

CLAIRE CULHANE

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In February, 1987 at the beginning of my life sentence, I met Claire Culhane in the Prisoners' Committee files at Prison for Women in Kingston, Ontario. Until then, I was lost in the nightmare of what is called prison, still in the state of grievous shock - the condition of all first time prisoners. Reading her words to past members of the Committee offered me the first relief from the despair at the banishment from my life and family ten months previously in Vancouver, B.C. I can unequivocally state that without Claire, I would not be living today. She gave me the first understanding of what I needed to do - survive. Claire gave me the courage to want to live with a life sentence.

When I wrote her, despite the hundreds of letters she receives from prisoners alone, Claire replied immediately. If she would be away from home, during her marathon visits to different prison areas visiting and assisting at parole hearings, she would have someone there to reply that she would answer as soon as she returned. This is just one area in which Claire Culhane understands completely the reality of imprisonment - how each person incarcerated waits each day for the single acknowledgement that yes, s/he is still alive, is still part of the living world found only outside the walls. Claire knows that the receipt of a letter serves this primary function.

Claire's own words speak to her profound humanitarianism:

...I neither know nor care about why anyone is in - all that matters is where their head AND heart is, and how we can work together in common cause....You have to aim high even while holding on to the reality that one can't expect to find any sanity in any insane situation, jungles being what they are.

And, to the Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women in 1990, Claire writes:

...the government will heed our advice about helping women who fall outside the white mainstream, I am writing to challenge you to extend that concern to women incarcerated in Canadian prisons. You will find all the same diversities, and in far greater need of attention than has been acknowledged in any meaningful way, to date.

I will never forget our first face-to-face meeting in the tiny visiting room at Prison for Women in June of 1987. With a smile that shone from her heart, a strong, clear voice and energy that rose with her commitment, this beautiful white-haired woman greeted me with a hug that imbued me with a strength and love that has stayed with me all of these years.

Before I was sentenced to life in prison, I knew nothing about prisons or about criminal law. Claire helped me to educate myself, and it is education which is the soil of survival. Claire is an educator par

excellence. Her scope covers all areas of social justice. In each and every letter, she would enclose a copy of a news clipping, brochure, newsletter or an excerpt from another letter describing some form of social activism. She would send information about civil disobedience and peace activism in struggles around the world, about her activities speaking on panels concerning everything from the poverty of children to capital punishment. Claire Culhane is a woman who clearly unmask the rhetoric used to disarm real action towards eliminating the cycle of violence in our society. She effectively applies a political-economic perspective to the misuse and waste of tax dollars.

August, 1993: ... money being raised for the monument (to women murdered by men) would be better spent on building and equipping community centres for young people. ... Far more urgent is the need to deflect possible future offenders into positive, constructive projects than to build monuments to their likely victims.

... If the public, the media, the government officials are really serious in their concern about violence running rampant and creating tragic victims, let them look to the breeding grounds.

Building community centres for our kids is far more urgent than building more prisons (for which there are always sufficient funds).

Claire does everything humanly possible to not only inform and inspire those of us incarcerated to understand and survive our own circumstances, but to contribute to the understanding and survival of others imprisoned in poverty, cruelty and despair outside of our walls.

Claire has done and continues to do all of this on her small pension. She recycles every piece of paper, copying and writing on any unused space, scratching over used envelopes and taping them closed, turning them inside out to use the reverse side, and carefully applying postage according to the weight of her lengthy parcels of information. How Claire Culhane has also managed to continue visiting prisons all over the country is an amazing feat of logistics and economic acumen. Claire has accomplished all of this while undergoing continual and unfathomable threats to her personal well-being, an ongoing act of extreme heroism.

In January, 1989 Claire was the only person capable of reaching through the barriers to speak directly to the Commissioner of Corrections, Ole Ingstrup. She accomplished this in time to save my life as I fasted in segregation at Prison for Women for my return to B.C. Throughout the next four years of ordeal spent locked up in the prison hospital at Matsqui Penitentiary for Men in Abbotsford, B.C., Claire visited and corresponded with me while she continued in her unabated support of all prisoners in Canada, championing particularly those physically, emotionally, intellectually, culturally or politically unable to defend themselves.

Claire Culhane challenged the authorities who denied my efforts for escorted temporary absence, wrote letters of support for my eventual

parole hearing and continued to encourage me to complete my BA (conferred while on day parole this past June 2nd at Simon Fraser University). My ability to survive imprisonment, to gain day parole and to succeed in my educational pursuits have been directly attributable to the indomitable spirit of Claire Culhane. Without the gift of her in my life, I could not have accomplished any of this.

My personal story is merely one of thousands of survivors who were graced with an angel on earth named Claire Culhane. Claire has never asked for, nor expected, even a simple word of gratitude. Her benevolence is uncharted and endless. Thousands of prisoners in Canada would gratefully provide testimonials to the genuine courage, incorruptibility and unfailing assistance that Claire has provided to them. I am merely one of the thousands honoured to do so.

Every person on this planet benefits because of the humanitarian contributions of Claire Culhane, for her rebuttals to injustices have no boundaries. Claire is a legend of accomplishment and expertise in all arenas of humanitarianism and has earned many times over this country's highest award of honour. Her courage, dignity, intelligence, exhaustive and extensive work for social justice and education, her incorruptibility and her "grace under fire" are unmatched.

Claire Culhane is a heroine of the people in a conscientiously unique time. Claire Culhane has bestowed upon all Canadians, a highly essential and vital role model for future generations. May she be honoured as we are blessed by her presence.

With Respect,
In the gentleness of Sisterhood