

Writing from a company of word-loving women

Heidi Schlumpf | Feb. 12, 2010



Participants put pen to paper at a Women Writing for (a) Change workshop. (Courtesy of Women Writing for (a) Change)

Throughout her life, Mary Pierce Brosmer's voice has been silenced: by her blue-collar family and the 1950s Catholic church, in the schools she attended and the schools where she taught. Once, at a public poet's workshop, she read one of her pieces about childbirth fears. "So what?" was one participant's response. "I don't care for mother poems," added another.

Lesser women would have given up. But not Brosmer.

Twice in high school she was accused of plagiarism by teachers who insisted the excellent essays she turned in couldn't have been written by her. Discouraged but not defeated, she went on to become a high school teacher herself, but her against-the-grain methods drew suspicions from administrators who went so far as to ban her chosen textbook.

Frustrated with teaching the traditional male canon of literature, she realized she had become "a female impersonator and ... a ventriloquist's dummy, having men's words about women put in my mouth that I in turn mouthed to my students."

Those painful experiences inspired Brosmer to dedicate her life to encouraging women's voices, believing that women's words "about our lives as women" can heal and transform "not only women themselves, but also the social fabric and even the planet.

Since 1991, Brosmer has run a school called Women Writing for (a) Change, which teaches collaborative writing as a creative, therapeutic and spiritual practice through semester-long classes, weekend retreats and one-day workshops. Begun in a Cincinnati living room, it now has affiliates in eight states. The school also has given birth to a foundation to support its work, the Feminist Leadership Academy to move its feminine model into other places and careers, an online radio show, special courses for young women and girls, a consulting service, and now this book.

GUIDE FOR CREATIVE TRANSFORMATION

In *Women Writing for (a) Change*, Brosmer shares the story of the school, her own trajectory of transformation through writing and a how-to for creating "containers" for reflective writing for individuals or groups (with a smattering of tips for teachers of any kind). The 30-page appendix alone includes a sample organizational chart, class agendas, exercises, code of ethics and glossary, among other tools.

It's too much for one book, really, and in the introduction Brosmer preemptively defends the book's structure, which she admits weaves a number of threads. The inclusion of poetry and prose along with letters, e-mails and journal entries works, but I fear some readers will get lost in the parts of the book not of interest to them.

The strongest threads are her argument for the power of unleashing women's voices and the instructions for doing that through reflective writing. She cites the connection between women's depression and women's sense of their words having little effect on their listeners. "I have come to believe that women's words, about our lives as women, are least likely to get a fair hearing," Brosmer writes (emphases hers).

Later, Brosmer says that she believes "that more violence is done by not telling the stories than by telling them."

She isn't concerned about keeping any of the school's trade secrets and freely shares the processes, rituals and exercises that have worked through the years and those that haven't. Her themes echo the wisdom of other women's groups (including a women's spirituality center in Chicago where I was a board member for years): the importance of a supportive, nonjudgmental circle of women; the need for attending to the process not just the product; the expectation of criticism from the dominant, male-dominated culture.

Some complained that the processes at the school were too touchy feely or New Age. But Brosmer defends the importance of ritual for creating space for reverence, even though rituals as simple as passing a "talking stone" or writing a few thoughts on 3x5 "soul cards" have prompted cries of "cult."

As a journalist always trying to craft the perfect lead to my article, I'm sensitive to beginnings of stories. Unfortunately, this one gets bogged down in details about the school's history and some "foundational" stories about Brosmer's childhood that would have worked better woven into later chapters.

More about Brosmer's own personal story (including her "chosen exile" from the institutional church) probably warrants a separate book. It is my hope and bet that she will write one, despite admitting that she never longed to be published in the conventional sense

"I longed to be heard," she writes. "I longed for the company of other truth-telling women. My longing has been met, for I have created for and with others a deep, loyal-to-ourselves-and-one-another company of truth-telling, word-loving women."

Silenced, no more.

[Heidi Schlumpf is the author of *While We Wait: Spiritual and Practical Advice for Those Trying to Adopt* (ACTA Publications).]

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For your weekend enjoyment, we present women writers reflecting on women who write.

Women Writing for (a) Change [1]

Links:

Heidi Schlumpf looks at Mary Pierce Brosmer, who runs a school called Women Writing for (a) Change, which teaches collaborative writing as a creative, therapeutic and spiritual practice.

[1] <http://ncronline.org/node/16940>

[2] <http://ncronline.org/node/16930>

Contours of the daily and domestic [2]

Melissa Musick Nussbaum says that she is drawn to writers -- they are women -- who observe the contours and appreciate the significance of the daily and the domestic.

[3] <http://ncronline.org/node/16937>

[4] <http://ncronline.org/node/16926>

Ethnic bias is no longer an option [3]

Diane Scharper recommends five women writers who, she says, "can provide us with salutary insights into ourselves as we live in a world full of international tensions."

How the remotely possible could become real [4]

Maureen E. Daly reviews a book titled *Ordained* and in it finds a plan on how to pressure a pope into calling a worldwide council and revising the rules of ordination.