easy,” he read aloud. “We make them hard by not listening.” This was the groove I was looking for.

“The best way to show a person you are listening,” I said, “is to repeat back to him something that you heard him say. So when someone reads what he wrote in class, you show him that you heard it by saying specifically what you liked in the writing. You have to speak to the writer and tell him what stayed with you.”

As if on cue, each man turned in his seat and faced the others for the rest of the class. My work was done.

It turned out that my initial fear about this class was partly right and partly wrong. At first, the men wanted nothing to do with me or my silly ideas, but, by the end of eight weeks, they wanted to walk me to my car and carry my books. They asked when was I coming back. (In the fall, I’d start a new class.) They teased me about my wrinkled trousers and my wristwatch. I told them ironing is for people with too much time on their hands. I still don’t know what was so funny about my wristwatch. Most of the students, not all, told me they had decided this writing gig was worthwhile. And they’d like to keep doing it. Alfred told me after the class ended that he had cultivated a correspondence with “three female pen pals.” The women happened to be in jail, but the important thing was that he was still writing. Crafting words from the raw, amorphous stuff inside you and then sharing them is a gift, perhaps more urgent, necessary, and precious to men who have been living on the street. These students received what we all want, an acknowledgment: I see you and hear you. I know you exist. 🙏