

Writing While Doing Life
By Robert Allbee

I teach creative writing at New Folsom Prison. It's right next door to the old prison, which they still use for lower security risk prisoners, and no, Johnny Cash never did any time there. New Folsom is a level four maximum security prison. It houses around three thousand of California's most dangerous convicts in the state.

There is hardly a week that goes by that someone doesn't lose their life in there. Disease, old age, overdose, suicide and plain old murder keeps the steady stream of corpses flowing out of the gate at a constant rate week after week, month after month, year after year. Some men actually do get paroled, but for most, they know that the way they will most likely get out of prison will be in a box. The convicts call it getting paroled, "feet first". The ones who have been sentenced to life without the possibility of parole call themselves "El Wops" derived from the acronym L.W.O.P., or life without possibility parole.

To say the least, it's a tough crowd, which leads me to some very interesting conversations with outside writers and writers groups when they find out I teach creative writing inside a place like Folsom Prison. Many people think of creative writers as people who are some version of a new age, airy fairy, crystal packin', tree huggin', hooray for birds, rah rah, petulie oil smellin' individual, puffin' out "love everybody" paragraphs from a rustic cabin with a hot tub high in the Sierras. Either that or a chain smokin', whiskey shot drinkin' social degenerate, spewing out pages of pain, machine gun style, from a Brooklyn basement flat in a building so old that they imagine suffering still oozing out of the bricks.

Don't get me wrong, my guys still write about love and suffering but mostly, in the end, they write to save their lives. Writing is the last stop on the train right before complete madness. It's what saved my life while I was inside, convicted of felony murder at seventeen, after the police shot and killed my best friend, at the end of a foot pursuit at three o' clock in the morning through downtown back alley ways and fire escapes.

Neither one of us escaped that night and if it hadn't been for writing, I would have died too. I discovered that with writing, for the first time, I could get my life out on paper, right there in front of me, with both hands, instead of that endless chaotic tape that ran at full roar inside my head.

Prison writers write just to get the noise level down. Just to get the mind to let up, even if only for a few minutes. Most of the time, and especially at night, the exact same tragic mental tapes start runnin' around inside the head, comin' up with thousands of "what ifs" and "if I only could have, would have" messages. The same scenes play over and over, sometimes all through the night, until gratefully the dawn brings the mind numbing tedium of daily prison life. That's why nearly everybody in prison loves a good killin' or anything out of the routine, cons and cops alike.

Some of the other reasons creative writing fits so well in prison are the obvious. They got plenty of things to write about and plenty of time to do it, especially when the prison goes on lock-down status. That means they stay in their cells 24 hours a day, except ten minutes every other day to shower, one at a time. Most of the stuff they write about is obvious too. Some of the big themes are hatred, I got screwed by the courts and my old lady is sleeping with my ex-crime partner who got

paroled a few years ago after I took the whole rap and got life. Most of them are guilty and for some, it's a good thing that they will probably never be let out of prison, but they can all still write.

There are exceptions. Tragically more and more of them are coming in as a result of the past decade of tough on crime sentencing. I've had a student for the past five years who got a life sentence out of California's three strikes law for illegally using his sister's credit card. He's only 28 years old. Another who took a weapons possession charge from a gun used in a multiple homicide. The weapon was found under the front seat of a car that had been stopped by the police in South Central Los Angeles, that he and four other young Hispanics were riding in. He was in the back seat. He decided to plead guilty to the weapons charge a few weeks later after one of his supposed co-defendants, blew up his mother's green Buick Skylark in her driveway while she slept upstairs. He too is 28 years old and will die in prison.

After a guy has been in my class for a few years and he has written all the rage out, sometimes his writing begins to shift. It's these guys that I spend the most of my time with. I can spot it when it starts to creep out from around the ends of their sentences. They start exploring. They want to find out if there is anything that they can salvage from what's left of their life. It's starting to dawn on them that they will most likely never get out. All the appeals have been denied and the visits have dwindled down to just mom, when she can make it. She's getting old and he knows that she is going to die too someday. When she does die, by now the guy has been in for twenty to thirty years and he can't find anything to get him up out of bed for awhile. If he keeps getting up everyday and just writing, it can get real honest, painful and sometimes even magical.

I don't teach, I never really have. I encourage. I invite him to look at the big questions, the ones most people never get around to. Like, is there anything bigger than me that I don't know about that will somehow make this all seem worthwhile? Is there any real point to all of this craziness and suffering? By now it seems everything is gone, everything. Is there anything left after that? Most people try peddling God to a person who has gotten to this kind of emptiness. I don't. It just doesn't seem to work in prison when a man gets to that point. It doesn't really work out here either, it's just that we got more distractions to throw in on top of it to sweeten the deal.

I have watched men literally crumble apart word by word. I did it too. The pages end up in fragments until there's nothing left on them at all. And there's nowhere left to run. And if he stays there and keeps bringing me blank pages, if that's all he can do, sometimes, something quite miraculous starts bouncing off the blank pages and around inside the man himself.

Once, in the evening after the place had started to settle down and everyone was locked in their cells, I sat on the concrete floor of the second tier outside of one of my student's cell. I sat down and leaned against the wall. He sat down and leaned against the wall inside and there were no words left between us. He had been writing for years and there was just nothing left that he could say. After a while as we sat there in silence he slipped a blank piece of paper out from under the door. I stared at it for a while and not long after I slipped another blank piece of paper back under the door to him. We sat there for a long time with our backs leaning against each other separated by those six inches of concrete. After a while I imagined I couldn't feel the wall anymore, like it just wasn't there and that I could feel his back against mine, breathing in and out and that he could feel mine. I don't know how long we sat there like that. What I do know is that something sweet shifted, for

both of us. We sat there quietly, surrounded by the din of caged human animals bouncin' off the walls and slowly we drifted into another world where words just don't exist.

It's a long way between here and there and sometimes those last six inches can take a lifetime, if it ever happens at all. But it can happen. I've been through it and I've watched other men go through it too, on both sides of the wall. And I can't even say what "it" is cause words don't work in that place. It reminds me of those monks I've heard about who lock themselves away for years in an isolated monastery somewhere waiting for the words to stop, waiting to come to the ends of themselves. Waiting for something bigger to step in and take over at the very moment one thinks all is lost and that the only thing left is insanity or death. And when it does happen words like "God" and "Love" just aren't big enough. The Dagara people, an indigenous tribe from West Africa, has a word that comes close to describing it, or as close as I've ever heard. The word is "Yeilbongoura". It literally translates into, "the thing that knowledge can't eat". That works for me.

Try teaching that. On second thought, don't bother, just encourage and ride it out if you can, till the end beginning.