

Bruce Coleman and Floyd Perry, two Frederick Douglass students who themselves have been clients of the juvenile justice system, led the Saturday morning (and sometimes week-day afternoon) writing workshops with juveniles on parole through the Jefferson Parish juvenile justice system. Their writing is featured in the book ***Writing, Not Drowning***. Here are their two essays explaining their reasons for and benefits from writing.

Writing as a Path to Emotional Health

by Floyd Perry

When I think about emotional health, the word that sticks out most to me is emotion. There are good emotions—emotions that make sure you're a person who can be lived with, like happiness, excitement, consideration, and love. And also you have those emotions that people don't really like, such as rage, anger, hatred, loneliness, stress, jealousy, and, worst of all, depression. And as far as love, it's about 50/50. And though we don't like some of these emotions, we need them all not only to balance life, but also to deal with it. I mean, to me if I had to live with someone who was happy all the time, I don't think I could deal with that person. Just like if a person was mad all the time, I couldn't be around him/her all of the time.

I myself have been on both sides of emotional health several times. I've been depressed, enraged, lonely, and hurt. I've contemplated suicide, had homicidal thoughts, and almost anything else you can imagine. And the sad part about it is, I didn't have it as bad as some people. My life was my own fault, because I let myself move through these stages I named. To this day I still hold hatred in my heart, and when you've been holding it for so long, it begins to become a part of you. You don't know how to react without it. It's kind of like a man born blind. After a while, even if you can find a way to give him his sight, he's been blind for so long, that he really won't be able to function like that.

Because of the hatred that had become a part of me, I put myself through a lot. I used to be a small-time thief. I just needed a way to vent my anger and hatred. This led to depression. I remember one time, three years ago, I was at home by myself, because my mama was at work. It was late at night. So I sat down and wrote this little poem which stretched about a page and a half. (I later entitled this poem "The Reaper.") This poem was to serve as my suicide note. I went to the closet shelf in my mama's room and pulled down a silver 38 revolver. I emptied the gun of all six bullets and picked up one bullet off of the bed. I put the bullet into the barrel of the gun and spun it. While still spinning, I slammed the barrel back into the gun. I put it to my head and pulled the trigger twice. I reloaded the gun and put it back to my head.

As much as I wanted to pull the trigger, to end the misery I was feeling, and to destroy the hatred inside of me, even if it meant destroying myself, I wouldn't do it. So I put the gun back on the shelf and went back to my room. I sat at my desk and closed my eyes for about 15 minutes. While I had my eyes closed, I think I was crying, because it looked like teardrops stained my shirt and my paper. I opened my eyes and had an urge to write. I wrote for about three hours. I later called what I wrote "Memoirs of a Madman."

Dealing with these emotions is the reason I started writing. It was a way to vent my frustration, hatred, and all the rest of my feelings, as well as love. I have, to date, 20 poems, 30 raps, and I am currently working on a play called "Ghost Stories," which is mostly autobiographical. As a result, my mind is more at ease than it used to be, I'm a lot more

disciplined, and, to me, my life is closer to normal than it was. And with the help of Mr. Randels, the pieces I have been writing are getting better. They are giving more detail and more background and are starting to make a little bit more sense.

Why Writing's Important (4-2-99) by Bruce "Philosophy" Coleman

One day I was sitting in class, and someone asked me "Why is writing important?" Writing is an expression of your emotions dealing with a lot of things. From love to pain, from hate that eats your insides, to your culture and everyday events, writing helps you understand who you are; to a certain level, you are your own philosopher when you write. That idea inspired me to have a rap poetry name called Philosophy. I have been through a lot of emotional stuff, just like Floyd whose essay and speech on emotional health started this juvenile justice system writing workshop. I thought about committing suicide like Floyd wrote in his piece, but I never put a gun to my head. We probably experience different emotions, but we had this drive to get a pen and paper and write about living a street life and trying to escape the street life.

Since I used to live a street life, I wrote about a lot of things I had built up inside me. I won first place in a contest sponsored by the Teen Expression talk show. The contest was on career choices and goal setting. I called my entry, "I Live My Life," a poem about the streets. You will see this piece in the book. I wrote this piece, because staying away from the streets is a goal for me. If I stay in the streets, I won't be able to fulfill one of my careers: entrepreneur. I start the poem off so you can see who I am and how I changed from the streets. In the poem, I say "poisonous streets are full of venom; I had to suck the poison out my life." This line means that all activities in the street will kill you, if you don't realize you're poisoning your life. I will write more poems about the streets and keep striving for my careers and goals.

Writing is an art. I can use everything that exists from music, art, hair, to anything. I always had a love for cooking food. I like to experiment with the different ingredients and spices. The way restaurants arrange food on the plates catches my eye. Swirls of thick sauces circle around flowers to make a festive meal. I use food as a way to write poetry, comparing it to the way I like a woman. For example, in my poem "My Only Serving," I wrote, "My woman is my soft-made, fresh-smelling fluffy pancake, syrups of sweetness of sister uniqueness." I also use musical instruments to express the way a woman makes me feel. For example, I would say something like, "she is my beautiful black smooth piano playing wonderful feeling in my heart." Another way I express myself with writing poetry is using hair as a way of expressing myself. For example I did a piece called "Definition Of Black People." In one part of the poem I say we're too strong, our life is a head full of hair and we're being pulled like a comb. Writing poetry has helped me use one experience or example to describe a totally different one.

Using what's around me is a good way for me to express myself. And all this writing, self-expression, and making connections among crazy things helps me connect with other people better. When I write, I learn about myself. I don't just improve my vocabulary; I also learn about what's in my mind. Like I said in the beginning you are your own philosopher. I learned about my feelings and what I'm going through by writing. When I see my writing, it

makes me feel good. Writing poetry is my pleasure; it's my vibe.

Writing also makes me want to read other books and gain more knowledge. From my writing, I read other people to see where they're coming from and see how different my poetry is. When I read, I learn writing techniques, not just new information. I learned how to write and set my poetry up on paper. When I read, I learn how other people's minds think. The more I read the more I want to write. My philosophy is "reading helps you become smarter and better able to understand what's good writing."

Writing helps me get to know and interact well with other people. When I listen to other people's poetry, I am motivated me to write harder material. Plus I get to know people better by listening to the feelings they put on paper. Poems and recognition give me self-confidence to relate to people in ways besides teasing or bothering. I get attention in positive ways. At the Jefferson Parish Juvenile Justice System workshop, everybody comes together as a group. We talk about everyday problems and write about them. That's how this book got started. A couple of us already were into writing, and the others are people who are getting the idea of what writing is all about.

My writing class at school is a lot like the Jefferson Parish Juvenile Justice System. Mr. Randels' writing class showed me how to make my writing skills good and better, even if you thought it was the best work you did. That's how the Jefferson Parish Juvenile Justice System program shows other people that they are capable of writing. The writing class helped me frequently with sticking to the point and not letting my work get shattered. Mr. Randels showed me how to revise my poetry. I enjoyed interacting with the students. I did a poem called "Illusion," and Mr. Randels helped me extremely. The poem was for the Teen Expression contest, and it was about teen sexuality. Mr. Randels helped me understand the time put into shaping your writing. Writing will always be my love, my first place. I will keep striving to express myself to the fullest.