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**Finding Our Voices by Sharing our Stories: A Transformative Curriculum in A Homeless Shelter**

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**Important Note:**

This is a report is a working document describing an ongoing project characterized by ongoing learning! Every classroom experience offers us new insights and awarenesses about story. If you are interested in using this “model” of teaching we invite you to contact us so we might share our up-to-date experiences as we are continuing to use healing story at the Women’s Empowerment Program and in a variety of other settings. Here’s to the power of story!

*“Remember only this one thing,” said Badger. “The stories people tell have a way of taking care of them. If stories come to you, care for them. And learn to give them away where they are needed. Sometimes a person needs a story more than food to stay alive. That is why we put these stories in each other’s memory. This is how people care for themselves.” Crow and Weasel by Barry Lopez*

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## **Introduction to the Project**

The purpose of this project was to develop and document an integrated storytelling program with homeless women at the Maryhouse Women's Empowerment Program.

### ***Maryhouse Women's Empowerment Program***

Maryhouse Women's Empowerment Program provides practical skill-building sessions as well as transformational arts-based activities to homeless and impoverished women in Sacramento. The program is funded entirely by private donations and grants has now graduated over 200 women with a distinctive 80% job and housing attainment rate. Joan Stockbridge and Gail Catlin have volunteered in the program since 2000, focusing in the areas of storytelling and journaling respectively. Their work became partnered after the first year, and this grant project was designed specifically to strengthen that partnership and document the work with the hope that the curriculum would become transferable and usable elsewhere.

It is important to note that the story program is contained within a larger program. The story program is a highly valued and effective component within a larger framework that also includes such courses as anger management, interview skills, job mentoring, group sessions facilitated by a social worker, and parenting skills.

### ***The Story Curriculum***

The Women's Empowerment Program works as a closed group that meets for eight weeks and then graduates, allowing a new group to form. We proposed to work with 3 different groups over their 8 week sessions, keeping process notes and other documentation, in order to develop curriculum materials that could be transferable. Funds were requested for supplies for documentation and art materials. Specifically, the project goals were:

- To develop a conscious "through line" of story over the eight week course, developing a curriculum of specific modules that build toward a reframed, productive narrative or "story of self" for the graduates
- Document the process and create a transferable model
- Provide each woman the opportunity to tell her story publicly, at graduation, and also, as appropriate, at large public forums.

Since the funding of this report, Joan and Gail have actually completed 6 cycles of teaching, keeping process notes and documentation. Additionally, they interviewed the program director, case worker and selected graduates regarding the results of the program.

### ***Discovering Our Voices:***

#### ***An Overview of The Developmental Theory Underlying the Curriculum***

This program is based on personal experience of healing story, as well as literature and research regarding the recovering of “voice” in women’s development. Specifically, Belenky et. al (*Women’s Way of Knowing*, 1994), building on the formative work of Carol Gilligan (*In a Different Voice*, 19\_\_\_) have identified women’s developmental patterns with an eye to the evolution of voice as an indicator of women’s understanding that they are creators of and participants in their own lives. This issue is central to the Women’s Empowerment Program, and foundational in women’s consciousness studies. Specifically, Belenky et. al. identified the following epistemological frames for women that help us understand in many cases the homeless women at Women’s Empowerment:

*Silent Knowers:* Women who respond to the “circumstances of life” with no authority over their plans or responses. The locus of authority is outside the woman, and she is generally perplexed with “how things happen.” This locates her as victim to her life with little understanding of how to change her circumstances

*Receiver Knowers:* These women are able to duplicate knowledge that is given to them from an outside source, usually a teacher and/or spouse. They give authority to the knowledge giver and depend upon that person to direct their lives, although they can take action with guidance and assistance. Often a woman in this stage will become dependent on a church, parent or spouse and create herself in the reflection of that authority.

*Subjective Knowers:* These women have usually experienced a trauma or break from their outside authority figure (divorce, abandonment, domestic violence) and have decided that they are never going to trust another again, and trust their inner feelings as the knowledge source. The good news is that these women have experienced a shift in authority to themselves, but this knowledge is emotional and untrained and can lead to impulsive decisions.

*Connected Knowers:* These women have begun to connect their subjective sense of self and their growing sense of “agency” with grounded knowledge, either academic, experiential, or professional. They create a worldview and behavior pattern that is tested against both theory and experience and is therefore more reliable.

*Constructed Knowers:* These women become creative, resourceful, and generative, by building upon their connected knowing and then creating new theories of life and action, understanding that they can create realities and worlds from their own ideas, with the ability to follow through and manifest results.

Belenky et. al. sought to isolate the factor(s) that contributed to these epistemic and developmental shifts in women’s decision making and intellectual maturity. Contrary to what was expected, socioeconomic factors were not central. Instead, the ability to participate in discourse was the factor that most determined a woman’s ability to move to more mature frames of thinking and acting. Discourse includes discussion, reflection, productive argument and rebuttal and conversation. Additionally, the conditions of this discourse were identified as a “connected classroom,” an environment that supported questioning, speculation, testing of theories, supportive teaching and co-learning between teacher and student.

The collaborators developed a story curriculum based on this model of women's development. We sought to use journaling, traditional story, biography and autobiography to engage women in an accessible discourse about life and meaning-making. It also was intended to assist the women to reflect on their lives and their stories about their lives, then to develop new, expanded, or transformed stories, all the while discussing the concept of to "authorship of one's life." The transformation in this curriculum is the transformation of self from story victim to story creator.

### ***The Power of Story***

In addition to developmental theory, and our own intuitive and experiential connection to story, the Story Curriculum at Women's Empowerment is based on the power of story to lead to transformation in the following areas:

*Literary:* The ability of story to shift perspective, ignite the imagination, develop critical thinking and create metaphorical understanding is well developed. Adult learning and developmental change as facilitated by literature studies and literary critique is well established.

*Cultural:* Stories carry the values of our culture as documented by anthropologic and sociologic studies. To study our cultural stories of race, family, and ancestry is to study our values, our beliefs and our expectations. Making these cultural studies visible and conscious can often liberate values that are both positive and negative for analysis and choice.

*Biological/Neurological:* The new neuroscience research is increasingly referencing the power of story to create imaginative connections between synapses of the brain. The understanding of "story trance" and beta brain waves is already established, indicating the suspension of judgment while listening to a story, which releases the story listener from preconceptions and restraints in thinking. Story is an open neurological space and can bypass many negative patterns of thought

*Psychological:* Narrative therapy has replaced family systems therapy in many locales as the focus of psychotherapy. Narrative therapy looks at the positive or negative meaning systems an individual has created around life events—meaning that can either liberate or restrict possibilities. Working with an individual's own narrative by identifying story elements and then re-imagining the story with different outcomes is a technique often used in narrative therapy, and one we applied at the Women's Empowerment Program.

*Adult Learning:* Increasingly, adult learning theory is discussing the power of story as a field for "contextual thinking" in creating meaning systems that are reliable and justifiable to the learner.

### **Curriculum Overview: Four Types of Story for Empowerment**

During each 8-week session, we met with the group 4-6 times to offer the story program. The goal of the story program was to allow the group members to:

- reflect on their own life story through the accessible lens of other's stories, including folktale, myth, personal story, and biography

- engage in an "action/reflection learning cycle" by providing the stimulus of a story followed by a variety of responses including personal storytelling, making meaning in partnership/collaboration, sharing group meaning and journaling for permanence

- develop a felt understanding of key themes, such as action/reflection, self as author and authority, the difference between self and circumstance, emergence of self and voice, agency and action, and expanded sense of possibility through openness to the end of the story.

We found that following a specific progression over the course of the 8 weeks was helpful. While many ways of working with story were interwoven, it was helpful to focus on one type of story per session. We found the following progression effective:

- Observe story in our own lives (journaling)

- Retrieve archetypal stories as a lens for personal understanding (folklore)

- Begin to understand why story is powerful and woven into us (history/biography)

- Begin to understand how story works in developing meaning, understanding, possibility (folklore/personal storytelling)

- Begin to choose stories and open up possibility (personal storytelling, with focus on "aha" moments)

The general structure of each session was:

- Introduction/meditation on words signifying class theme

- Story

- Group reflection on story

- Dyad work, sharing stories

- Activity, creating metaphor/manifestation of story

- Journaling

## **Curriculum Components: Sample Session Outlines**

### **Session 1 - Journaling - “Write and Find Out Who You Are”**

#### **Objectives:**

- To introduce the power of journaling for self discovery and reflection
- To share how journaling has been special for women, providing place for their voice
- To provide a safe place for journaling to support subsequent curriculum
- To introduce the concepts of
  - Authoring self and authority
  - Herstory vs. history

#### **Process:**

**Story Summary:** Gail tells her personal story and introduces the journal as opener. This is a story of Gail’s dealing with mental illness in her family of origin and unconsciously compensating through workaholism and over achievement. At midlife, Gail experienced a breakdown/breakthrough using her journal to remember her past, retrieve her story, put together elements of her authentic self and deal with her “journey toward wholeness.”

**Discussion:** A general discussion in response to this story is facilitated. Women are asked to identify parts of the story that they can identify with and relate to. Also women are asked to share their own experiences of journaling-for-meaning. They are also asked to share their fears of journaling/diaries including fear of writing, fear of discovery, etc. Stories of women who have journaled are shared, including Anne Frank, May Sarton, Zlata Filipovic, with a discussion of how women’s journals are often our most frequent and accessible sources for the truth of women’s lives....and often sources that change the way we see the world, as in Anne Frank’s case. In this section the concepts of being the “author of your own story” and “author-ity over story” are presented. The question is asked: “Do you know who or what is authoring your life today?”

**Story Summary:** A few excerpts of other journals are shared, including Gail’s grandmother’s journal from 1913, and a journal from a woman in a mental health facility that includes prayer and meditation. Gail shares other examples of journals including a watercolor journal, quotation journal and grief journal of her own to demonstrate that “there are no rules” in personal journaling and meaningfulness comes from creating a personally unique space. In this section the concepts of “herstory” rather than “history” is presented.

**Distribution of journals:** Each woman is then given a journaling pack including a journal, pens, pencils, colored pencils, glue stick, scissors for collaging, eraser, pencil sharpener, etc. A letter accompanies the pack regarding Gail’s own journal that “saved her life.”

**Activity:** The women are then asked to write their first journal entry: Write a letter to yourself about your hopes for this program. Women who want to share their letters are then able to read them aloud. Otherwise the letter stays confidential

**Closing:** Gail closes the session with a reading of the poem “The Journey” by Mary Oliver and distributes “If....Questions for Journaling.

## **Session 2 – Folklore**

### **Traditional Stories and Myths**

**We use myth and folklore frequently as the basis for sessions at the Women’s Empowerment Program. Hearing and discussing myths and folktales creates a safe and respectful way for the women to access and process their own experiences and come to new understandings. The art of using folklore as a catalyst for healing lies in creating processes that allow group members to internalize the story, individually connect with the healing imagery/theme/dynamic of the story, and apply it consciously to their own lives.**

**The following outlines are not fixed and definite. They are an approximation and synthesis of our best experiences with the stories. We drew up the outlines as part of the planning process, helping us clarify the goals for each session and create activities to work towards those goals. However, in any given session, we have to be flexible, often adapting and changing our activities in response to the group. We offer the outlines as flexible tools, meant to be adapted to each unique situation. Some outlines have more activities than can be used in a single session; our goal was to give you options to choose from. Written activities can often be adapted as oral activities, and vice versa.**

**Finally, the form of these outlines was borrowed from Alida Gersie. Her books, particularly *Storymaking in Bereavement: Dragons Fight In the Meadow*, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2000 and *Earthtales: Storytelling In Times of Change*, Merlin Press 1992, have been instrumental in shaping our understanding of healing story and how to use story in therapeutic groups.**

## **THE STOLEN CHILD**

**Session focus: loss and recovery**

**Length: 120 minutes**

**Story summary:** A young mother falls off a cliff and goes unconscious. Her child is stolen by the fairies. Mother is rescued by fishermen, returns to consciousness, and embarks on journey to find child. Along the way she is helped by the gypsies, makes gifts to barter for child, enters the dark kingdom, and wins her child back.

**Story sources:** The Treasure Chest at [healingstory.org](http://healingstory.org); *Fearless Girls, Wise Women, and Beloved Sisters*, Kathleen Ragan, WW Norton, 1998; *The Moon in the Well, Wisdom Tales to Transform Your Life, Family, and Community*, Erica Helm Meade, Open Court, 2001

**Check in:** Check in with group re mood, status, issues, and insights since last session.

**Share:** Associations with the word “stolen.”

**Draw:** On the Way Home.... Fold a paper in 6 squares. In first square, draw an image of a some object or animal, i.e. a sailboat, car, horse etc.. In last square draw an image of garage, harbor, or barn. In the squares in between, draw images of what happens to it on its journey home.

**Share:** Show drawings to group.

**Tell:** Tell the story of *The Stolen Child*.

**Share:** Reactions to the story. How does she lose her child? How does she feel when she wakes up? What does she draw upon to keep going?

**Write:** Write a letter to the young mother, telling her something important. Don't sign your name unless you want to. Write legibly because the facilitator will read them out to the group.

**Place:** Put the letters in the middle of the room.

**Break**

**Read:** Facilitator reads the letters out loud.

**Response Task:** Turn over the sheet of paper on which you drew the boat etc. While you are listening to the letters written by group members, note down 1 image or 1 phrase or 1 sentence from each letter. After the letters are all read, make a poem from the words you have jotted down.

**Share:** Read your poem to the group.

**Connect:** Ponder over the poems, the story, and everything that has happened in the group, making connections to your own life.

**Share:** Share some of these reflections with the group.

**Select:** One thought/feeling/idea which you especially want to remember from this session.

**Share:** The thought/feeling/idea with the rest of the group.

## **VASILISA THE BEAUTIFUL**

**Session focus: Discovering our sources of wisdom and sharing personal stories as gifts**

**Time: 120 minutes (including break)**

**Story Summary: Girl receives a doll from her mother as mother lies dying. She keeps doll in her pocket as it is a source of wisdom and guidance. Daughter is mistreated by stepmother and sent to fetch fire from the Baba Yaga. Doll aids her in completing tasks set by Baba Yaga, who gives her fire.**

**Story sources: This classic Russian tale can be found in many sources, including <http://www.sunbirds.com/lacquer/readings/1160>**

**Check in: Check in with group re mood, status, issues, and insights since last session.**

**Discuss: Talk about empowerment. What makes us strong? Where do we get wisdom from?**

**Tell: Vasilisa the Beautiful**

**Share: general reactions to the story.**

**Visualization: Remember a situation which was hard for you, a situation in which you felt tested. What quality would have helped you in that situation?**

**Journal: write for a few minutes about that situation and the quality that would have helped you.**

**Visualization: Give an example of visualizing a quality, e.g. courage. Group shuts eyes and does a visualization. Imagine that quality. Is it fast, slow? Hard, soft? Bright, shadowy? Really think about that quality. If it were an animal, what would it be? If it were a landscape what would it be? Go back in your mind to that situation you journalled about. If you had that quality, how would it have been different?**

**Make: Pocket Rocks. Decorate a river rock with Sharpie pen, and write an empowering word, perhaps the name of the quality that would help you most in your life now.**

### **BREAK**

**Discuss: Sharing personal stories. Stories are gifts, like the gift Vasilisa received from her mother. Anecdotal kitchen table type stories.**

**Brainstorm: Give some examples of types of personal stories, e.g; someone who was a hero to me; an animal I loved; a special place to hideaway or getaway; a family car; a family trip. Then let group brainstorm possible topics for a personal anecdote. Write down topics on flip chart.**

**Introduce: Interview, Reflect, Share model.**

**Share: Get in pairs: One person starts talking about a memory. Listener asks prompting questions if teller is stuck. Otherwise let teller reminisce....After a set time, the listener says what he/she liked about the story, any questions he/she might have, what the highlights were, how it made the listener feel. After hearing this feedback, the teller quickly retells the memory as an anecdote.**

**Switch roles.**

**Share: Return to large group and everyone shares their story.**

**Share: One thought, insight, or resolution that comes out of the session.**

## AMATERASU AND SUSANOWO

Session focus: Overcoming fear and coming out of hiding

Time: 120 minutes

**Story summary:** The angry storm god Susanowo is sent to the Underworld by the Father God. Susanowo stops to visit his sister, the Sun Goddess Amaterasu. They fight. He becomes enraged, terrifying her, ultimately sending her into hiding. Once Amaterasu is hidden in a cave, light leaves the world. Other gods and goddesses cajole her out of hiding. When she steps out of the cave, she sees her reflection in a mirror and recognizes her beauty and promises not to withdraw her light from the world again. Susanowo is banished, but on Earth he uses his power rightfully, to save a girl from a monster, and finds peace and reconciles with Amaterasu when he sends her a sword of healing. Note: Although it is tempting for time's sake, to end the story with Amaterasu coming out of hiding, it seems vital to the group to know of Susanowo's fate, and his ultimate redemption is extremely important.

**Story sources:** Although there are many sources for the Amaterasu part of the story, the Susanowo part is not as widely available. An awkward but extended version is online at [http://www.ishwar.com/shinto/holy\\_kojiki/part\\_03.html](http://www.ishwar.com/shinto/holy_kojiki/part_03.html).

**Check in:** Check in with group re mood, status, issues, and insights since last session.

**Word association:** dark, hide, see, hear, lost, found

**Discuss:** Fear and depression. What kinds of things make us go into hiding?

**Tell:** Amaterasu and Susanowo

**Discuss:** What moments in story stood out for you? Anything you particularly liked or disliked? What was happening inside Amaterasu when she fled from the palace?

**Write:** Ask group to respond to the following stem lines and write a collective poem on a flip chart or white board.

I went into hiding when....

Sitting in the dark, I felt....

I knew I could come out when....

Stepping out, I see....

**Title:** Read the poem out loud, carefully and with feeling. Ask the group to offer suggestions for a title.

**Make:** Hand out construction paper cut into the shape of a mirror. Ask group members to write appreciations on mirror for the person to their left. Words or phrases about what they see in her that is beautiful, good, strong etc. Read appreciations and give the mirror to the person.

**Journal:** Write a note to Amaterasu while she is in the cave, giving her encouragement OR write about a time you have gone into hiding OR write about something you keep hidden.

**Share:** Group members can share from journal, if desired.

**Share:** Pick one insight, question, or new resolution that has come to you during this session and share with the whole group.

## **THE WOUNDED SAMURAI**

**Session focus: forgiveness and release**

**Time: 60 minutes**

**Story summary: Great warrior is shot with an arrow, which lodges in his breast. Vows he will not pull the arrow out, but will find the man who shot him, and make that man pull it out. While the samurai searches, the wound gets infected and the samurai dies. Who is responsible for the samurai's death: the one who shot the arrow or the one who refused to pull it out?**

**Story sources: I don't have a source for this Zen story, as I've only heard it orally, but the bones are as described above.**

**Check in: Check in with group re mood, status, issues and insights since last session.**

**Discuss: What does it mean to "keep carrying things?" Is there a difference between letting go and forgiving? Forgiving selves and forgiving others?**

**Tell: The Wounded Samurai**

**Discuss: Reactions to story.**

**Reflect: Give group members construction paper cut in shape of arrows. Ask them to go to separate places in the room. Will have about 10 minutes to write down or draw images of the "arrows that you carry". Write down things that have hurt you, which you are still carrying. Flip the paper over, and on other side, write down the "arrows that you have shot": things that you have done that you regret doing. We will not be sharing these; they are private, but we will be doing a healing circle, a ceremony of forgiveness and release during which you can release your painful memories**

**Ring bell: People return to large circle, now set up as a healing circle.**

**Describe: Explain the healing circle and the tearing up of arrows, consciously releasing old hurts in order to cleanse and make a new beginning.**

**Give direction for healing circle: "Go up one at a time, whenever you are ready and tear up arrow, putting the torn pieces into amphora. Those staying seated, give your attention and support to the one making this important journey of release and new beginning. It can be helpful if you say out loud what you are doing, stating your clear intentions, for example: *This is over with now. I am pulling out the arrows. I am making a new beginning.* After you are finished tearing up the arrow, walk over to new ground. (a scarf or cloth on the floor) Wash hands in the big bowl of warm water. Towel off and return to seat.**

**Carry out: Carry out the healing circle.**

**(After everyone has torn up their arrows, taking the torn pieces outside and burning them can be very effective. Sometimes that is not possible; in which case the facilitator should take the torn pieces away at the close of the session.)**

**Close circle. Read a poem or sing, whatever is appropriate to group. Choral speaking of a poem can be effective too, where the leader says a line, then group repeats it.**

**Journal: Take out journal and write down any insights, intentions, or affirmations you want to remember.**

**Close: go a round circle and share 1 insight, experience or intention that came to you during this session.**

**LITTLE BURNT FACE (aka Strong Wind the Mystic Warrior)**

**Session focus: Healing wounds through truth-telling**

**Time: 90 minutes**

**Story summary: Girl with unaware father is scarred and tormented by her sisters. Girl seeks magic husband and wins him, because she alone of the many suitors tells the truth. Beautiful scene of transformation when Strong Wind's sister washes away her scars.**

**Story sources: *Ready-To-Tell Tales*, Holt and Mooney, August House, 1994; *The Moon in the Well, Wisdom Tales to Transform Your Life, Family, and Community*, Erica Helm Meade, Open Court, 2001**

**Check in: check in with group re status, mood, issues, insights since last session.**

**Share: Think about a small scar and share the story of how you got it. This can be a small simple anecdote. This can be done in triads, if the group is large, or in the whole group, time depending.**

**Tell: Little Burnt Face**

**Discuss: General reactions to the story, including moments that stood out. Anything you particularly liked or disliked. Lies, truths, and half-truths in the story.**

**Retell: Ask the group to retell parts of the story from different points of view, including the sisters', the father's, the aspens', Strong Wind's sister's, and Strong Wind's.**

**Discuss: How does the story change when it's told from different points of view? What does truth mean in the midst of changing perspectives?**

**Break**

**Collage: Draw a line down the middle of a large sheet of construction paper. On one side of the paper, make a collage of your 'wounded self.' On the other side, make an image of your 'healed self.' Use images torn from magazines, drawings, words, anything that helps express your vision.**

**Journal: Write a conversation between your healed self and your wounded self. What does each want to tell the other?**

**Share: In the large group, share observations and insights, including showing the collage, if desired.**

## Session 3 –Biography/ Women of History

### Objectives:

- to share a powerful story of a woman of history that started in hardship and ended in victory
- to draw conclusions about the biographies of women of history of overcoming hardships and challenges in order to change the world
- to consider how women in states of hardship knew they were different, better more powerful than their circumstances dictated (i.e., slavery)
- to consider the difference between circumstances of homeless and the self empowered.
- to introduce the concept of sheroes rather than heroes
- to identify moments when we have been sheroes
- to begin to prepare a readiness to write one's biography for graduation

### Process:

**Introduction:** The Women of History poster gallery is hung throughout the classroom at Women's Empowerment. With the support of the WE staff, one biography is read each morning during the eight week session. This biography session is intended to focus on these biographies and learn from them.

**Word meditation:** The women are asked to brainstorm "what are the characteristics of heroes". This discussion can encompass traditional "male" attributes but most often goes in the direction of characteristics of caring, compassion, honesty, etc. We begin to consider how heroism is taught in schools and often includes men's stories, but often excludes women's biographies and stories. Then we begin to look at women as heroes. The word "shero" is then introduced.

**Story:** The biography of Maya Angelou is told in story format, focusing on her early life up to age 15. Maya Angelou is introduced as Marguerite Johnson, her given name, in order not to initially reveal the name of this famous woman. Her biography of parental divorce, separation from family, rape, murder, muteness and fear resonates with many of the women's history. When Maya regains her voice because of her love of poetry, the theme of "reclaiming voice" is both literal and figurative. Her life after 15 is summarized.

**Discussion:** The women are asked to reflect on this story and talk about what they noticed. Other biographies on the wall are summarized and the women are asked to identify the consistent themes in these biographies. Invariably, students notice that the women overcame great challenges and obstacles. We identify that "women's tears have changed the world" and that women have most often moved from their personal circumstances to political or artistic power. Then the concept of "circumstance" versus "self" is introduced with a question such as "How did Sojourner Truth know she was free?" This question then moves us into a comparison of how the world sees us as homeless women, rather than how we see ourselves. A student usually observes that it is difficult not to believe that the circumstance of homelessness IS self.

**Activity:** We then break into dyads and each student tells a story of when she was a "shero". This allows her to connect with the part of her story/journey where her "self" was most evident. Her story partner then titles her story using her Name first and then her action and then the positive result, e.g., "Mary uses her power to save a life." These titles are then shared with group, the Shero pages are posted on the board and we acknowledge what women of power we have in the room and how important our lives have been to others and the world.

**Journaling:** The women can place their Shero page in their journal, or write this story or title in their journal.

**Closing:** The session is closed by the reading of “Still I Rise” by Maya Angelou (in Artifacts and Appendices) and the distribution of a book of women’s empowering quotations, *The Clay Pot*, compiled by Gail Catlin.  
**On occasion we sing:**

Let my little light shine, shine shine

Let my little light shine,

oh my Lord

There’s may be some one down in the valley  
Tryin’ to get home

## **Session 4- Personal Stories of Transformation/Ah Ha Moments**

### **Personal Storytelling**

While virtually every story session at the Women's Empowerment Program contains some exercises or opportunities for sharing personal stories, we usually focus our final session on discovering, shaping and sharing stories of personal transformation.

#### **Objectives:**

**Capture personal stories of transformation during program**

**Take group through a process of discovering, shaping, and sharing personal stories of transformation.**

**Help group with closure and preparation for continuing their recovery without the group.**

**Check-in with group, including insights or obstacles since last session.**

**Play Zoom-Zork, as context-setting. i.e. can take Women's Empowerment with us by carrying capacities of flexibility, alertness, responsiveness, making choices, and being able to laugh at self.**

**To play Zoom Zork, group stands or sits in a circle. Leader says Zoom, simultaneously clapping and looking to the right. Person who receives the "Zoom" sends it on by looking right and clapping. Each person in turn, sends Zoom around the circle. When it gets back to leader, leader turns left, claps, and says Zork. Person who receives Zork sends it left. After it gets back to leader, the leader announces that this time around, the recipient can choose to either Zoom or Zork, in other words, clap, look, and send the energy either right or left. This seems like a simple game, but it can be challenging and seems universally popular. Additional variants can include Zap (sending the energy directly across the circle) or Zip ( looking one direction but clapping the opposite, in which case the energy goes the direction of the look).**

**Tell Heaven-Hell Samurai story.**

**Story summary: Samurai goes to find monk. Demands to know what the difference between heaven and hell is. Monk teases him. Enraged, samurai raises sword to kill monk. "That is hell," monk says. Samurai recognizes what he was about to do, lowers sword, bows. "That is heaven."**

**Story sources: Spinning Tales, Weaving Hope, Stories, Storytelling and Activities for Peace, Justice, and the Environment, Brody et al, New Society Publishers, 2002**

**Discuss: General reactions to the story. How did the samurai change? What was his "aha" moment?**

**Demonstrate: Leader tells short (2 minute) personal story of an "aha" moment, a moment of insight or change. Story should focus on a single moment, including sensory detail. Does not have to be monumental insight, could be quite modest.**

**Discuss: Was story interesting? Moving? Value of precision, detail, avoiding abstraction. Draw attention to the value of focusing on a single moment.**

**Brainstorm: Group brainstorms about "aha" moments that have occurred for them personally during the program. Goal is to generate a lot of ideas in the room, refresh memories, also to help group see the progress that has been made collectively and individually.**

**Share: Get in pairs. Tell personal story of aha moment. After the teller finishes, the listener responds appreciatively, saying what struck him/her about the story, what he/she liked. Listener could also ask appreciative questions to help the teller flesh out the story or deepen it on the next telling. Switch roles.**

**Share: Get back in large group and everyone share their "aha" story.**

**Response task: After each story, the group gives it a title, one that the teller approves of. All the titles are written on whiteboard or a flip chart and become a kind of collective poem.**

**Close: Read all the titles as a collective poem.**

## Evaluation Interviews with Staff and Graduates

*(Please note: Full evaluation interview transcription available. Contact Joan at [joanstockbridge@gmail.com](mailto:joanstockbridge@gmail.com) if you want a copy.)*

Joan and Gail held interviews with Lisa Culp, Erie Shockey and three of the Women's Empowerment graduates to determine the impact of the story curriculum. The following are meaningful conclusions/excerpts from those interviews:

General: During the interview themes about the general transformative impact of the full 8 week curriculum emerged (i.e., not just the story curriculum). These themes were:

- The choices offered in the program empowered the women. The ability to choose and act as agent was very empowering.
- There was an "arc of transformation" that evolved over the length of the program, not just in an instance.
- The opportunity to be in a circle of women who witnessed each woman and helped reflect her qualities was transformative.
- Being in a group allowed the women to both give AND receive.
- Transformation consistently occurred when a woman began to accept that "she mattered."
- When the women experienced being treated with respect by teachers, mentors and other students, she felt seen and connected and this had a strong positive effect on her. Feeling worthy was a key theme of transformation.
- The program helped women feel "more comfortable inside," more confident.
- The program created a new culture and a new vision, within which the woman could become something different.

Related to the story curriculum, the following evaluative themes emerged:

### **Journaling:**

- A place to work things through, process emotions, objectify issues and deal with them
- Freedom and no rules in Journaling allowed ability to express self and take risks
- A place to release things held inside
- Tool for caseworker for processing or for hard times
- Journal was a place to "collect the pieces of myself"
- Consistent theme and reflections in morning sharing

-Ripple effect with families and helping children through problems

### **Biography**

- Making connections between biographies and own life and challenges
- A goal to be on the wall with the other biographies
- Put together a screen saver to remind me of the women's stories

### **Folktale**

- “Took me to a different, beautiful place—a different world”
- Hearing stories I missed in childhood and didn't have safe story space
- “Reminders in the story helped me inside.”
- Story was trigger for creativity
- Story was a springboard for case worker—looking at a character or incident
- Learned there are “lots of different ways to tell a story”
- Journey stories particularly great
- Could work through story with students that were more guarded

### **Group Poem**

- Ability to be a poet in the safety of the group

One respondent put it succinctly:

*“Story brings....*

*The possibility of change*

*The possibility of creativity*

*The ability to overcome an obstacle*

*The nurturing piece”*

## Observations by Collaborators

After each session that Joan and Gail taught together, they would reflect together about the process and what they were learning. These session meetings, combined with end-of-project reflection sessions have surfaced the following observations:

- 1) The Frozen to Unfrozen Story – We talked at length about “what are we really doing” in this program. Eventually we began to understand that the curriculum was supporting the women in viewing their stories in a more flexible way. Ultimately, as they became acquainted with how many stories were possible and the multitudes of interpretations of story, they would begin to understand that their story was also not brittle and fixed. We experienced this shift in their perspective as the move from “frozen story to unfrozen story.” We agreed that we did not have a goal of a specific story that a woman needs to embrace to be liberated into empowerment, but, instead that this change of perspective -- from fixed to unfixed, frozen to unfrozen, victim to creator -- was the empowerment shift itself. Moving towards resilience, flexibility and an ability to choose among multiple narratives and outcomes was the empowering moment.
- 2) A Safe Place – It has become clear to us that the women’s ability and privilege to feel safe as they deliberated about their conditions and circumstances was critical to their changes and transformations. Although most women in the program were still living on the streets when the program began, they at least had a safe haven for half the day, and staff working with them to find shelter. Homeless women not in a daily program over a two month period would most likely not find support, safety, time or quiet to engage in this curriculum. The skills of living on the streets or in daily shelters are different than the skills of reflection, deliberation, personal assessment, and contemplation that were important for this program. Telling stories in a shelter is certainly a powerful and healing activity, but a full curriculum such as this would be difficult, if not impossible, if it weren’t within the context of a program with supportive staff and conditions.
- 3) Working as a Team – It was clear that working in a partnership and as a team contributed significantly to the effectiveness and support in the curriculum. Specifically, it was important to have a teammate in order to a) observe the process while teaching was taking place, b) contribute a variety of skills, c) provide a “reality check” and feedback after teaching, d) support one another in issues that might come up or emotions that might emerge.
- 4) Working with Professional Support –The homeless can be fragile and carry heavy emotional and other burdens, and in this setting, it was imperative that we worked with the support of social worker/counselor/ case worker support. The more personally-challenging components of this curriculum should be very cautiously attempted without such support. Specifically, the stories, the processes and the themes of the curriculum bring up issues and emotions that will require support to process. Also, issues arise after the story teachers have “stirred the pot” and left, and the staff need to be involved and

coordinated in order to understand what the women have experienced in order to help them process it in a productive way.

5) The Capacities of the Teachers – We were aware that certain perspectives and attitudes of our own contributed to the learning of the students. Specifically, this curriculum in this environment should not be attempted by teachers that are working through emotional issues and traumas of their own. Neither should teachers take the attitude of moral directors or “try to fix” the students. In this environment, a compassionate attitude of service without judgment and openness is most effective. We like to think of it as “hopes without expectations.” Difficult issues are bound to emerge such as rape, incest, addiction, murder, neglect , etc.

6) Words and Privilege – We are beginning to explore the distinction in experience of the women who are facile with words (writing, speaking and listening) to those that are not. While the focus of this work will always be oral stories, we are attempting to broaden our follow-up activities to include more movement and arts-based activities. We’re beginning to consider that stories can be told with pictures, visuals, etc. in such a way that won’t exclude those who are less language based. This will be an interesting inquiry.

7) Knowing What’s In the Room – It became apparent to us that it was critical that we be well coordinated with the larger program of Women’s Empowerment. We tried to be in close touch with the director and case worker at most turns in order to a) be aware of what the women were experiencing when we weren’t in class, b) knowing what themes and issues were surfacing so that we might better choose stories and activities, c) provide feedback to staff regarding how the stories and activities might have roused emotions or issues in a particular student (i.e., give them a “head’s up”) and d) hear how the stories and activities were “rippling out” in other parts of the program and with other family members, etc. It is tempting to go in, teach and leave. This would be a disservice to the students and staff because the story work lives and grows within the group even when the story teachers are gone.

8) Story Work of Therapy –We are always riding the edge between story work and therapy. Neither of us is a trained therapist or social worker; however, at Women’s Empowerment, we are working hand in hand with the staff social worker who is either in the room or a few doors away. Absent professional support, it would be irresponsible to push the edge towards therapy. We believe it is important to do healing story work, even absent professional help, but we believe that the story work in that case would focus much more on the positive and not take the exercises too deeply. For example, with professional support in a well-structured program it might be advisable at some point to tell Bluebeard or Mr. Fox and work explicitly with the issues of physical and sexual abuse that those tales evoke. Absent professional support, it would probably never be appropriate to work with those stories in that way, but instead to work with stories such as Vasilisa the Beautiful and focus on positive and esteem-building themes, such as sources of guidance, strength, and courage.

9) An Insecure Future – We are aware that it is unusual for two teachers to be able to volunteer this much time and in this intensive way. We are privileged to have this flexibility. This model, however, is in peril if we have to rely on individuals to make such a commitment. We contemplate “what will be the future of this work here and elsewhere?” Projects such as this might be able to be included in an organization’s operating budgets if results are clear. Additional grants could be pursued. But a key strategy of the future may be to train social workers and therapists already in these programs in this work or for story workers to pursue such credentials. This is worth further inquiry and problem solving.