

Susan Josephs
CM Writing Group
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Balancing Within

In a dingy, forlorn, San Bernardino juvenile detention classroom, twenty youths sit behind grey, cold, metal desks, with armed-guards stationed just outside the door. I place a brightly colored book in front of each incarcerated teen. It's my first time in a prison school.

Learn to stand firmly on a moving center.

My inner-stance is wobbly.

As a guest teacher, I'd traveled across country to work with these confined minors.

Not wanting to insult them, "If you'd rather not watch me read the story, you can read your own copies," I offer.

Four-year old looks of vulnerable wonder belie each of their 17 year-old faces. I doubt anyone has ever read-aloud to them.

Neem the Half Boy is an illustrated children's book about a boy born half who decides to become whole. Neem asks his parents how to do so. They don't know. He must, using his own inner sage, figure it out. He succeeds.

We discuss Neem. This beautiful tale stimulates analogical thinking.

"How old do you think Neem is? Why do you say that?"

“ What prompts his decision to become whole?”

“Why can’t Neem’s parents tell him how to do it?”

“ Have you ever felt that you were only half of yourself?”

Before acknowledging responses, I pause for ten seconds after each question. This “Wait Time” strategy insures deeper probing and an opportunity for the slower reflectors to join in.

Silence, and the passing of time, not unfamiliar to these young men, settles in.

I have nowhere better to be.

Neither do they.

Then, a writing prompt - “In what way do you feel like only half of yourself? What would it take to feel whole?”

The calmness of inward reflection and authentic writing pervades the classroom.

In this forced seclusion I offer the luxury of self-focus and strengthening resolve to change.

“Would anyone like to share his story?” I can’t know their names, their crimes, or touch them.

A few teenagers hesitantly read their essays. For these machismo boys, this is a courageous act.

One young man shyly asks his teacher to read his.

“I left my parents house because I couldn’t take their drugs and drinking and fighting anymore. It was chaos. I went to live with my grandmother. They didn’t even come and look for me. I thought it was the right decision. Now, I’ve ended up here. I don’t know if I did the right thing? “

My heart is heavy. Why can’t I offer a reassuring hug? Behind my glasses tears sting my eyes.

My internal ground is whirling.

Returning home, I think about these kids. The teacher-librarian, whose classroom I’d visited, calls.

“Guess what just happened? The student whose essay I read yesterday came in to class and timidly offered me the notebooks of poetry he’s been writing for years. They’re beautiful. I’m the first person he’s ever shared these with.”

The tears that merely trickled the day before now teem down my cheeks.

Learn to stand firmly on a moving center, echoes in my reverie.