

The Transformative Potential of Walls to Bridges: My Journey into Becoming a Whole Self

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ABSTRACT

Our modern disjointed society facilitates the creation of fragmented identities among its citizens. Throughout our daily lives we traverse multiple and diverse settings, meeting different people with different expectations, values, and perspectives. For many years, I had a fragmented personality, only showing people certain aspects of who I am depending on the context I was in. Rather than expressing my identity as a unified whole, I shared the *mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual* aspects of myself in specific times and settings with select people depending on presumed social norms and expectations. This fragmented self-expression disrupted my identity development, leading to mental and emotional distress, as well as unhealthy relationships. My experiences of trauma, addiction, violence, and incarceration are examples of what Paulo Freire refers to as “limit situations”, which contributed to inhibiting the development of a cohesive identity. Themes of identity politics and limit situations are explored here through an evocative approach to autoethnography, which is a particularly valuable methodology for research and writing conducted by scholars with a lived experience of incarceration. While imprisoned in a Canadian federal prison, it was through my involvement with the Walls to Bridges (W2B) program that I learned how to become my whole self, merging my mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual identities into a single entity via W2B pedagogy and praxis. Becoming my whole self was an act of liberation – freedom *from* hiding parts of who I am and the freedom *to* be who I am meant to be. In this autoethnographic essay chronicling my journey with W2B from prison to the community, I integrate literature with my experiences to highlight some positive impacts and the transformative potential of Walls to Bridges.

INTRODUCTION

Our modern disjointed society facilitates the creation of fragmented identities among its citizens. Throughout our daily lives we traverse multiple and diverse settings, meeting different people with different expectations, cultures, values, and perspectives. While incarcerated in a federal prison, my

involvement with the Walls to Bridges (W2B) education program allowed me to become my whole self, merging my mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual identities into a cohesive entity. Additionally, in my view, practicing autoethnography as a form of research and writing can be a therapeutic healing process. By allowing a researcher to explore personal history and lived experience in connection with the wider sociocultural context, like feminism, autoethnography links the personal to the political, facilitating a reflexive process concerning identity formation. In this autoethnographic essay chronicling my journey with W2B from prison to the community, I connect selected scholarly references to my experiences to highlight some positive impacts and the transformative potential of the W2B program. Elsewhere, I have described my experiences in the two classes I completed inside and my involvement with the alumni collective, along with the anti-oppressive, empowering pedagogy of W2B (e.g. Fayter, 2016; Kilty et al., 2020). Here, I focus on how my engagement with W2B facilitated my journey into wholeness and confidently sharing my true self with the world.

In this essay I draw upon the evocative approach to autoethnography, which is designed to evoke emotional reactions and facilitate readers in personally connecting to the story being shared. This process involves writing that is not simply academic, but also artistic, personal, vulnerable, and has a practical, ethical, and emotional significance to human wellbeing (Bochner & Ellis, 2016). Autoethnography can facilitate explanation, understanding, and reconciliation with a fragmented identity, because this deeply personal research and writing process “interweaves different and particular aspects of the self: the personal, the political, the biographical, and the social” (Denzin, 1997, p. 200). Furthermore, Bochner and Ellis (2016, p. 81) highlight the critical potential of autoethnographic writing since “the work of autoethnographers expresses a personal and cultural urgency with a critical edge”. This process involves a level of personal vulnerability and willingness for self-reflection and personal revelation. Additionally, at its most basic level, autoethnography “is a moral, allegorical, and therapeutic project” (Denzin, 1997, p. xiv).

I begin by considering how trauma and incarceration serve as *limit-situations* (Freire, 1992), which can disrupt or negatively impact personal identity formation. Next, I discuss some literature on identity development and fragmented identities, which I illustrate with some personal examples. I then provide a brief autoethnographic vignette outlining my journey

towards becoming my whole self, facilitated by my involvement with the W2B program. Finally, I conclude with some brief reflections on how coming to terms with my experiences of trauma was liberating and allowed me to form a cohesive, holistic identity.

TRAUMA AND INCARCERATION AS LIMIT-SITUATIONS

Our personal identities are mediated by our experiences, along with how others view, treat, and speak to us. Experiencing trauma or abuse also impacts us significantly and can lead to a fragmented identity or sense of self. Trauma can impact identity formation by disrupting a person physically, emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually. Depending on how we are treated and perceived by people in our lives and wider society, a person's identity can be fragmented, isolated, disconnected, privileged, empowered, or marginalized (van der Kolk, 2014). When we are treated poorly by someone we trust and love this can lead to cognitive dissonance or the perception of contradictory information. Some survivors of trauma and violence can feel undeserving of love and respect or experience a sense of disconnection from their personal identity (or a sense of not being who they thought they were). External factors influencing identity development thus impact people internally, potentially leading to emotional or psychological turmoil. Personal struggles, shame, embarrassment, discrimination, and oppression can all lead to an ambivalent sense of self (van der Kolk, 2014).

My experiences of trauma, addiction, poverty, violence, displacement, and incarceration inhibited the development of a cohesive identity. These are examples of what Paulo Freire (1992, p. 193) refers to as "limit situations". As people reflect on their place in the world, they understand they are limited by their concrete experiences, facing personal, social, political, and economic barriers that obstruct their capacity for self-actualization and becoming whole persons. Essentially, a limit situation is a historical condition that prevents people from having freedom, creating conditions of social inequity and framing those impacted by the limit situation as *less than human* or *the other*. A limit situation results in some people benefitting (i.e. the dominant class), while others are harmed (i.e. the oppressed). They are a product of history, and thus impermanent and can be overcome.

Some examples of personal limit-situations that impacted my liberty include being in an unhealthy, abusive relationship for many years; struggling with an opiate addiction brought on from medical issues and doctors' prescriptions, while struggling to pay rent, bills, and eat; frequently moving to new communities due to a lack of employment or affordable housing; and a decade of carceral controls including four years in prison. During these difficult times, I did not want to believe these situations were real. I was ashamed, embarrassed, and at times scared, so I initially failed to talk about it or reach out to anyone. Hiding my pain only made things worse and led to emotional instability, unhealthy coping behaviours, a lack of hope, and questioning who I was. I withdrew from people I cared about and lost interest in things I enjoyed.

Many aspects of my identity were suppressed, and I hid certain interests and values from certain people. Incarceration was the ultimate limit-situation, which led to a further fragmentation of my identity. The prison system forced me to put up emotional walls, lose many social connections, disconnect from the natural world, while also losing my housing, car, belongings, employment, and student identity. My personal values, goals, hopes, and dreams quickly shifted or were replaced. The violence, trauma, isolation, and coercive nature of imprisonment have been linked to negative or harmful shifts in a criminalized person's identity, potentially resulting in low self-esteem, negative self-perceptions, and feelings of a purposeless existence (Hoskins & Cobbina, 2020; Liebling & Maruna, 2005; McCorkel, 2013).

IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT, STIGMA AND FRAGMENTED IDENTITIES

Like other areas of personal growth, human identities are dynamic, evolving over place and time. According to Hall (2003, p. 4) "identities are about questions of using the resources of history, language, and culture in the process of becoming rather than being: not 'who we are' or 'where we came from', so much as what we might become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves". Identity development is therefore contextual, intersecting with experiences in social, cultural, political, economic, and other domains. Our living conditions directly impact our psychological, spiritual, physical, and emotional well-being, which have implications for our identity development.

Identity formation is thus a continuous process based on how we are represented in the world, requiring us to reconcile our personal history and experiences. Our name, language, physicality, cultural traditions, along with our neighbourhood, clothing, and material items all contribute to how others see and treat us, and how we feel that we fit into this world. Individual identity influences a person's decisions and behaviour as people live within their co-constructed personal identity (Pals, 2006).

For many years, I had a fragmented personality, only showing people certain aspects of who I am depending on the context I was in. I expressed the *mental* or intellectual aspect of myself in school and university, sharing only my educated thoughts and perspectives, which were often disconnected from my experiences. My *physical* self was saved primarily for athletic activities, while my *emotional* self was kept mostly private, as I hid my emotional struggles from those who cared about me the most. My *spiritual* self mainly existed in relation to my family, church, and research, however, I did keep that part of me hidden from most friends and colleagues. I was self-conscious and wanted to avoid being stigmatized.

Goffman (1963) describes how social stigma and discrimination leads to a 'spoiled identity' or the perception that an individual is abnormal due to their stigmatization. Goffman regards stigmatized identity as a relational phenomenon existing in the relationship between the stigmatized attribute of a person and the audience who views this characteristic as abnormal or undesirable. In certain contexts and communities, these attributes are not stigmatized, whereas they are in others. This notion that stigma or a spoiled identity does not reside within the person, but instead is contextual, illustrates the process by which an individual's identity can become fragmented. In certain social situations, spiritual or religious beliefs are stigmatized, whereas other social environments might stigmatize people who openly express their emotions or exhibit differences in their mental health.

Even in the 21st century, domestic abuse, mental health issues, addiction, poverty, and having criminal records are highly stigmatized. Surviving or recovering from these challenges does not eliminate the ongoing stigmatization, which can stay with someone long-term. Stigmatized identities such as 'prisoner', 'criminal', 'addict', 'homeless', or 'victim' are hegemonically determined from the top down. These stigmatized identities emerge as a direct result of limit situations, which prohibit the oppressed group from realizing their humanity. As marginalized 'others' we do not

often have the privilege of determining our own identities – societal norms tend to decide this instead.

Hall (2003, p.4) asserts that identities emerge “from the narrativization of the self” (p. 4) or our personal story concerning our lives and place in the world. Hall clarifies that despite “the necessarily fictional nature of this process [this] in no way undermines its discursive, material or political effectivity” (ibid). This narrativization of self is a multifaceted and complex process. Building on this notion from the field of psychology, McAdams and McLean (2013, p. 234) explain that “people express to themselves and to others who they are now, how they came to be, and where they think their lives may be going in the future”. This narrative identity therefore reconstructs one’s autobiographical history, while envisioning the future in a way that provides a person’s life with inherent meaning and purpose.

While our internal personal narratives may not be completely factual, our emotions or how we are affected by events in our lives certainly are. Reflexively writing and critically reflecting on aspects of my own life narrative has been a therapeutic process, while also contributing to shaping my identity. By accepting the universal reality that part of being human involves recognizing and living with our imperfections (Kurtz & Kretcham, 1992), I was able to engage in a journey of self-discovery towards wholeness.

MY TRANSFORMATIONAL JOURNAL INTO BECOMING MY WHOLE SELF

My story consists of a journey from who I was (before prison and W2B) to who I am now, after living through these events. I was transformed by personal crises (i.e. domestic violence, addiction, mental and emotional distress, incarceration), and the process of overcoming these challenging limit situations. This was a lengthy and still ongoing process. If identity is fluid – always changing and growing – the carceral system of control effectively stops this process by essentially freezing prisoners in time and restricting our personal agency. For people in prisons designated for women, we share the experience of being infantilized, treated as vulnerable or needy children incapable of decision-making without a powerful, patriarchal system assigned to ‘fix’ us.

In 2010, I was a 4th year PhD candidate in psychology, on an Ontario Graduate Scholarship. That April I was violently arrested based on my

personal associations and lost everything while I was placed on house arrest in another city to await trial. In November 2013, I breeched my bail conditions and was placed in custody for almost four years. After five and a half months in a maximum-security provincial jail, I was convicted, sentenced, and then transferred to a federal prison designated for women. Below, I provide a brief autoethnographic account of my initial experiences in the federal prison system as background context for my transformational journey.

Entry Vignette – How my journey began

It is April 2014, and I have just arrived in prison on a five-year sentence. I look around this unfamiliar setting with 15-foot-high razor-wire fences surrounding the compound, juxtaposed against a backdrop of lush green forest. Despite the relative openness of the compound compared to the maximum-security jail I had just arrived from, I sense a visceral feeling of being in another world, a place I was not familiar with. I reflect on how strange it feels to be back in the city where I lived and worked for ten years. I had driven past this prison many times on my way to school without really knowing about this strange world that exists behind these fences and walls. Although I was geographically in the same city that I had called home for so long, I felt like I was on another planet, in another time. I never felt so isolated and disconnected from my community, and everything I thought I knew.

As I reflect on my new surroundings, I walk along the track to drop off my prison issue items in my cell, enjoying the crisp spring air and sunshine after spending almost six months in a maximum-security setting. I immediately notice a few prisoners wearing these cool T-shirts with graffiti writing that reads, *‘Moving beyond the walls that separate us’*.¹ I ask one of my fellow prisoners who is wearing this shirt where I can get one myself. They tell me I will have to take a W2B course first. I am instantly intrigued.

In early June, as I enter the main building where air-conditioning provides temporary relief from the hot summer sun, I see some unfamiliar faces in the hallways and classrooms, listening respectfully to some prisoners, which is a rare occurrence inside. I later learn that this outside group was

part of the second annual instructor training of the W2B program. As I stand in the building enjoying the cool air, wondering who those people were and why my fellow prisoners looked so happy, my thoughts are interrupted by two approaching guards. "Inmate Fayter! Get back to your unit now! Movement time was over five minutes ago, beat it now or you're getting a charge!" I'm instantly irritated, "Calm down, I was enjoying the A/C and checking my mail. Gimme a minute," I reply. I am so tired of being yelled at and ordered around, treated as a problem child or wild animal. I saunter over to my mailbox a few feet away, ignoring the guards yelling at me while I empty my mailbox. "That's it Fayter, I'm writing you up for disobeying a direct order and if you don't get back to your unit in the next two minutes, you're really going to be sorry!" Reining in my indignation, I keep my mouth shut and return to my living unit.

After dinner when count clears,² I go outside to find one of the prisoners who I saw earlier that afternoon. They tell me about prisoners training university professors how to teach inside prisons. My initial reaction is one of doubt since I have learned this past year that honesty and trust are not commonplace inside. After I am handed a flyer advertising the application process for the next course in September, which provided me with some background information about the first class three years earlier and resulting alumni collective, my reservations recede. I am determined to join this unique and interesting program. In the very least, I think it will give me something to do.

THE HEALING POWER OF WALLS TO BRIDGES

When I attended my first W2B class and began my lifelong commitment to this program, I was a broken, angry, and hopeless person. I had already spent years on house arrest awaiting trial and was imprisoned for about a year prior to my first class. During this time, like most incarcerated people, I had to cope with daily emotional, physical, psychological, and spiritual violence and abuse from police, guards, lawyers, media, and other prisoners. I had to become someone other than myself to survive that oppressive, coercive, harmful environment. I hid my compassion, empathy, and emotions from others, putting up walls so people could not see any weakness to exploit. I said and did things that I do not believe and later regretted. I felt like a mere

shell of myself, hollowed out inside with an external protective barrier. At times I was not sure who I really was or where I fit into the world beyond those walls. Angry, hurt, scared, and lonely, I decided to shed my previous identity from my life in the community. I had already lost my job, car, home, belongings, doctoral degree, relationships, and everything else in my life. I assumed my future would be hopeless, so I adopted the labels that were ascribed to me by the system: troublemaker, criminal, menace, manipulative, dishonest, dangerous, and offender. It became a self-fulfilling prophecy. If that is who they thought I was, I thought that I may as well start behaving that way. What was the point of trying, when none of my strengths or accomplishments were appreciated or recognized by the carceral system? Why be honest when everything I said or did was used against me? Fortunately, this nihilistic attitude was disrupted after my first W2B class.

This was not an easy or immediate change, but the lengthy transformative process towards becoming my whole self, merging my fragmented identity, and feeling safe enough to show who I was on the inside to the outside world began in that small prison classroom. Since institutional staff are not inside a W2B class constantly monitoring us, documenting our every word, emotion, and action to assess our risk-potential, I finally felt safe to authentically open. The creation of group norms ensured confidentiality, trust, and respect within this space, all very rare in the prison environment. Outside people coming in each week did not look down on those of us whom society deemed disposable. Indeed, it was quite the opposite. In W2B spaces, prisoners were valued, respected, heard, and seen as equals. Our lived experiences and histories of trauma were sources of knowledge that could not be found in any textbook. We were lifted up in a place where we are constantly put down. People with power and privilege, such as university professors, came to the prison to learn from us! I had found a place where my strengths could be nurtured, my voice would be heard, and my perspective was valued. In the W2B community, I found a place to heal, I found somewhere I belonged, and most importantly, I found myself.

Arguably, the central component of W2B pedagogy, which is practiced in every class, workshop, training, and collective meeting, is the use of a talking or sharing circle. This “circle of trust” (Palmer, 2004, p. 27) provides participants with a sense of community and belonging, while promoting healing, safety, self-learning, authenticity, and the capacity for people to engage with their whole selves (Freitas et al., 2014; Pollack, 2016; Pollack

& Edwards, 2018). Circle pedagogy has its roots in various Indigenous and traditional cultural groups around the world, and W2B invites Indigenous Elders into this space to share their wisdom and cultural practices.

Two of the foundational readings we use for learning how to share space within a circle comes from a Quaker author and an Indigenous writer. In *A Hidden Wholeness: Toward an Undivided Life*, Quaker Parker Palmer (2004, p. 116) describes how in this space “we speak our own truth; we listen receptively to the truth of others; we ask each other honest, open questions instead of giving counsel; and we offer each other the healing and empowering gifts of silence and laughter”. This method of sharing, teaching, and learning together runs counter to conventional western norms of conversation and education; it takes time to learn and requires a skilled facilitator. In a chapter on the practical pedagogical practice of a talking circle, Fyre Jean Graveline (1998) outlines some basic rules for Indigenous circle processes: one person speaks at a time while the rest listen respectfully; describe your own experiences and share from the metaphorical heart; and choose your words with care and thoughtfulness recognizing that speaking is a sacred privilege. The circle process requires explicit modelling, is time-consuming, sometimes uncomfortable, often emotional, but in my view, it is absolutely essential to building community, healing, and wholeness. The healing power of W2B can empower prisoners and criminalized people to transcend their stigmatized identities and limit situations.

OVERCOMING LIMIT SITUATIONS THROUGH W2B PRACTICE

For Freire (1992, p. 194) overcoming “limit situations” requires breaking through the particular sociopolitical barrier through a “limit act”. Such acts reject passivity and blind acceptance of the particular social problem in question (e.g. racism, criminalization, patriarchy, poverty). As obstacles to achieving social justice and equity, limit situations cannot be overcome if they are regarded as “historical determinants against which there is no recourse” (ibid), leaving the oppressed to simply adapt to the injustice. Limit acts require a collaborative social justice praxis based on critical consciousness-raising of the oppressed group. This involves social action linked to critical reflection, which has the potential to dissolve the barriers that obstruct the oppressed from gaining liberation. As a liberatory education program based

on radical solidarity and an ethic of care, W2B actively disrupts carceral logics by humanizing prisoners and challenging stigmatizing assumptions perpetuated in society. W2B contributes to destigmatizing and humanizing prisoners by seeing and treating us as whole persons. The holistic pedagogy of W2B nurtures mind, body, spirit, and emotions, which combats the isolating, fragmenting impacts of the prison system.

Education, opportunities for leadership, social action, and feeling safe and not judged, are examples of limit acts and are key aspects of the W2B program and community, which contributed to my ability to heal from the past and ongoing trauma of incarceration. The empowering, non-hierarchical, anti-oppressive praxis (Pollack, 2016, 2019) of W2B spaces are in stark contrast to the punitive, stigmatizing prison system. My engagement with this program allowed me to feel a sense of purpose, confidence, and hope for the future.

Freire (1992) highlights the necessity of both hopeful confidence and social consciousness in overcoming limit situations. Once identified, oppressed people can have varying perspectives concerning the existence of limit situations. Some may perceive limit situations as immutable obstacles that cannot be overcome. Others may perceive them as obstructions they do not wish to challenge or remove (perhaps they perceive indirect benefits or fear the harmful repercussions of resistance). The critically conscious, hopeful individual is acutely aware of the impediment to their liberty, recognizing the importance of eliminating these barriers, and dedicates their life to overcoming them. This critical perception of the limit situation challenges the oppressed to social action, striving to resolve these societal problems in a spirit of hopeful confidence. Freire (1992) asserts that only by comprehensively understanding the essence of a limit situation and detaching this from its concrete existence can it truly be perceived as hindering their liberation. As the issue is both perceived and detached from daily life in an academic manner, it becomes problematized leading to a moral imperative aimed at overcoming the barrier.

Beyond the potential for social change, connecting academic lessons, theories, and readings to lived experience provides richness, deepens our learning, and enables us to better remember and comprehend course content. The open, honest communication that occurs in W2B spaces builds lasting personal connections and facilitates the development of trust, which is almost non-existent in the harmful, callous prison environment. This was

the only place in the carceral system of control where we truly had choices and the capacity to exercise our personal agency (despite the institutional rhetoric of creating meaningful choices and empowering women).³ Developing workshops and events, producing training materials and publications, and working collaboratively with diverse people contributes to building confidence and learning new skills, all of which are empowering examples of limit acts.

All these factors combined contributed to personal healing and strengthening my social responsibility and capacity to challenge limit situations. While the prison system attempts to break people down, W2B actively contributes to building people up. The integration of internal perceptions and external treatment, along with personal, professional, and cultural identity development can allow us to connect disjointed or fragmented aspects of the self, transforming the fragmented identity into a cohesive whole.

CONCLUSION

This story bears witness to what it means to live with trauma, abuse, addiction, pain, stigma, powerlessness, and insecurity. Our experiences of trauma and suffering throughout life shape who we are and who we become. Perhaps even more important to identity formation is answering the questions: where do I belong and where do I fit in? As relational animals, we humans define ourselves and understand our purpose in life in relation to and in community with other people. This is particularly difficult in the isolating, oppressive prison environment. My ongoing involvement with the W2B program has helped me to find a sense of belonging, purpose, and holistic identity despite the trauma of imprisonment. Writing about and sharing my experiences through various publications, speaking engagements, and media outlets has allowed me to gain a sense of agency through personal testimony, while also controlling the public narrative concerning my story.

Since my involvement with W2B, I often use an autoethnographic approach in my writing and research, which is particularly valuable for criminalized scholars. Autoethnographic methodology requires us to bring our whole selves into our research and writing by honestly reflecting on our life, while writing with vulnerability and emotion (Bochner & Ellis, 2016). W2B enabled me to feel confident and recognize the value of my lived

experience as a potential academic contribution. The holistic pedagogy of W2B also highlighted the importance of multiple ways of knowing, integrating physical, spiritual, and emotional intelligence with intellectual knowledge. This is essential for autoethnographic research, which is in stark contrast to positivistic notions of objective, value-free science. This methodological approach is a powerful tool for criminalized researchers because it allows us to acknowledge and own the nature of our personal narrative and identity in the context of our social environment (Reed-Danahay, 2017). Writing in this authentically open, subjective manner can be cathartic, as opposed to more traditional academic writing, which tends to disconnect the researcher from their lived experiences and emotions. Finally, the flexible approach of autoethnographic writing allows for the creative presentation of narratives in an accessible format that can evoke emotional responses from its readers and facilitate critical conversations regarding the phenomenon of interest (Ellington & Ellis, 2008).

Without my W2B community, I never would have had the courage to shed my emotional armour and share my true self with the world. While some of my past experiences were traumatic, they shape who I am today, providing me with a sense of strength and eventually liberating me from the limit situations I faced. My post-traumatic growth was facilitated and supported by my friends and colleagues within the Walls to Bridges community. W2B helps prisoners to build connections and social capital that strengthens our capacity for successful community re-entry. Through this program my personal and professional network has grown, and it significantly eased my transition into the community. Beyond prison walls, the W2B community alumni collective stays connected with meetings, electronic communications, social gatherings, along with the development and facilitation of various workshops, assisting with the annual facilitator training, and speaking in university classes, conferences, and other events. We also collaborate on various initiatives to support criminalized people, engage in public education and activism, contribute to academic writing, and support one another practically and emotionally. These are all examples of limit acts – reflective action aimed at overcoming obstacles to the liberty of the oppressed.

Carceral logics focused on punishment, retribution, surveillance, security, and risk seek to dehumanize and reduce prisoners to ‘less than’, maintaining the oppressive power of the prison as a limit situation. There is

constant stigma and discrimination directed towards those of us who have been criminalized and incarcerated. W2B assisted me in recognizing that I should not be ashamed of my story and lived experience. While I feel remorse for some of my past actions, this is qualitatively different from shame. W2B facilitates consciousness-raising among oppressed prisoners, enabling us to recognize and critically reflect on various limit situations encumbering our liberty and equitable inclusion in society. By learning about and critiquing oppressive and discriminatory attitudes, policies, and practices present in our society we are empowered to actively challenge and hopefully solve these harmful social problems.

My identity narrative is consistent with psychological research concerning women who have experienced violence. For example, Matos and colleagues (2015) found that women's experiences of victimization shaped their self-perception, and through recovering from such trauma women can find strength and resilience. Most significantly, becoming my whole self was an act of liberation – freedom *from* hiding parts of who I am and the freedom *to* be who I am meant to be. It is ironic that my journey towards personal freedom and self-actualization began during a period of incarceration.

This experience illustrates the significant value and transformative nature of the Walls to Bridges program. W2B spaces provide a sense of safety, belonging, meaning, value, and purpose. As teachers and learners, we build connections and community, while breaking down divisive barriers and encouraging participation with our whole selves. Open, honest communication is facilitated, which allows us to safely share our perspectives, experiences, and bare our souls. Such raw honesty deepens both interpersonal and intrapersonal connections and communication, allowing me to confidently become and present to the world who I really am.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ This was the previous tagline used when the program was initially Inside-Out Canada. When we transitioned to the Walls to Bridges model, an inside collective member created our current tagline: “We are One, Not the Other”.
- ² In Canada's federal penitentiary system, prisoners are formally counted five times a day at specific times when all prisoners must be inside their living units. When the guards come through each unit for count, prisoners must be standing inside their cells or risk receiving an institutional charge. Free movement on the compound

(when prisoners are allowed outside of their living units) only occurs after guards have completed their rounds, returned to the administration to share their count ensuring all prisoners are accounted for, and a guard calls the unit or announces on a loudspeaker that “count’s clear”.

- ³ While the Task Force on Federally Sentenced Women (1990) promised to transform corrections for people in women’s prisons based on five key principles for change – empowerment, meaningful and responsible choices, respect and dignity, a supportive environment, and shared responsibility – researchers and advocates have long since noted the failure of *Creating Choices* (e.g. CHRC, 2003; Hannah-Moffat, 2000; 2001; Hannah-Moffat & Shaw, 2000). More recently, reports from inside federal prisons designated for women indicate that this model has not only failed to be realized by the CSC, but conditions inside continue to be increasingly worse (e.g. Fayter & Payne, 2017; Zinger, 2021).

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