

Word.

On Being a [Woman] Writer

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The Girl Behind the Smile

Judith Clark is a poet, independent scholar, peer-educator, and lifelong activist. Since 1983 she has been serving a sentence of seventy-five years to life at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility. Born in Brooklyn to a politically radical family, at age fourteen Clark began her activist work in the civil rights movement. As Clark notes, working "in the radical social movements of that era defined my life before prison. But my own unacknowledged needs and psychological issues drove me further and further into the extreme margins of those movements." In 1981 Clark was arrested as the get-away driver in an armed robbery, "during which three people were killed." Although she declared herself a political prisoner during her trial and moved herself to a basement holding cell, Clark's later two-year lockup and solitary confinement nearly broke her. During this difficult time she turned to books, "particularly women writers." It was also while in lockup that Clark began writing daily. Initially a record of the deep resonance she felt when reading writers like Joan Nestle, Alice Walker, and Grace Paley, her journal soon evolved into a space for exploring, through poetry and memoir, her own voice and world. Clark's poetry has appeared in the *New Yorker*, *Ikon*, *Bridges*, and *Global City Review*. She is also a contributor to *Aliens at the Border* and *More In Than Out*, two volumes that came out of Hettie Jones's writing workshops at Bedford, and Bell Gale Chevigny's *Doing Time*, the anthology of PEN prison writing contest winners. Her short memoir essays have appeared in *Red Diaper Babies: Children of the Left* and *A Wretch Like Me*. Clark also continues her activist work through writing. She is coauthor of *Breaking the Walls of Silence*, a book about the AIDS peer-education, counseling, and support program she codeveloped in response to the growing epidemic at Bedford. After completing her bachelor's and master's degrees in psychology, she published several articles from her thesis on long-term mothers and their relationships with their children. She is part of the writing group with writer/activist Eve Ensler featured in the recent PBS documentary *What I Want My Words to Do to You*.

Writing has proven not only crucial to Clark's survival while in prison; it "has been a central part of my evolution" there. In "The Girl Behind the Smile" (2003), Clark opens a window onto her journey as a woman writer. Now "the mother of a young woman writer," here again she is reminded—this time by reading the words of her daughter—of the power in being not one or the other, but both.



It is my journal that keeps me above the surface of the waters. On the days when I feel close to drowning. Drowning in anger that wells up, like a tidal wave, from the pit of the stomach, burning my heart, choking my throat. . . . The walls are closing in, closer and closer. My cell window faces a brick wall, and I wonder if they are sending me a message. . . . But I can't let "them" invade my mind. I don't want to write about "them." I want to write my stories, my poems, my words.

(Writing exercise, 10/13/93)

Although I have published numerous poems, essays, and articles, I still hesitate to call myself "a writer." How many women writers share that fear of making a fraudulent claim? But I have no problem joining the words *woman* and *writer*. My journey toward being a writer has been a woman's journey, which like so many women's journeys began in silence.

from "Panic"

*Papa, driving the family car
debates politics with Saul*

*Mama, next to him
navigates*

in the back seat

*Brother pinches
me scrunched
between him and Saul*

*Papa's voice rises
as he turns*

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*red faced
jabbing his finger at Saul
his bullet words
flying
scatter-shot*

My family deified the Word. The books that lined every wall of our home represented the ultimate truth that my parents believed in. Ours was a family of talkers and debaters. Meals, car trips, poker games were all occasions for political discussion and debate. But in this atmosphere saturated with the language of ideas, there were many silences.

I had trouble with my speech as a young child. When I was an infant, my family traveled to the Soviet Union, where we lived for three years. I came to speech in two languages, always knowing which language to use with whom. When we came back to the U.S., I intuited the unspoken message to stop speaking in Russian—that it was somehow dangerous. But the echo of that first language left a residue on my tongue. I slurred my r's and l's to the point of being unintelligible. My parents were told by school authorities to send me to a speech therapist. I can't remember how long I went to him; only that I hated it: His musty, smoke-filled office choked me, and my words got stuck in my throat every time he sat, too close, and commanded me to speak into his tape recorder. *"The red bird went round the corner, whirled up onto the blue window ledge."* Somehow, he succeeded in retraining my tongue. Cured of my "speech defect," I emerged with a strong Brooklyn accent unlike anyone else's in my family—and just like that cigar smoking therapist's! His would not be the last embodied voice I would adopt to comply with the expectations of one higher authority or another.

from "there is the girl"

there is the girl/shouting slogans/there is the girl blindly/smiling/there is the girl/rocking/herself to sleep/there is the girl smiling . . . there is the girl behind the smile/yearning to be known . . .

No one who knew me in my younger years as a "movement militant"—before the crime, before prison—would have suspected that I was lost in

silence, least of all myself. I masked my silence with the strident cacophony of slogans and rhetoric. I disdained words as empty promises. "Put your money where your mouth is" was my motto. I was a woman of action. That rejection of a language and communication represented a fundamental disconnect, a nihilism that degenerated into and justified violence.

from "these hands"
. . . these hands clenched
into defiant, upraised fists
pointed accusing fingers
punched, ripped and drew blood
gripped the careening wheels of delusions
trembling with fear and fury

and when child, home, lifework
and freedom
were lost
these hands kept on
writing, gesturing
desperately drawing
words in air

until one day
these hands
stopped . . .

In my fifth year of incarceration, I was locked up in solitary confinement for two years. Everything in me wound down to a halt. I lost all energy to write letters and articles filled with hopeful revolutionary rhetoric, felt no desire for visits with political comrades seeking to show their solidarity. I lived from week to week for visits with my father and daughter, and from a professor with whom I'd begun to look at myself. I stopped being "a public political prisoner" and went into a seclusion of silence. My day-to-day company came from reading books, particularly women's writings: Joan Nestle, Audre Lorde, Jo Sinclair, Dorothy Allison, Cherríe Moraga, Barbara Smith, June Jordan, Minnie Bruce Pratt, Maya Angelou, Grace Paley, and many others. I was drawn to

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writers who defined themselves and their work in the context of community. Their words triggered memories and images, fomented deep longings, drew me into new ways of posing questions, challenged me to see things from different angles. I had begun to keep a journal, and while I was writing to and for myself, it often felt like I was in conversations with these women writers.

The words of these women helped me feel less isolated—that despite our differences and how very far out on the limb of humanity I had taken myself, the challenges I faced and the emotions they evoked were not unknown to others. Soon I realized that in order to face myself and do some serious psychological work, I had to “shelve” my political assumptions and identity. Reading Alice Walker’s poem “On Stripping Bark from Myself,” I was reassured that there was another person who felt as raw and naked as I did. Months later, after a hard holiday season, I wrote in a poem,

*Everyone has her nightmares
her prison cell
solitary box
that she alone can enter
hesitantly
fearful
of getting trapped
without the key*

Exploring the many truths revealed by women writers opened in my mind the sheer possibility of multiple truths. I began writing narratives to explore the varied dimensions of my own experience. Writing about our voyage to the Soviet Union in my mother’s harried voice, I felt her intense loneliness and her anger at living in the shadow of my father. And for the first time, the Gordian knot of our conflict was loosened.

Viscerally aware of how these women’s words nurtured and challenged me, and how different my journal writing felt from my previous “political writing,” I contemplated the power of words and my relationship to “the word.” I began to appreciate how my attitude that words were only legitimate if acted on actually eviscerated the power of words to express feelings and desires we would never want to act on. Such literalness robbed me of fantasy and imagination, through which

we grow to relate to a world full of conflict, injustice, and possibility. Words could either illuminate deeply experienced truths, or mask and distort reality. Words could either connect or disconnect. I thought about my relationship to words. I had come to prison cloaked in the mantles of "freedom fighter" and "political prisoner." Words spun from whole cloth, a flimsy fabric that began to fray quickly. In those early years inside, I had written speeches, arguments, and political tracts—a torrent of words that had begun to feel illusory and dishonest. They were words meant to stave off questions and doubt; pat phrases, like "to be a mother is to care about the children of the world," meant to stanch the hemorrhaging of shame and guilt about my own child.

My search for a new language was central to the choices I wanted to make. I wrote out in bold letters some lines from Adrienne Rich's "Transcendental Etude":

*But there come times—perhaps this is one of them—
[. . .]
when we have to
pull back from the incantations,
rhythms we've moved to thoughtlessly,
and disenthral ourselves, bestow
ourselves to silence, or a severer listening, cleansed
of oratory, formulas, choruses, laments, static
crowding the wires.*

And I let Adrienne's words light my way through the beautiful darkness.

When I call myself "a woman writer," I am giving homage to all those women writers who kept me alive and hopeful, whose words were like kindling, stoking my own creative embers. I am a writer, able to face harsh realities and tell my truth because of these women. The "woman" attached to my "writer" is really "women." It is an affirmation of my sense of community, inside and outside of prison.

There are women whose *words* reached me, and then there are the women who went beyond their own lives to enter into *this* world and our lives. I learned the craft of poetry writing in a workshop taught by Hettie Jones. For over a decade, until the doors were closed to her, she came weekly to conduct a poetry workshop. Many women passed

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through Hettie's workshop. But a core of us stayed and wrote and read our work aloud and grew into writers. Ours was an emboldened sisterhood, and we were in love with each other's words. The sacred energy of our circle and our communal silence of concentration generated the beginnings of most of my best poems. Their enthusiastic responses led me to believe that my work had potential. Hettie taught me the physical pleasure of working on a poem, of carving away words, changing and reshaping until the poem emerges.

*... what I want
is to sink into my heart
for words that
take us to a different plane

where lines dividing and defining
melt into rivers,
oceans that carry us to a
unravaged continent
of understanding*

In recent years, Eve Ensler has facilitated a workshop where we write narratives from our lives as a means to explore those parts of ourselves we had disavowed and disowned. We've written about our crimes, struggling to own and understand ourselves and take responsibility. We've pushed each other to find the words to express remorse and seek reconciliation. Our work together helped me to write what may be the most important words I have published—a letter of apology for my crime.

... It's that place—that miserable, weak, isolated, muzzled part of me—that strangely, I want you to know. . . . It is that part of me that makes me a kindred soul to every lost, desperate creature on the Earth. That part of me has known fear and therefore would never want to engender fear in another. . . . She has been alone and voiceless too long. Let me let her speak, to call out her desire for love. Let her be heard.

(Writing exercise, 1999)

I do not think I could have made the shift of consciousness, thinking, feeling, and personality necessary to emerge into an honest sense of remorse without my search for a language to express what I was feeling and discovering.

*flesh
overflowing waistbands
jiggling under tee shirts*

*slack chin heavy breasts
loose, sticky thigh meat*

*I dreamed of taking a sharp knife,
slicing it away
believing that
smaller, I would be*

*quieter
my tongue tamed
as in clitorodectomy
that other hungry organ*

Writing has been central in my repossessing those aspects of myself that I had disavowed, dispossessed, and denied, beginning with my femaleness. When I was young, being female meant feeling puny and afraid. Later, it was about hating my flesh and the longings of my flesh. I grew up into a literature dominated by the male voice, from Tolstoy to Bellow, and by the notion that great literature separated the word from the body. Great ideas emerged from great minds, and to think great thoughts, one had to become liberated from the subjectivity of the body. While I welcomed and enjoyed the explosion of literature and poetry by women in the 1970s; it did not seep into my own soul. It could not change me until I was ready to face all that I was throwing overboard.

*... there is the girl who turns
into her stillness to
create worlds
teeming with sound and surprise*

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Today, my words emerge from my body. While I write in various modes, I feel most at home writing poetry because it is a language of rhythm, of senses. Poetry is about breath. It flows from the heartbeat, the cadence of my natural rhythms, the sounds that emerge from my vocal chords through my wide open mouth—all that is okay in poetry. Poetry forgets shoulds and leaps beyond literal, dualist meaning. This is not to say that poetry lacks discipline. One must hold true to the structure of a poem, its shape, and let go of the excess. Writing poetry is like labor: hard as hell, also incredibly satisfying.

I am a mother, and more to the point, the mother of a young woman writer. I did not know that she would choose a writer's life. But when she was very young, I knew that I wanted her to have the power of the word, to be able to speak and write her own truth and be heard. Watching her grow up and contend with all the negative messages that threatened to deny her a sense of her own potential was at times enraging and disheartening. But she truly has that writer's way of observing and knowing, a capacity to reflect as she experiences life and use a complicated language encompassing self and other, and embracing diversity. Recently, she helped edit a collection of politically inspired short fiction; in her bio, she gave me a most precious gift in thanking me for teaching her "all that words can do."

I am a lesbian, a Jew, a prisoner; but if in describing me you paired any of those words with *writer*, I would add the words *more than*. Not so with the word *woman*. Being a woman encompasses all the potential I can imagine. It also bears the experience of being Other, of being an observer, of having to reclaim that potential—and therefore loving it, and valuing it all the more.