# Woman is the Word

*by Bruce B. VanDusen*

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About 7 A.M. on most Thursday mornings during this spring semester, Meghan Abel and Lauren Smith, two 21-year-old seniors, would hop into Assistant Professor of English Michele Tarter's car, drive about 40 miles north of the campus to Clinton, and park in the public lot outside the Edna Mahan Correctional Institution for Women.

They would enter a "temporary" prefab building outside the prison, sign the register, surrender their driver's licenses, pick up visitors' tags, submit to metal detection searches, and make their way through an initial checkpoint. They would walk past the minimum security section, which except for the fences would look like any set of school buildings, to another guard office called

*Lauren Smith and Meghan Abel wait outside a locked metal door for a guard to admit them.*

prison interior © Corbis

the sallyport. After closer check and search of handbags there, they would walk back outside; down a slope bounded by 12-foot fences topped with coiled razor wire; into the maximum security section (known as the "red zone" because a red pass is required), past surveillance cameras, more locked gates, and scary motorized doors activated by an unseen guard; finally into a 30-foot-square room. It has windows along two interior walls, allowing a view to and from a corridor. This is their classroom, furnished simply with tables and chairs around which they and 10 or 12 other women can sit comfortably, spread out some papers and books, and talk in private.

The maximum security wing of the complex houses about half of the 600 women in the prison—300 women whose crimes are the most serious under state law: assault, robbery, murder. Soon after they arrive, some of these women file into the room with their papers. This year the first class attracted 12 women—11 African Americans and one Hispanic, ranging in age from 20 to about 55. Once a week for the next two months, from 8:30 to 10:30 A.M., the professor, the college students, and the prisoners would sit around the tables and talk about the books they're reading, the writing they've been asked to do, and the ideas that bring them together.

Tarter has been doing this for years now, first when she taught at Eastern Illinois University in 1998 and since 2001, after she had been on the faculty at TCNJ for two years. She has supervised seven students doing independent teaching projects during this period, most of whom think back on it as the most powerful learning experience of their lives. Another six have done similar work with other faculty members, and perhaps a dozen more have volunteered by helping type up the prisoners' writing.

The prisoners all want to be there. Most have been on a waiting list more than a year to take the course entitled "Woman is the Word." Some signed up simply because it would be a change of pace from the crushing routine of prison life. Others heard about the class and how it would give them a chance to talk about personal experiences without ridicule, and without being stared at constantly by guards who seem to say "no" to every request just to assert their power.

The first of Tarter's New Jersey students was Christine Peluso '01, who went on to law school and is now practicing in Philadelphia. She recalled the impact of the semester she spent in the spring of 2001, observing, "I don't think anyone can go into prison every week, and get to know them and their system, and not have it change your entire attitude toward them and your own life."

It was a difficult experience for her. "I had a very comfortable childhood," she said. "My parents provided everything. I was educated. I was never abandoned. I was never abused. But these women had nothing. They had dropped out of school, lived in poverty all the time, with drugs, despair. They had heart-wrenching stories; you can't believe the horror of it."

(It was Peluso who named the course. It is a play on varying meanings of "*the word*," from "the news" as in "What's the good word?" to "the gospel" as in "the word of the Lord." In this course about women's biographies, the name is spoken with the stress on "woman.")

Peluso said the prisoners she knew in 2001 responded strongly to the assigned readings, mostly by women telling their own stories, and mostly on the theme of living through captivity of some type. She and Tarter were working toward having the prisoners write their own stories, and set the stage for that with brief writing "prompts" they would do in class.

One involved compiling a list of "I remembers." It was designed to get them to think and talk about specific incidents that generated feelings of strength or helplessness. Another had the women describe their lives with sensory images and metaphors. One exercise was to "give me your morning," describing the movements, feelings, sounds, and actions of a typical prison morning. By the end of the 10 weeks of reading, writing, and discussing, about half did write brief autobiographical essays. For others that was just too painful.

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A major problem that first year was the lack of reading materials for the prisoners. The "library" for the maximum security wing consisted of a locked cabinet with a few dozen books that were inaccessible to most prisoners. While Tarter took on the daunting task of convincing the correctional authorities to provide a place for a real library, Peluso, by then a first-year law student at the Rutgers-Camden Law School, worked on the book problem. Her fellow law students proved extremely generous. "I just would put out a box with a sign on it explaining the situation, and hundreds of books came in out of nowhere." It took the better part of a year, but with the added help of some sympathetic prison educational staff and efforts by TCNJ students and staff, a real library now holds over 3,000 volumes, all catalogued by a prisoner who once worked as a librarian.

As for textbooks, Tarter scrounged for cheap used copies needed for reading assignments. In the beginning, Jimmy McAndrew, a TCNJ trustee with a great interest in the project, helped pay for many of the books and other class materials. The prison staff provided writing materials and let the class participants keep books and papers in their cells—a "huge gift" Tarter called it.

By the spring of 2003, most of the kinks had been worked out of the program. Tarter had become known to the staff and prisoners alike as an unflappable, constantly cheery, and optimistic teacher who deserved everyone's trust. The College English department and the Office of Academic Affairs had rewarded her initiative with an unusual three-year agreement to reduce her teaching load to pursue the project, which may well produce a book in another year or two.

TCNJ seniors Jamie O'Connor and Crystal Walker did independent study projects with Tarter in the fall of both 2002 and 2003. Meghan Abel and Lauren Smith worked with her this spring. All majored in English and graduated in May. In nearly every case, they said, upon learning of their plans to teach prisoners in jail, their parents began by asking: "Why on earth do you want to do that? Couldn't you teach somewhere else that would be safe?" O'Connor's father was the exception. As a police officer, he knew the risk to his daughter was virtually non-existent. Soon, all the parents came around, and several of them read many of the books on the reading list.

In one way or another, the young women all said their interest had been piqued by Tarter's description of how the teaching project affected the prisoners. They all were looking for something more from their English major than reading and writing about literature. They hoped to make a difference and learn how to achieve results in an environment unlike any they had ever known.

O'Connor recalled she "saw it as an opportunity to teach others who, although they wanted to learn, didn't know how to start. I had to find ways to motivate them and get them to put down their thoughts."

Walker stressed a point often made by her fellow students. "Trust is the biggest problem," she said. "Most of the women have been abused all their lives: no real love, no kindness. That means they have no trust of others."

Tarter prepared her helpers for that, telling them some of the prisoners may suspect at first the college students will try to use them for something. She spent an hour with Lauren Smith and Meghan Abel before the first trip to the jail going over everything they should expect, including the expected behavior of the prison staff and the anxiety of the prisoners. Lots of dos and don'ts.

Was it an adequate briefing? "Yes and no," said Smith a few days later. "'Yes' in terms of my safety and what to do and

wear, but 'no,' not in terms of feelings. Emotionally and spiritually I don't think there is any way in the world to prepare for this. To see these people, all stripped down and locked up with no freedom, no voice. I mean, everyone is in some sort of a prison—of school or marriage or job. But these people have their spirits taken away."

Smith admitted to being "really scared, terrified," walking in on that first day. "I mean they have done some really heinous crimes," she said.

Professor Tarter and her students had planned an "icebreaker" exercise for the first day. After explaining their plans for the 10-week course, they organized the group of 12 into pairs, and had 10 minutes of one-to-one talk about a series of questions: What do you like to do for fun? What kind of guys do you like? Have you ever met anyone famous? It worked like a charm. Back in the group, each member of a pair introduced the other to the rest. It turned out to be a warm, happy experience with a lot of kidding and laughing, setting the stage for talk among people who knew each other at least a little.

Then Tarter turned to read aloud a short, three-page essay by Audre Lorde entitled, "Transformation of Silence into Language and Action." It's a brief memoir about a woman who overcomes her fear of speaking out, and gains strength and self-esteem even as she inspires others. In a way, it is the signature piece of the whole program, which is designed to help the women, who tend to hold their feelings tightly inside to avoid further ridicule or punishment in prison, find their voices and thereby improve their lives.

The Lorde essay "touched my life," Tarter explained. "That's why I do this. We must seek out those who have no voice to help them tell their stories. If they can do that in this safe place of a classroom, then even if it goes nowhere, they cross a threshold." By the end of her reading of the essay, she said, "some of the women are cheering."

Smith was amazed by the effect of the reading, and after a few sessions in the jail, offered this observation about the women: "These are intelligent people who must have had some previous academic training. They could break down passages and analyze ideas. I was surprised. In some ways it was better than a college classroom."

After the reading, Tarter asked the prisoners for their reactions, and Abel said, "That's when I learned that all my stereotypes were shattered. They all were so intelligent, so intuitive, and well-spoken. Any of them might have been a lawyer or a professor even. Slang? There was none of it."

That morning Abel said she "watched people break out of their shells," and explained it this way: "They can't really talk about themselves to people in there; it's a sign of weakness and others will take advantage of it. (In the class) there is healing because they can say things out loud."

Later in the semester, she said she is convinced by her studies in other college courses, that women, particularly poor women, have little chance in our court system. They don't get good legal advice because they can't pay for it, and besides, "if a woman commits a crime she's not a woman, she's just a being. In our culture a woman is either an angel or a devil," she said.

One goal in each weekly session was to discuss the book (about 200 pages) that had been assigned the previous week. Usually the women also were asked to do a brief writing assignment, to be reviewed and commented on by Tarter or one of her students. With the writer's permission, it might be read to the group and discussed. Tarter and her TCNJ students participate as well, doing all the same assignments in an effort to build trust and serve as a model for the others.

Each of the TCNJ students said that until the women began to write and reveal their own stories, they had difficulty appreciating what being in prison really meant to the women.

One Valentine's Day, the TCNJ group brought some rose petals into class to use in a writing exercise on sensory description. They were hidden in a bag, and the students were asked to reach in, feel what was there, and write about it. Suddenly the prisoners were having a sensory experience the prison system did not allow, and more than one of them stuffed rose petals into her blouse to enjoy them back in her cell.

Another day, the teachers arrived with some women's magazines that happened to contain pages with scratch-and-sniff perfume advertisements. The women could not take those back to their cells, but they didn't miss the chance to massage themselves with the scented pages as long as possible.

One inmate told Meghan Abel that after she had prepared a short piece on the assigned topic of "one part of your life," she became so moved by the experience that she wrote a letter to her husband at home, apologizing for something she had done before being jailed.

Crystal Walker told of a prisoner who for weeks was unable to write anything for the class, but regularly brought in wonderful little drawings she had done of animals. So Walker asked her to write about her love of drawing. "She wrote about the animals and told me she does their eyes last because she doesn't like the eyes staring at her. She gets enough of that from the guards," she said.

It was Walker, a student in Tarter's class last fall, who said the guards, most of whom are male, have "stares that go right through you. They intimidate with their gruff behavior and their voices, saying 'you can't stay there; move over there' for no reason. You get to know what the women go through day after day, hour after hour, in the world of khaki and gray." The prisoners wear mustard-colored khaki pants and blouses.

At first, not wanting to risk annoying their students by wearing colorful or even stylish clothing, the TCNJ women wore ordinary, somewhat somber, outfits. But as the two groups became more close and familiar, each tended to relax and be themselves.

Professor Tarter is used to this transformation, and has noticed the prisoners' body language often reveals an attitude shift from anxiety, fear, and depression to confidence, good humor, and determination.

O'Connor and Walker, who worked with Tarter last fall, recalled that at the beginning of the semester, the women could never share their stories in the group. They seemed to have been silenced by fear all their lives, depressed and angry, were not interested in writing and would hardly talk about the reading assignments.

But at the end of the semester, they were ready to tell the whole world what they thought. They held their heads up, looked each other in the eye, smiled and joked, and knew they were strong enough to cope with their lives.

It's their own writing, Jamie O'Connor said, and often the discussions that help these women break their silence, open up, and put their feelings out where others can see them. Writing helps to make the events described both true and believable.

*Professor Tarter and her students, Meghan Abel (front) and Lauren Smith, check on their plan before the others arrive.*

And Crystal Walker said she, herself, gradually began to open up. "I'm more apt now that I see how it affects these women to open up myself and say what I really think. I'm not going to be silenced," she said.

Lia Papamichael, an English major who plans to teach in high school, worked with Tarter in the spring of 2003. She, too, came away with hard feelings about the prison system. One of her prisoner students, in jail for 13 years for her part in a killing, had changed substantially but, she said, "Not from anything the prison system did. She had a great thirst for knowledge, and cried when we gave her a book. It was the only one she'd ever had. Like the rest of them, she just wanted to do something

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Michele Tarter photo © George Moore Photography

*Meghan Abel and Lauren Smith approach the maximum security wing.*

*Michele Tarter on campus.*

*Tarter and her TCNJ students participate as well, doing all the same assignments in an effort to build trust and serve as a model for the others.*

with her time. At the end we made up a book for each of them, with all their writings in it, and gave it to them with a certificate and a handshake. There was a lot of applause, hugs, and tears. Then we signed their books, and they signed each other's. It was just like a yearbook signing."

Smith and Abel said they invested more time and emotional energy by far into this independent study project than any other course in their college careers. For every two hours on Thursdays, they read a book, worked up a lesson plan, thought up several writing prompts, and read over papers handed in the week before to offer comments to the writers. They spoke with each other almost daily about the plans, analyzed what happened after each session, and typed up notes for use in a thesis required at the end of their own course. In addition, they thought about their inmates constantly.

Abel, who hasn't decided whether to pursue a doctorate in English literature or a law degree, has been thinking a lot about the psychological deprivation she's seen in her group of prisoners. She knows full well the strictness of the rules is justified, especially in a population of adults with such serious problems. However, she sees "no reason at all" for much of the harsh attitude of the custodians, which she sees as designed simply to emphasize who is in command.

A widely held view among the TCNJ students who have been part of "Woman is the Word," is that they have learned at least as much as the women they have taught.

"It's impossible to do this and not take away more than you give," said Crystal Walker.

And Jamie O'Conner said, "It really shapes your way of thinking, helps you decide what's really important, and how lucky you are. I've learned what's important is not *where* you are, but *who* you are."

Peluso, who was so deeply involved in the first year of the project at TCNJ, who knew she had brought enthusiasm and sunshine into the prison class, and who helped found and supply the prison library, decided to attend law school in part because of the need to improve the prisoners' situation. But in the end, she took another path as an attorney. "I just can't do that kind of work," she said. "It's too hard, too sad; I don't have the stomach for it."

Maybe 2004 is the year.

Lauren Smith, who is headed for law school, said the whole experience with the prisoners has made her, as she put it, "fall back in love with my passion for advocating for people. I feel very connected to them. I know this is supposed to be professional, but in conversations with them I feel a real sense of appreciation and respect. They always ask how I'm doing, and how's school, and how's my life. There's nothing I can do for them, but they still care about me."

Halfway through the project in March, she said she had a solid understanding of "What it means to have no one to listen to your problems." She is convinced many of the women now in prison need only a more effective advocate to improve their lives. "I'm going to make that difference," she insisted.

*Bruce B. VanDusen is editor of TCNJ Magazine*

## Woman is the Word

### The Reading List

*Written by Herself, Autobiographies of American Women.* (Editor, Jill Kerr Conway). Vantage Books, 1992. An anthology of exerpts from American women's autobiographies

*Cries of the Spirit.* (Editor, Marilyn Sewell). Beacon Press, 2000. An anthology of women's poetry containing a range of feminine experience.

*Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*, by Harriet A. Jacobs. Harvard University Press, 2000. The autobiography of a freed slave and contemporary of Frederick Douglass.

*Couldn't Keep it to Myself, Testimonies of Our Imprisoned Sisters.* By Wally Lamb. Harper Collins, 2004. A selection of rich biographical stories from 11 women convicted felons.

*Wall Tappings*, (Editor, Judith Scheffler). Feminist Press of CCNY, 2002. An anthology of women's writing spanning A.D. 200 to the present. Prof. Tarter calls it "the primer of the whole course."

*Women at Point Zero* by Nawal Saadawi. St. Martin's Press, 1997. A novel based on the author's prison experience in Egypt.

*The Cancer Journals* by Audre Lorde. Aunt Lute Books, 1992. Inspirational stories of women and breast cancer.