Truth Be Told

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Mandala by Kim J.
Crossing the Threshold Into New Life:
A Truth Be Told Facilitator in Training Tells Her Story
By Juliana O’Brien

As a person desiring to develop my spiritual life, I often feel I receive, what I call “nudges” from God (the divine) through nature, people, books and silence. These nudges might come as a word or thought or feeling inside. Then I know I am being asked to move in some direction, change a habit, or shift an attitude. Often these nudges are not always directions I am immediately keen on following! Usually they are a path unknown to me, a direction I cannot see or even predict. There is fear involved, and my old self wants to remain comfortable, and stagnant.

In the midst of my first two months in Austin, I was attending a dance class. The teacher, hearing I had been a mental health therapist in the jail system in Vermont for four years pulled me aside after the class. She had a friend who was a movement dance facilitator for Truth Be Told. She spoke highly of Truth Be Told. “They help incarcerated women tell their story, write their story and dance their story. There are wonderful women facilitators and volunteers involved.”

I listened to her speak and felt “the nudge.” Knowing hardly anyone here in Austin, I felt the call to explore Truth Be Told and at the same moment I felt fear and resistance. My experience in the Vermont prisons had ended in a place of disillusionment. I worked as a crisis counselor in a poorly run jail system with colleagues that were negative, often putting the inmates down. After trying to carry my light of creativity and hope to the jail I got a big “nudge” that I needed to be around more positive support.

Within a week I attended a volunteer orientation for Truth Be Told and heard the story of a released inmate who had completed the program. She was using the tools she had learned in Truth Be Told on the outside. Shannon, the Executive Director of Truth Be Told, spoke of her journey. Her mom had been incarcerated and the power of the program transformed their relationship. If God had a voice she was saying, “Here is the real deal. People walking their walk and talking their talk.” I felt truth and clarity in these women.

It was at that meeting or soon after I was invited to facilitate for a Truth Be Told Exploring Creativity workshop at the Lockhart prison. “Yes,” I heard myself saying as another part of me was wondering what I just committed to. I love facilitating groups as a therapist using art, movement, laughter and exploring spirituality but I was just a newcomer; shouldn’t I be cautious, take it slow? The “nudge” in my belly said, “No, jump in. Are you willing to hold your fear gently and step beyond the threshold?”

Eighteen women showed up to the creativity class at the Lockhart prison. My groups in the Vermont jail had six men and I had a hard time getting the guys to come. I was humbled and moved as these women with their eager, shy and a few tough faces looked towards me to begin.

The group I led was on “Strengths.” It included laughter exercises and picking three strengths the women could identify in themselves. The women wrote about their strengths, made their body in a shape that represented the strength and witnessed each other. Some of the strengths they named and shared were compassion, leadership, smiling everyday, and being a good communicator.

As a certified laughter instructor, I have found that these playful exercises open up our hearts to each other and allow us to relax, release anxiety and get in touch with our creative child self. All 20 women, in a small room at the Lockhart jail, (including Carol and myself), clapped our hands and practiced laughing. The energy in the room became light and fun, the women with their tough faces melted into smiles. The fun silly exercises released my performance anxiety and I felt more grounded as a facilitator. I was so grateful that God had led me to learn those
THE TRUTH TELLER

SPRING 2011

Help Wanted

TBT is always looking for volunteers to join our team! If you are interested in any of the opportunities below, please contact us!

**Truth Be Told Wish List**

1. Volunteer Coordinator to recruit, place, and organize volunteers
2. Grant Writers
3. Fundraising Team Members
4. Individuals or Organizations willing to host Truth Be Told presentations
5. Volunteer Board Members with expertise in Marketing, Public Relations, and Financial Leadership
6. Individuals who can help develop an assessment tool that demonstrates healing from trauma through story telling, creativity and community. A social scientist to guide the administration of the tool developed above to our program participants.
7. A volunteer with experience in creating manuals, layout, and graphic design to help with the final development of the Model Program Curriculum. Online course development experience is preferred but not required. This short-term position would require about 30-40 hours of work between April and July 1. If you are interested in this position, please contact Nathalie@truth-be-told.org or 512-292-6200.

**Table Captains Needed**

We need YOU! TBT is looking for 25 individuals to serve as Table Captains for our annual Fall Fundraising Luncheon on October 4, 2011. Table Captains are asked to fill a table of 10 guests, who will all receive a free lunch and witness a powerful one-hour program about Truth Be Told. Table Captains are not required to ask anyone for donations...they simply invite friends, neighbors, or coworkers to come hear about the work of Truth Be Told. If you are interested in serving as a Table Captain for us this year, please e-mail office@truth-be-told.org for more information.

Letter to Warden Barry from Mary Cole, Talk to Me Speaking Class Mentor, Dec 2007

"Truth Be Told" has really helped me look at my many selves, as a young girl and as a mother also. I have now been able to share my deepest secrets and pain. I saw how I had become my mother as I promised never to do. On the other hand, this class has helped me to see how I have something to offer to help others.

I am now becoming the woman I have always wanted to be. I truly believe if you change your thoughts about yourself and change them to be who you want to be, you become that person. Only until I shared my story in the Book of Wisdom did I realize the impact it made on the audience, and I too was in awe.

Now I know I can go back home and hold my head up. No more guilt and shame and self-pity, but strength and confidence and love for myself and respect, morals and values to live by. Now I want to instill these strengths of character in my grandchildren. I believe my life will be better for having taken "Truth Be Told."

Respectfully, Mary Cole

“On the Way to Prison” by Tammy W.
Volunteer Orientation  by Lauren Cox

Truth Be Told held a successful orientation for new volunteers at The Sanctuary on February 22nd. A total of ten new volunteers attended to discover the inspiring opportunities available in each aspect of our organization.

Natalie Weinstein and Kathleen Littlepage shared their experiences of working in the Behind Bars program. Both speakers encouraged new volunteers to attend a TBT Graduation at least once to witness the graduates’ bravely telling their stories. Kathleen spoke of the need for guest speakers for the Let’s Get Real class, and both women stressed the amazing experience of being a class facilitator.

Board member Cassandra Thomas then addressed the Beyond Bars program and its areas of need. Cassandra discussed the Planning and Development Team and the database and social media projects. She also explained the need for resource packets for women newly released from prison and the development of the correspondent program.

The chairman of the board, Laura Strausberg, described the responsibilities and needs of the board. Specifically, Laura addressed the need for help with fundraising, public relations / media leadership, and motivational leadership. Along the same lines, executive director Shannon Holtzendorf discussed the Bridge Building opportunities to help with “behind the scene” functioning of TBT.

The evening was highly motivational and we are excited about our new volunteers. Thanks to everyone who attended. We also want to give a special thanks to Sherry Jameson and Apple Annie’s for providing delicious sandwiches for our attendees!

Hello,
To whom this may concern: I was a student in the Truth Be Told classes and I was just released a few days ago. I’m proud to say that I was a part of a very special program. I thought I’d send my first letter forward to a positive future. Thank all the sponsors for their time and dedication. I pray and ask that you’ll continue to do what helps a lot of us inmates come to deal with themselves in a positive way of expression.
Sincerely, LaShira

Continued from page 2

exercises, because even in struggles, we can access our joyful, light-hearted selves. One woman cried, it felt so good to laugh!

At the recent Truth Be Told graduation that I was attending, two of the women who had come to my group said when things got tough they did the laughter exercises in their cell. They also said they remembered their three strengths! That is what I call crossing a threshold.

Truth Be Told invited me to get involved. This has increased my sense of belonging, my own self-confidence and integration into a new place. The incarcerated women who complete the Truth Be Told Program will have practiced tools to cross the threshold into new life. At some point we know, we are “nudged” onto the threshold and asked, “How are you going to proceed in your life?”

I will close with this prayer that reminds me that crossing thresholds is not about being perfect, it is about moving forward as we are,

In courage, with hope, together. I am grateful for Truth Be Told as a threshold for me into my new home, Austin Texas, and my real home: Myself in God.

So God, I ask you to use me anyway,
Take my fears and use me anyway,
Take my failures and use me anyway
Take my arrogance and use me anyway
Take my greed and use me anyway
Take my guilt and use me anyway
Take my confusion and use me anyway
Take my regret and use me anyway
I offer all myself to you
Use me to serve many or few
In pain or joy
Use me, as you will.
— Carol Orsborn
One Women’s Journey By Springing Forth
By Nathalie Sorrell, TBT Co-Founder and Behind Bars Director

I can't remember a spring that I've been so aware of life's moment by moment transition. Not a gardener, and not observant by nature – I have walked down the streets of my life so absorbed in conversations and relationships I never noticed a plant, or anything else for that matter.

This year, I've cherished every day of sunlight starting in the usually dreary month of February, noticed the tiny buds of life appearing on seemingly dead tree branches, delighted in every colorful change as it's appeared, whether in grasses, leaves, berries or actual blossoms. Spring is when the varied nature of creation is most apparent – a daffodil is not a pear tree, nor does a redbud resemble an oak when it's going through the change. I LOVE variety! Love the uniqueness of creation and creativity.

At the prison, we continue offering the tools of communication skills, community building, creativity and caring for self. Soon our individual Talk to Me Classes will move from each woman telling her unique story about what brought her to prison, to becoming one larger Discovery Class. We will use play, coloring, music, writing, movement, guided imagery to encourage each participant to befriend her past, now that she is no longer driven by it nor running from it.

These eager students will visualize masks that illustrate selves they hide as well as selves they'd like to develop. They will write letters to their current selves from the future women they will become. They will create a group dance that celebrates an ordinary moment in each day when they can say "In spite of everything, Yes!" to their own lives. They are consciously creating for themselves a springtime, and willing to let their old life become mulch for their growth into older and wiser women.

TTM Class facilitators watched young women, wary and closed, stir like seedlings poking into sunlight as they told their heart-breaking stories and saw other class members weep. They heard us applaud their courage. We have seen women in their 40s, 50s and 60s, gaunt and grey-faced with despair, brighten into incredulous grins as they returned to class the next week. They discovered that even shameful crimes did not cause the rest of the group to withhold their compassion, or isolate them from the circle of women. We are seeing each week's transformation strengthened by each person's commitment reflected in the group's willingness to keep speaking more truths and as well as to keep the confidentiality that makes our classrooms safe -- sacred containers where past horrors can be laid to rest.

I am blown away by March winds – and by the grace of God appearing like bluebonnets as new volunteers contact us. You are ready and willing to participate in our pilot program for facilitator training online. Some have offered your skills to help create it. My glad heart also celebrates the sight of familiar volunteers, like true gardeners celebrate the blossoming of beloved plants that bloom on time, every season for years.

We delight in VARIETY: every volunteer, donor, creative or nurturing or playful or reliable or good with numbers or good at hugging or good at remembering or organizing or decorating or cooking or leading a group or being a team player ... YOU make our life work so beautiful!

None of you received from us the kind of nurturing that true gardeners give to preparing the soil, getting rid of encroaching weeds, watering and care so that the bloom will be nourished and do itself proud! Carol and Shannon and I have spent years wishing and hoping that God would provide a Volunteer Coordinator for Truth Be Told. We don't know why that prayer hasn't been answered. But we do know that no volunteer for TBT gets the full credit and acknowledgment and celebration that each of you deserve. Yet you are hardy and somehow you do us all proud by your beauty and how well you fit into our surroundings. I guess we're some sort of wild Texas xeriscape...

And I guess I need to stop using metaphors beyond my knowledge. Please accept my thanks and praise today. Your prayers are always needed, so each volunteer will bloom and scatter seed as we go, and each woman we serve will see how to become a seed spreader herself. May you each accept the gifts the divine gardener offers you as you experience your own seasonable growth today, until I can beam on you in person.
Truth being Told
By TBT Graduate Dara Musick

Although i put aside all that i learned in Lockhart during TBT Talk To Me and Discovery classes i NEVER lost it this time
i was in Woodman state jail with just 6 months to serve and free of paper for the first time in 20+ years
i was really tired i had had enuff
i was ready to be free
What i didn't know that TBT taught me was that thru the writing and expressing i could recognize and name my feelings... that THRU my pain THRU my confusion and THRU my shame i could write it all down in a very authentic and raw way and know that i would be okay...
God helped me to connect the knowledge that i learned 10 yrs ago with my HEART
i have been out since Nov of last year and have since reconnected with TBT
and i have to say that what i thought was lost is now in my heart FOREVER

i was diagnosed with uterian cancer a month after i got out
and every reason i have used in the past to run hide and kill me
i have now used in a way that really makes me a PRINCESS WARRIOR
the tools that were so freely given to me then i now use to help me embrace all the pain anger and self pity...

I'M A SURVIVOR
A WARRIOR
A BEAUTIFUL DAUGHTER of a KING
A PRINCESS
i thank God today for getting me ready back then for what is happening to me today...
i thank all the TBT Staff for letting Our Creator use them in a way that has saved my life....

I love you guys
i love what ya'll are doing
and To the ladies taking the TBT class
What ur doing is Awesome
keep giving it ur all and never give up...
there are a lot of us praying for u.....
"Owning our story can be hard but not nearly as difficult as spending our lives running from it. Embracing our vulnerabilities is risky but not nearly as dangerous as giving up on love and belonging and joy—the experiences that make us the most vulnerable. Only when we are brave enough to explore the darkness will we discover the infinite power of our light."
— Brene Brown

This quote highlights the essence of Truth Be Told’s programs.

At the Lockhart unit and at the Hilltop unit, in Gatesville, TX, we have just completed the Talk To Me classes, which means we have listened to over 30 women’s life stories. These women made a choice to do the intense work of looking at their entire lives, creating a lifeline in 5-year increments, for the sole purpose of telling the story of what happened on their life’s journey that led them to incarceration. Not only do these women participate in this intense investigative dissection of their lives, they then choose to stand up in front of their community of peers and bare their souls and secrets. When I say to you that this work has continued to amaze me for the last 11 years, it’s the TRUTH. Witnessing these magnificent women owning their story, not running from it, embracing the vulnerability of baring their secrets is immense and transformative to all of us: those of us that are taking our turn to use our voices to own our stories and those of us that sit in the community and do our part of being respectful witnesses. Their energy is fluid and seeps into all of our hearts, healing us all with the mystery of what happens when love and respect is present.

Last week Nathalie and I joined our TTM Speaking and TTM Circle classes into one large community. Before joining we spent time with our respective communities for one last sharing about what the community has meant to them and how it was for them to go through the process of sharing their stories. The common thread was that each week they felt that they could come and be in their TRUTH and know that they did not have to hide from each other, or themselves -- they had come to a place of belonging. After this closure ceremony, we brought our classes together, now becoming part of a larger community, of like-minded sisters, all having made the choice to embrace our vulnerabilities and now taking the risk to step into yet another unknown territory. Moments later we were in a circle that filled the room from wall to wall. We embraced each other’s hands as a sign to recognize that we had all accepted the oath to be respectful to each other and were now ready to move into the next level of the work – the Discovery Class. Now we’re shifting the focus from the past to the present, engaging in writing, impromptu speaking and creative play to increase our discovery and understanding of ourselves, others, and the world outside. We continue to improve our communication skills and deepen the network of support we began developing in the Talk To Me classes.

As I reflect back to January, when we first met these women, it brings light to my face and I nod with the internal knowing that we all need to know we are not alone, and Spring brings forth rebirth, renewal, and regrowth.

I have a wonderful class on Thursdays and this is definitely the highlight of my week. Truth Be Told has given me treasures and memories that I will never let go of. I have cutting edge, top notch, sought after and very polished for this Blackberry Age role models in my life.

The teachers that come to us ultimately show us the importance of every one in the community to build a completely different world here than we know, full of style and grace, love and care, inspiring and encouraging, and above all the truth that sets us free.

Karen C
Hilltop Prison in Gatesville
March 2011
Calendar of Events

May 20 – Discovery Class Graduation at Lockhart Prison, 3-5 pm (RSVP to office@truth-be-told.org or email for more info)

May 26 – Graduation event at Hilltop Prison, Gatesville, TX (RSVP to office@truth-be-told.org or email for more info)

Please note: Our graduation guest lists fill quickly, and we must have your information three weeks prior to the event, so send us your RSVP soon to get on the list!

Make a Donation or Contact Us

Truth Be Told is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization, and your donations are tax deductible. Donations may be made securely online at www.truth-be-told.org or mailed to the address below.

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