



## VISUAL & PERFORMING ARTS | RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Arresting hope: Women taking action in prison health inside out

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*Cogent Arts & Humanities* (2017), 4: 1352156



Received: 19 April 2017  
Accepted: 04 July 2017  
First Published: 17 July 2017

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# Arresting hope: Women taking action in prison health inside out

Ruth Elwood Martin<sup>1\*</sup>, Mo Korchinski<sup>2</sup>, Lynn Fels<sup>3</sup> and Carl Leggo<sup>4</sup>

**Abstract:** In 2014, we published the book *Arresting Hope: Women Taking Action in Prison Health Inside Out*, which narrates a story about women in a provincial prison in Canada, about how creative leadership fostered opportunities for transformation and hope, and about how engaging in research and writing contributed to healing. *Arresting Hope* reminds us that prisons are not only places of punishment, marginalization, and trauma. They can also be places of hope, where people with difficult lived experiences can begin to compose stories full of healing, anticipation, communication, education, connection, and community. Since the publication of *Arresting Hope*, we have been engaged with further research, and we are now editing a second book tentatively titled *Releasing Hope*. We have been reflecting on our personal and professional commitments to research with women with incarceration experience, as well as the many ways that this research journey together as a collaborative team of four editors working with many others has informed and influenced our ways of being in the world. In this article, we offer four reflections on our collaboration as we continue to bring our academic and activist commitments together in order to promote education, awareness, and change. In our collaboration, we have discovered the value of researching, conceptualizing, and writing in creative ways in order to understand how the stories of individuals are always connected to social and institutional dynamics of policy and practice.

### ABOUT THE AUTHORS

The Collaborating Centre for Health and Education (CCPHE) was established in 2006 as a means of addressing the distinct needs of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated individuals. CCPHE is committed to encouraging and facilitating collaborative opportunities for health, education, research, service, and advocacy, to enhance the social well-being and (re)integration of individuals in custody, their families and communities.

The book *Arresting Hope* describes participatory health research that ran inside a British Columbia provincial correctional centre from 2005 to 2007. Starting in 2008, women who were released into the community formed a network called “Women in2 Healing”. They created a closed Facebook group to provide peer support, and the “Unlocking the Gates to Health” peer health mentoring program, which supports women during the immediate days following their release from prison to achieve their health and social goals.

### PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

As the co-editors of the book *Arresting Hope: Women that take Action in Prison Health Inside Out* (Inanna Publications, 2014), we have been engaged in a long collaboration of research and writing. *Arresting Hope* narrates a story about women in the Alouette Correctional Centre for Women, a provincial prison in Maple Ridge, British Columbia, Canada. *Arresting Hope* tells a story about how creative leadership fostered opportunities for transformation and hope, and about how engaging in research and writing contributed to healing. The book includes poetry, stories, letters, interviews, reflections, memories, journal entries, and scholarly research. The book records the warden’s vision for an effective prison, the prison doctor’s exploration of “What is health?” for women in prison, and the narratives of some incarcerated women, including Mo Korchinski who emerges from prison as a writer, researcher, and community leader. In this article, we offer our experiences, our learning, and our reflections on our collaboration as we continue to promote education, awareness, and change.

**Subjects: Lifelong Learning; Action Research & Teacher Research; Primary Health Care & Family Practice**

**Keywords: prison and health; education, women’s lives; hope; the power of story and writing; social activism; participatory research, peer teaching; narrative; recidivism; social justice; prison reform, restorative justice, transformation**

*Not walls of cement, but ...*

*the melodies of your temperature*—Barba (1995)

As the co-editors of the book *Arresting Hope: Women Taking Action in Prison Health Inside Out* (2014), we have been engaged in a long collaboration of research and writing.<sup>1</sup> *Arresting Hope* narrates a story about women in the Alouette Correctional Centre for Women, a provincial prison in Maple Ridge, British Columbia, Canada. *Arresting Hope* tells a story about how creative leadership fostered opportunities for transformation and hope, and about how engaging in research and writing contributed to healing. The book includes poetry, stories, letters, interviews, fragments of conversation, reflections, memories, quotations, journal entries, creative nonfiction, and scholarly research. The book re-traces the warden’s vision from its inception and portrays the prison doctor’s journal entries and her exploration of “What is health?” for women in prison. It describes the ways that babies can live in prison. The book narrates the role of a recreation therapist in prison, the significance of indigenous education in Canadian prisons, and the processes of participatory health research transformation. The book includes the narratives of some incarcerated women, including Mo Korchinski, whose journey is shared from childhood through her revolving door incarcerations. Mo’s narratives, poetry, and art enable readers of *Arresting Hope* to know the story of Mo’s transformation in the prison, and to know Mo as a prison inmate, writer, and artist, as well as an advocate, researcher, woman, mother, and grandmother.

*Arresting Hope* reminds us that prisons are not only places of punishment, marginalization, and trauma. They can also be places of hope, blessing even, where people with difficult lived experiences can begin to compose stories full of healing, anticipation, communication, education, connection, and community. *Arresting Hope* does not present a romantic or nostalgic version of the story of a provincial correctional centre for women. While *Arresting Hope* acknowledges pressing challenges, it also presents a testimony to how hopefulness is possible in prison. The editors of *Arresting Hope* promote hope because they have been arrested by hope’s possibilities. Since the publication of *Arresting Hope*, we have been engaged with further research, and we are now editing a second book tentatively titled *Releasing Hope*. From the liminal space between *Arresting Hope* and work on the new book, we have been reflecting on our personal and professional commitments to research with women with incarceration experience, as well as the many ways that this research journey together as a collaborative team of four editors working with many others has informed and influenced our ways of being in the world.

In this article, we offer four reflections on our collaboration as we continue to bring our academic and activist commitments together in order to promote education, awareness, and change. According to Walter Brueggemann (2001), “human transformative activity depends upon a transformed imagination” (p. xx). Brueggemann promotes a prophetic imagination that will “nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us” (p. 3). In our long collaboration together, and with others, we have each been transformed and motivated by the possibilities of living with imagination.

### 1. Ruth’s reflection

Back in 2005, I thought my prison health research would likely focus on HIV, Hepatitis C, and injection drug use, because, to my knowledge, these were the most urgent medical issues facing incarcerated women. And, if I had followed the research questions that I believed were most important, my life would not be what it is today. I had absolutely no idea what I was getting into when I

embarked on participatory health research. As I reflect and write this, I realize that by taking the chance of exploring the unknown with participatory health research, I opened up my life to the serendipity of new ways of knowing, new possibilities and new relationships: serendipity, possibility, and relationships.

Participatory health research engages the “subjects” of the research as equal partners in all aspects of the research process, including generating the research questions, deciding the research design, collecting the data, conducting the data analysis, and interpreting and disseminating the research findings. In *Arresting Hope*, I describe my experience of the first prison research forum on October 2005, a day-long event in which incarcerated women came to the microphone, as if using a talking stick, to share their ideas for the research. Incarcerated women, who are normally silenced, came up to the microphone in turn to give voice to their hopes and passions for change, their wish to help with improving health for their families and for each other. The prison Aboriginal Elder (Mary Fayant) and the prison chaplain (Henk Schmidk), standing in the centre, opened the day with prayer; correctional officers, incarcerated women and visiting academics held hands in a large circle around the perimeter of the prison gym. Thereby, “spiritual health” was introduced into the project, as integral as physical, mental, and emotional health for the well-being of incarcerated women and those who work with them. Short of birthing my children, that day is etched into my soul as one of the most impactful days of my life, and one that I keep returning to. I knew then that I was in this for life.

Following that first prison health forum, we decided to apply for a special “Interdisciplinary Capacity Enhancement” (ICE) funding call of the Canadian Institutes of Health Research to support this research. My academic co-investigator colleagues and I were from the Faculty of Medicine, but we needed an interdisciplinary “place-holder” faculty member for this grant application. The Education PhD student partner of one of the medical co-investigators thought that Dr. Lynn Fels might be interested and, through Lynn, Dr Carl Leggo later joined the research project.<sup>2</sup> Lynn and Carl were not “place-holder” people! Over time, the prison health research process morphed into “health and education”. Together, we learned from incarcerated women that their health and educational goals are synergistically intertwined. As one woman in prison stated, “Can you imagine ... What if, instead of going to prison, women were sentenced to education?”<sup>3</sup> And, as my relationship with Lynn and Carl deepened, they taught me about language, words and creativity, about dance and play, about poetry and narrative. They probed and asked questions, seeking clarity and meaning, and pushed me to write deeper.

The initial CIHR ICE funding application was not successful, but the prison participatory health research continued anyway, without funding. Women in prison considered this work meaningful, and they convinced the warden that health research work should become a prison work placement position. During the following three years, as incarcerated women engaged in participatory health research and as they followed their research passions, they compiled life stories, paragraphs of passion, surveys, focus group transcripts, art, and letters. When the participatory health research project was shut down, and the warden retired, I reacted with anger, outrage, and dismay. The project had been benefitting so many women, and its discontinuation seemed deliberately provocative and cruel. I felt dismayed because I should have been able to navigate the correctional administrative system better, in order to prevent the research shut down, and I felt that I had let the women down.

We wondered how best to respond. We had previously published several academic papers, which with their limited word count could only begin to convey the transformations in prison that we had been privileged to observe. In my conversations with Lynn and Carl, the idea of a book began to emerge, as a way to honor the vision of the warden (Brenda Tole) and as a way for the lives and voices of incarcerated women to be shared with more people. We invited formerly incarcerated women, now living in the community, to participate in the book writing process, and Carl and Lynn facilitated writing workshops with them. Mo Korchinski emerged as a leader in creating *Arresting Hope*, in her writing and in her art.

As we embarked on the *Arresting Hope* journey at the beginning of the summer, I naively suggested that we would finish the book by the end of the summer. I had no idea that the project would take us five years from start to finish, over numerous cups of tea around a large dining room table. I learned about the serendipity of a book, which grows from the narratives that women entrusted to us. We let the book emerge. And our relationship deepened, Carl, Lynn, Mo and myself, as we journeyed together, each of us committed to stewarding the book and its messages.

We sent the manuscript to 30 publishing houses, before Inanna Publications responded with, “Our lay readers love it!” *Arresting Hope* had found its home. The book is now in its second printing. I have learnt that a book has a life of its own, one that we can’t predict. Readers tell us of the impact of the book on them, and how it changed their view of women in prison. For example, early on, when we were discouraged because publishing houses were rejecting it, my book group read the *Arresting Hope* manuscript, and one member appeared on my doorstep with tears in her eyes wanting to know when she could volunteer in a women’s prison. Another book group in Kitsilano obtained a Vancouver Foundation community grant to buy copies of *Arresting Hope* for their members, and invited Mo and myself to join them to discuss ways that they might help women in prison. We decided that all net proceeds of *Arresting Hope* would support educational bursaries for women with incarceration experience and their children. We recently created the *Arresting Hope Education Fund*<sup>4</sup> to ensure long-term sustainability of the educational bursary funding.

As women moved from the correctional centre to the outside community, their unanswered participatory health research questions moved with them. Women from prison brought to the outside their passion for asking questions, and for developing initiatives to improve the health of incarcerated women, their children and families. Research narratives filled with hope from women inside prison, morphed into women’s urgent action advocacy initiatives in the outside community. For example, women’s questions about why so many in prison have breast cancer, led to a participatory cancer prevention education project for formerly incarcerated individuals. Women’s questions about why so few formerly incarcerated indigenous women living on the streets access community health resources, resulted in a qualitative study called *Aboriginal Healing Outside the Gates*. Grieving women, whose babies were taken from them at birth, engaged in a five-year legal battle, culminating in a BC Supreme Court decision: when a baby is separated from his/her mother, because the mother is incarcerated, the baby’s charter rights are violated. Women questioning what helps/hinders them to be healthy following their release from prison resulted in the creation of a peer health mentoring program that supports women for the days following their release. We will write about some of these advocacy initiatives in *Releasing Hope*.

I feel privileged and honored to have worked as a family physician with incarcerated women. As John Berger (1997) writes about family physicians, so I “bear witness” to women’s lives. In the prison clinic, as women told me about the events they endured as children, young teenagers and women, I would put my pen down and listen; and, I realized that if I had been dealt the same cards, I might have been sitting in their chair. In the participatory health research project, I learned from listening to women in prison that in order to achieve health, women in prison want to be supported in improving their relationships with their babies, their children and families; they want to be engaged in meaningful work; they want to be supported by communities when they leave prison; and, they need supportive housing when they leave prison. Their prison research work demonstrated that, when they are given a chance, and support, and hope, women are capable, and that everything is possible.

Women tell me that society let them down when they were children. And, when they went to prison, their children were left behind. When society punishes women, society punishes their children, and society punishes the small child inside each woman. Women tell me that the public turns a blind eye to them when they are released from prison, when they’re homeless, when they’re lonely, when they’re uneducated, and when they’re traumatized. Women tell me that society needs to understand what they go through. If the community actively welcomes women, and connects them

with resources, offers them kind words and believes in them, then they can succeed. Women are asking society to be their cheering squad and to support them, not to condemn them.

## **2. Mo's reflection**

### ***Jail***

most people think jail is hard  
a sad place to be  
but jail saved my life  
jail gave me hope  
a sense of belonging  
a purpose to life  
a new way to live  
jail gave me a job  
three meals a day  
a warm bed to sleep in  
clean clothes to wear  
friends by my side  
growing and healing  
from the beat of the drum  
on this new journey  
called life

The key to the gates of prison represents far more than just turning the lock to open it on the days you are incarcerated or released. For me the day I was released was the beginning of many unknown challenges that I would have to face as I tried to find my place in mainstream society. So many barriers to moving forward in one's life after many years of addiction that led to crime to support my habit. Always on the outskirts of society and not sure where I fit into this big wide world we live in.

### ***Right or left***

Which path shall I follow?  
What route should I take?  
Should I go left or should I go right?  
Will I fall back into the dark bliss?  
Make the same mistakes or try something new?  
Move far away and start over again?  
All I really know is the life of crime.  
I know too much about the game.  
The lifestyle. The people.  
It's all about money and drugs.  
For me it has to change.  
So what do I do?  
I've made big mistakes for many years.  
It's either this way or that way.

I'm going to change and try something new.  
The unknown has to be better than the past.  
I have been lost for many years.  
I guess I am going to change.  
Follow the right path.  
And hope it leads to happiness.

Collaborating on writing *Arresting Hope* taught me so many things about myself and others. In many ways, I closed myself off to life and to others, as a form of self-defense. The pain of my childhood taught me to hide myself in different ways: don't let others in, use walls to keep others at a distance, hurt others before they hurt you, and hide the pain to show that no one can hurt you. Opening myself up about my life and writing it all down for the world to read was very intimidating but at the same time very healing. As I wrote my life out on paper I slowly learned that I was no longer that little girl who was beaten down in all aspects of life. From parents who should have loved me unconditionally but didn't. From losing my innocence in so many different forms of abuse. As I wrote poems, stories, and memories, I found the inner strength that kept me from never giving up on life. Having a UBC prof (Carl Leggo) edit my writing was very nerve-racking at first, but I soon learned that he was a caring, non-judgmental, compassionate person. I felt safe to dig deeper into the dark shadows of my childhood.

Today I give a voice to the women who still don't know that they have one. This is the driving force behind my determination to continue in my work with prison health. In some ways, all our stories have the same themes of darkness and shame that lead us to seek ways to escape the dark shadows of our pasts with street drugs to numb the never ending pain that rips the soul from the inside out. Finding inner peace from writing my story, I no longer feel the guilt and shame of my past. I know that writing my story will help give other women who are still stuck in the revolving door of hell hope that they too can fight their way back and learn to find themselves. *Arresting Hope* gives other women hope that they don't have to stay stuck and can make it out of the street trenches of addiction.

Giving truth to humans who others see on the streets as homeless addicts is my driving force. Seeing others as human beings: someone's grandmother, mother, daughter, aunt, or sisters. Humanize the sad reality of childhood trauma that leads most to escape into addiction. All humans want to be loved and accepted, not judged and beaten down. We beat ourselves up way more than anyone else in society can. We need to rise above the stigma of addiction and love others who are lost souls looking for a way to escape life.

### ***When I was a little girl***

When I was a little girl, I lived a life of trauma.  
I stood on the battlefields of parental damnation,  
slowly lost my innocence never to be found again,  
faded into seclusion, tried to remain hidden from the world.

*No words*

*No cries*

Unprotected I began to build an arsenal of destructive mechanisms  
that shielded me from the pain of neglect, abuse, and mistreatment.  
I developed an education of lies, deceit, silence, and manipulation.  
Those who should have cherished my heart and soul dismissed me.  
I became a casualty of addiction, warped love, and dashed dreams.

*No peace*

*No relief*

I am tired of searching for peace. I have no control of my life, going in and out of jail. What has my life become? No one tries to find me. No one cares that I'm lost. There has to be more to my life. This cannot be what God has planned for me.

*Wishing I could change*

*Wishing I could make it better*

No one comes. Life and time unfold. I become a soldier. I arm myself with kindness, empathy, and love. I now stand tall, proud of the woman I have become, yet humble with the knowledge of my past. I offer new hope for future women who have faced a traumatic childhood, by lending an open mind, and listening with an open heart.

*Knowing I can change*

*Knowing I can make it better*

No longer am I a casualty of a traumatic history. I am a mother, sister, aunt, and grandma. I survived and I am stronger today because of my past. Don't let the darkness from your past block the light of joy in your present. What happened is done. Stop giving time to what no longer exists. There is always so much joy to be found.

### **3. Lynn's reflection**

Here in this moment, at the edge of the Pacific Ocean, Mo and I call back and forth, "The water's cold!" "Go for it!" "Arghhh!" We are spending a weekend at Galiano Island, at the Farm, where we are participating in a writing workshop for *Arresting Hope*. "Let's go swimming!" "What? Now? It's dark outside!" Mo invites me to join her, promising a surprise, and gratefully, I follow. I have been struggling to find a toehold, in this group of women whose life experiences trouble my heart. This I can do, swim in the ocean.

Slipping, splashing, sliding, we enter the water, froth of sea at our ankles. Knee-deep, I hesitate, look back at Mo who waves me forward, "Go on! Do it!" I enter the black sky that is the ocean, speckled with stars. The rush of cold water chills my skin. My heart stutters in syncopated beats. I move my arms in a cautious breast-stroke, and, to my amazement, phosphorescent creatures create swirls of light. I am painting light in water! A galaxy of light in an underwater sky. In this moment, we are no longer a university researcher and former inmate, but two women sharing a midnight swim; here and now, Mo gifts me with an ocean dancing light in our presence.

How shall I receive her offering with grace?

The labels come to us like Band-Aids: university researchers, prison inmates, incarcerated women, women who are incarcerated, women who were formerly incarcerated, co-researchers, researcher/participants, and, pausing for breath, simply, women co-researching together. How do we name ourselves in this journey from behind prison walls to this moment now, writing our stories into your presence ... *not walls of cement, but the melodies of our temperature.*

Here and now we meet, and something happens.

“Do you want a panic button?” asks the guard as I sign my name into the visitors book. I look up, wide-eyed. “What’s that?” “You wear it on your shirt, if you get into trouble, you just push it, and a guard will come running.” I pause. If I’m wearing one, I’m saying I don’t trust the women; how will they trust me? “No, thanks.” Gulp. How dangerous are they?

The journey of *Arresting Hope* through the years from the first time I walked through the prison gates to the editing of our book, called me to attention, tugs on the sleeve that revealed my fears of those who dwell outside my circle of familiarity, my reluctance to get involved, to be committed, to become responsible. What happens after I walk through those gates? Who will receive me? I am uncomfortable in places of pain, of grief and loss. Women locked up. Murderers? Drug addicts? Mothers? Sisters? Daughters? Women who walk through darkness, through trauma, through sickness, through despair, through illness, through violence. What do I know of their pain? What am I doing here? I am so privileged.

We are gathered around a table, choosing angel words from a box. Surrender. Hope. Joy. Transformation. Listen. Each word is received and spoken to with careful reflection, stories revealed between the silences, the pauses, the hesitations, the smiles, and nods of recognition. We share experiences that these words evoke. We recognize resonant moments in between the strangeness of our lives.

*There is a crack in everything, that’s how the light gets in.*<sup>5</sup>

Sometimes, someone unexpected finds you and calls you into action. I wore many hats in the Faculty of Education at UBC: lecturer, graduate student program advisor, academic editor of *Educational Insights*. I worked in the Centre of Cross-Faculty Inquiry and one morning, the director, Dr. Graeme Chalmers called me into his office. “I’ve got a job for you.” He asked me to recruit professors in the Faculty of Education who would like to be involved in a participatory action research project located in a women’s correctional centre spearheaded by Dr. Ruth Elwood Martin in the Department of Family Practice, Faculty of Medicine. “This is a great opportunity for cross faculty engagement. See who you can find.”

Philosopher Hannah Arendt (1961) challenges educators to engage children in the world’s renewal:

And education, too, is where we decide whether we love our children enough not to expel them from our world and leave them to their own devices, nor to strike from their hands their chance of undertaking something new, something unforeseen by us, but to prepare them in advance for the task of renewing a common world. (p. 196)

*Arresting Hope* shares the journey of the reimagining of a prison for women; we are invited to engage in its renewal as witnesses. If we replace the word children with women, the quote speaks to the ambition that is ACCW during the time that *Arresting Hope* documents. What had begun as a research health initiative was slipping over the edge into an educational project, a project where women are re-imagining the renewal of the world.

Initially, while I was looking for interested faculty, I acted as a place-holder for the Faculty of Education, holding the space of inquiry open for others to enter, to engage in their research. I never intended to be involved. “Just one meeting,” I informed my director. A place holder who became stuck in a place that curiously reminded me of a college campus, of summer camp, of my high school, behind gates, where women were all dressed in uniform, blue plaid shirts and flannel sweat-pants, eating grilled cheese on white bread, sitting at long wooden tables with glasses of milk in the dining hall. How could I leave? I was guilty.

Inside these walls are women whose childhood was stolen. Young girls who dropped out of school by the age of 14—children who suffered child abuse, family abuse, relationship abuse, sexual abuse, self-medicating with drugs, promised love, required to turn corners past themselves into a darkness that I cannot imagine. Women who turned a trick, pocketed a lipstick, lost a child, were lost themselves. *Arresting Hope* shares their stories, awakens us to who they truly are. Women. With stories.

Where had I been in the midst of all this suffering unfolding through time? As an educator? As a fellow citizen? What now was my responsibility?

Words on a page. Paragraphs that dance on a line in the wind. I offered writing workshops with the long-haired poet professor. One day, in his absence, I am asked if I have a crush on him. Too late, I see that she is teasing me; my awkward laugh betrays me. Who could not but fall in love with a poet? I invite the women to, “create a map with stories of places where you were happy in prison.” He asks them to write about Christmas. We are complicit in their sorrow, as educators, what we offer requires their forgiveness. We stumble into places of pain. Writing is time remembered. Writing is tears. Writing reveals and makes known what is hidden. Writing is sharing. Writing is release.

Writing is not enough to open the gates ... but it lets the light in ... sentence by sentence ... line by line ...

The doctor, the warden, the recreation therapist, the inmate ... women who walk through the cracks in the walls, widen the cracks ... stepping through the spaces they create.

Funny, inside I met women who stared hard at me until I looked into my own soul and found myself wanting.

I recognize that what I offer in return is not enough.

I arrive in a garden, a dog baby-sitting business, an Eagle Hut where Holy Cow teaches women about their indigenous heritage. She calls forth the ancestors to witness.

The drum speaks to each woman, calling her to walk proud, to sing her presence, to walk free. Warrior’s Song.

A woman wraps her lower body with a blanket because she is menstruating.

Invited to sing at the drum, I am without voice.

I have not yet learned to honor, to sing in friendship, in advocacy.

A woman speaks to her experience of doing cocaine, shadow of light illuminates her face each time the projector changes a slide on her PowerPoint.

“I learned more from you,” a guard tells her, “than all the workshops I’ve taken over the years.”

What the women wanted was to give back.

Offering stories, moments, that arrest me, break my heart.

I have not their courage. Nor persistence. Nor resilience. Nor gift of generosity.

Gasping for air, I shout, “This is amazing! Thank you, Mo!” And she laughs, a husky laugh that drifts on the night wind ...

What can I offer in return, to Mo, to the women who have touched my life, who shared their pain, their sorrow, their hopes, in their writing, trusting me with their words, cracks in the wall, welcoming me into the magic of painting light in the watery depths of a midnight ocean?

#### 4. Carl’s reflection

During the many cycles of planning, writing, and editing *Arresting Hope*, I was frequently reminded of the radical and transformative power of creativity. *Arresting Hope* is a resounding testimony to creative collaboration and activist change. Like Wendell Berry (1990) reminds us, “to be creative is only to have health: to keep oneself fully alive in the Creation, to keep the Creation fully alive in oneself, to see the Creation anew, to welcome one’s part in it anew” (p. 8). *Arresting Hope* is especially the story of some remarkable women who imagined creative possibilities for transforming how we understand prisons and attend to issues of humanity, health, and hope. Frederick Buechner (2006) writes that, “the world is full of darkness, but ... at the heart of darkness ... there is joy unimaginable” (p. 240). Joy in the midst of seemingly inescapable sadness is the story of *Arresting Hope*, which recounts a few years in the story of Alouette Correctional Centre for Women. In collaborating with women with incarceration experience, I was reminded about the power of story-making. In her moving memoir about growing up in a dysfunctional family and coping with depression, Camilla Gibb (2015) claims that, “stories are how we make sense of our lives” (p. xi). *Arresting Hope* offers a compelling testimony to the power of stories for helping us make sense of our lives.

In *Thirst*, the poet Mary Oliver (2006) writes about her experience of living with grief after the death of her partner, Molly Malone Cook. In the first line of the first poem titled “Messenger,” Oliver (2006) professes, “My work is loving the world” (p. 1). In all my research, teaching, and writing, I, too, am committed to “loving the world”. In *Book of Longing*, Leonard Cohen (2006) sings about desire in an old man’s song of praise and lament. He advises us to “press your lips/to the light of my heart” (p. 120). In order to know the light of another’s heart, or to know the light of one’s own heart, or to know the heart’s light, or to know the light heart, we need to learn how to hear the heart’s rhythms. To engage with the heart of light, we need to be engaged with an ongoing practice of story-making. As we share with one another our stories, all our stories, we grow in wisdom and intimacy and joy. We can tell our true stories and we can tell them truthfully, and in turn we can testify to the joyful hope that holds us fast. In *Storycatcher: Making Sense of Our Lives through the Power and Practice of Story*, Christina Baldwin (2005) reminds us that “it takes courage to tell our stories” (p. 18). We need to hear one another’s stories. We need to embrace the healing efficacy of sharing stories. Baldwin understands that “when we reveal details that we think are excruciatingly personal, we discover that the personal is universal” (p. 85). My story is your story; your story is my story. This is the heart of *Arresting Hope*.

I am an exceptionally privileged 63-year-old professor of education. I spend much of my time teaching secondary school teachers of English. How did I become involved in the extensive and intensive research projects that include the editing of *Arresting Hope*? I am a co-editor of *Arresting Hope* because I was invited to participate with Lynn Fels in presenting several writing workshops for a group of women who had been incarcerated in Alouette Correctional Centre for Women. I first met the women at Nicola Valley Institute of Technology in Burnaby. I came to the research as a writer and teacher of writing. As a poet and educator I am committed to supporting others so they can grow as writers. I invite students to write creatively, critically, and courageously. I encourage them

to take risks, to experiment with different kinds of writing, and to seek truth. We write and share our writing with one another. We tell stories of our lives, and we reveal ourselves in intimate ways, and we grow more confident in our conviction about the power of words for writing our lived stories, and transforming our living stories.

In co-editing *Arresting Hope* I worked closely with my co-editor Mo Korchinski to support her in learning to write her stories and poetry. In working with Mo, I quickly learned she was the perfect student! Mo had a remarkable story to share, and she was eager to learn how to write the story. Mo understood intuitively all my comments, directions, and edits. We walked together in the journey of her writing. I was the pedagogue. Like the ancient Greek family servant who walked with the student to the place of instruction where the teacher waited, I walked beside Mo, and we learned from one another. Mo exemplified the spirit of the poet-scholar who is willing to tell the truth and be vulnerable. Mo understood how writing is an integral part of her journey of healing. In the effective pedagogical relationship, the teacher and the student both teach one another, and both learn from one another. I taught Mo about organization and punctuation, and Mo taught me about courage and motivation and love.

In *How Poetry Saved My Life* Amber Dawn (2013) narrates her story of sex work in Vancouver and turning to writing as a way to make sense of her life: “What does it mean to be given the rare and privileged opportunity to have a voice? To me, it means possibility and responsibility. It means nurturing my creativity and playing with personal storytelling” (p. 13). Like Mo, Amber Dawn learned that “The written word can be a faithful witness/if you’re willing to show yourself” (p. 56). Mo’s willingness to show herself is an exceptional gift she offers in her stories, poetry, ruminations, and art.

*Arresting Hope* offers an invitation to open up our hearts, to imagine how we are all inextricably connected, to acknowledge that we all need one another. In *Becoming Human*, Jean Vanier (1998) offers five principles that guide his work, and these principles are at the heart of *Arresting Hope*. “First: all humans are sacred, whatever their culture, race, or religion, whatever their capacities or incapacities, and whatever their weaknesses or strengths may be” (p. 14). Until we acknowledge the sacredness of all humans, we will fall into demeaning and destructive binary oppositions such as: us/ them; good/bad; successful/unsuccessful; winners/losers. *Arresting Hope* reminds us that we all have remarkable gifts for supporting one another, for infusing one another with hope and courage and conviction. “Second: our world and our individual lives are in the process of evolving” (p. 14). The best advice I ever received was from a Christian pastor who once told me, “We are all in process.” Poets know a poem is always in process. It is never completed; it is always available for revisiting. *Arresting Hope* recognizes how our being in process also means that we are frequently looking backward and forward, even while learning how to forgive and forget, always filled with a desire for hope. “Third: maturity comes through working with others, through dialog, and through a sense of belonging and a searching together” (p. 14). No one will grow wise and mature on their own. We need collaboration, conversation, and communion in order to grow as individuals in community with others. The most frequently used words in the English language are the pronouns *I* and *you*. We can never be whole without understanding how the unique sense of identity expressed in the pronoun *I* is always in relationship with the often mysterious identity of the other, expressed in the pronoun *you*. “Fourth: human beings need to be encouraged to make choices, and to become responsible for their own lives and for the lives of others” (p. 15). Mo has taught me more about responsibility than any other teacher. Since we are all in process, we are all constantly making decisions. Some of those decisions will be wiser than others. We need to learn how to respond to the emerging stories of our lives as well as the emerging stories of others. We must all be engaged in the responsibility of responding. “Fifth: in order to make such choices, we need to reflect and to seek truth and meaning” (p. 15). *Arresting Hope* is a witness to the meaning-making efficacy of story-making. In writing about the lived and living experiences of human beings, we understand how we are all seeking to “become

human”, to discern what are the possibilities for living well on the earth. We all live with broken and fearful hearts. We need “to grow to a maturity of the heart” (Vanier, 1998, p. 58). Amber Dawn (2013) recommends that one way to nurture the heart is to embrace “that buoyancy that comes when” you observe your life “as art” (p. 65).

As an editorial team, Ruth, Mo, Lynn, and I gathered around Ruth’s dining room table on many occasions. Like the writing staff of a television series, we generated ideas that called back and forth to one another, ideas that bounced wildly in our imaginations, ideas that fired our hearts with innovative possibilities. We were always committed to honoring the process. We realized that we wanted to narrate the story of ACCW so others could understand the remarkable story that had unfolded. We knew that we did not want to tell a straightforward story with a beginning and conclusion, a story with a traditional plot line with rising action that culminated in a climax and falling action. We wanted to re-create the sense of wonderful energy, even mystery that erupted when women in ACCW began to research their experiences and take responsibility for helping one another. Instead of narrating the complex story in a simplistic way, we realized that we needed to attend to alternative ways to compose the story. Instead of focusing on “what happened”, we focused on “how” to narrate the story. As a consequence, we focused on discourse, and *Arresting Hope* was composed like a patchwork quilt, a collection of ruminations, poetry, stories, quotations, interviews, letters, snippets of conversation, and research data.

After *Arresting Hope* was published I read Camilla Gibb’s (2015) memoir *This Is Happy* where Gibb explains that telling a story “demands the creation of something coherent out of disparate bits and pieces and gaps in knowledge” (p. xii). Gibb reminds me that the co-editors of *Arresting Hope* understood intuitively that the story of Alouette Correctional Centre for Women could only be narrated in fragments. As Isabel Huggan (2003) understands, we needed a “random mode of composition” (p. 223) that does not “impose pattern on experience” (p. 224). Instead of a clear predictable pattern in the story-making, we created a text that invites the reader to encounter a diverse chorus of voices. The reader is able to make connections, links, and patterns among the disparate fragments. Like Huggan suggests, this kind of reading experience invites the reader to generate “an infinite number of variations” (p. 224). In a similar way, Jeanette Winterson (2011) explains how she writes—“collecting the scraps, uncertain of continuous narrative” (p. 41). Winterson notes that, “life is layers, fluid, unfixed, fragments” (p. 156). Therefore, she writes in ways that honor lived experience as fluid and fragmentary.

*Arresting Hope* narrates a story that is part of a complex and ongoing conversation, a story that evokes tenacious tension and haunting memories and indefatigable hope. The story is personal and political, individual and institutional, idealistic and ideological, ethical and economic. I often wonder how Ruth keeps her heart supple and strong as she navigates the countless challenges of leading, inspiring, facilitating, and orchestrating the entangled relations and stories of so many participants in the research project that is narrated in *Arresting Hope* as well as all the other projects that inform *Arresting Hope* or build on the legacy of *Arresting Hope*. Every radical transformative movement needs leaders who are strong, wise, and resourceful. Ruth and Mo are clearly the kind of leaders who can fire and support a revolution. What I think is most noteworthy and encouraging about Ruth and Mo’s leadership is that it always begins and remains anchored in Leonard Cohen’s (2006) advice to “press your lips/to the light of my heart” (p. 120). May we all press our lips to the light of one another’s hearts as we learn together how to live more humanely, heartfully, and hopefully.

## 5. Lingering reflection

As four colleagues who have collaborated in composing the book *Arresting Hope*, we reflect in this essay on our experiences in participatory health research and creative writing in order to understand how transformation emerged when we chose to break the formulas and protocols that govern so much prison practice as well as research practice. In our collaboration we have been surprised over and over. Ruth writes:

I had absolutely no idea what I was getting into when I embarked on participatory health research. As I reflect and write this, I realize that by taking the chance of exploring the unknown with participatory health research, I opened up my life to the serendipity of new ways of knowing, new possibilities, and new relationships. Serendipity, possibility, and relationships.

In the process of doing participatory health research, we learned to trust the voices of incarcerated women. In the process of researching, writing, and editing *Arresting Hope*, we learned to trust one another and to trust the creative process that seeks serendipity, possibility, and innovation. In these processes, we have all been surprised. Above all we have been surprised, even arrested, by hope. In the title *Arresting Hope*, we play with the participle *arresting*, which can be read as an adjective or a verb. We seek to *arrest hope* in order to linger with hopefulness, and we seek to acknowledge how *hope arrests* us so that we are always committed to radical transformation of individuals, institutions, communities, and social networks.

Mo understands the power of hope, writing, and activism:

I know that writing my story will help give other women who are still stuck in the revolving door of hell hope that they too can fight their way back and learn to find themselves. *Arresting Hope* gives other women hope that they don't have to stay stuck and can make it out of the street trenches of addiction.

As Lynn writes, “sometimes, someone unexpected finds you and calls you into action”. Mo and Ruth have called Lynn and me, and many others, into action. Lynn recalls her first visit to Alouette Correctional Centre for Women as the beginning of a life-affirming story that arrested her and called her to attention:

The journey of *Arresting Hope* through the years from the first time I walked through the prison gates to the editing of our book, called me to attention, tugs on the sleeve that revealed my fears of those who dwell outside my circle of familiarity, my reluctance to get involved, to be committed, to become responsible.

While Lynn began with trepidation about the unfamiliar Other, she quickly learned how we must all learn to respond to one another with a resounding sense of responsibility for the well-being of everyone.

Carl notes how “*Arresting Hope* is especially the story of some remarkable women who imagined creative possibilities for transforming how we understand prisons and attend to issues of humanity, health, and hope”. The key words in this statement are “imagined creative possibilities”. There can be no transformation without first imagining “creative possibilities”. *Arresting Hope* is a testimony to what Carl calls “the radical and transformative power of creativity”. Now we are engaged in composing a new book titled *Releasing Hope*, which will narrate the experiences of women after they have been released from prison and seek support to write their lives with hope and purpose. Activist change is possible, especially when we engage together in creative collaboration with a conscientious commitment to asking critical questions and listening carefully with the heart's attention.

#### Funding

We acknowledge the following support for prison participatory health research and for the development of the book *Arresting Hope*.

Vancouver Foundation provided an operating grant from the British Columbia Medical Services Fund (BCMSF) entitled “Community-based participatory action research: Collaborating with women in prison to improve their health” (2007); an operating grant entitled, “Community-based participatory action research: Women in2 Healing, women who were incarcerated” (2008); a BCMSF salary award for Dr. Ruth Elwood Martin entitled, “Community-based Clinical Investigator” (2007–2012); and a BCMSF

community engagement grant for “Book Proposal, Prisons that Heal” (2010).

Fraser Health Authority and Tula Foundation provided operating funds entitled, “Community-based participatory action research: Women in2 Healing, women who were incarcerated” (2008). We acknowledge many other organizations and individuals who donated funds to the participatory research activities of Women in2 Healing so that incarcerated women can take educational courses, present their work at conferences, host networking events for women with previous incarceration experience, and support venues for women who exit from prison.

Nicola Valley Institute of Technology (NVIT) hosted monthly support meetings of Women in 2 Healing and writing workshops that spurred the writings in the book. In addition, UBC Department of Family Practice, Women's Health Research Institute, BC Women's Hospital and Provincial Health Services Authority provided practical support such as office space, fiscal hosting, and human resources and administrative support.

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#### Citation information

Cite this article as: Arresting hope: Women taking action in prison health inside out, Ruth Elwood Martin, Mo Korchinski, Lynn Fels & Carl Leggo, *Cogent Arts & Humanities* (2017), 4: 1352156.

#### Notes

1. Dr. Carl Leggo, Dr. Karen Meyer, Dr. Marla Buchanan from the Faculty of Education stepped forward in response to my invitation.
2. Drs. Karen Meyer and Marla Buchanan from the Faculty of Education, UBC, also joined the research team, offering invaluable support through our research.
3. This question was asked during one of the research training sessions with the women participating on the research team in the correctional centre, a workshop designed to teach them how to code transcripts.

Instead, the session turned into one of teaching the university researchers how to listen to the stories and silences within the transcripts. See Meyer and Fels (2014).

4. Vancouver Foundation hosts the Arresting Hope Education Fund, which awards bursaries to women with incarceration experience and their children to support their education. See <https://www.vancouverfoundation.ca/give/donate/fund/arresting-hope-fund>
5. Line from Leonard Cohen's poem, Anthem. Cohen (1993, p. 373).

#### Cover image

Source: Cover image of *Arresting Hope*, published by Inanna Publications.

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