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The Name Said Peace

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The Name Said Peace

The name said peace but the message was hope. That's what I felt when I read the newspaper story about Project Peace, a shelter for pregnant teenage girls which was about to open on Fulton Street in Montclair.

Located in a two-story brick building that used to be a convent, Project Peace was conceived by a former nun. I went on a tour a week before the doors were to open. The building was immaculately clean but cold and austere. On the first floor there was a community room with a television and some dark leather couches, a few offices and some medical examining rooms. On the second floor, the tiny cells that had once housed the nuns had been converted to bedrooms. The rooms were identical, each with a twin bed in an iron bedstead, a small wooden desk with a chair, and a brown bureau for clothes and belongings. No mirrors in sight. The beds were covered in plain white spreads; the walls were painted a sickly institutional green.

As I threaded my way in and out of the chambers, I could not help but reflect back to my own pregnancy. I thought about the pale blue nursery embellished with a border of pastel balloons and wondered what it would be like to give birth in an institution. What would happen to the young girls who walked these halls? Who would nurture them in their vulnerability? Who would shower them with gifts of crocheted sweaters and blankets? The need to make a difference, to be of use, swept over me.

When I was fourteen, a friend from sleepaway camp ran away from home because she was pregnant. One Saturday afternoon my doorbell rang, and there was Lise on the doorstep, dripping with sweat because she had walked ten miles carrying a heavy backpack. Sobbing, she begged me to hide her in my closet. Frightened by her need, I told my mother, who phoned Lise's mother, who came and took her home. This was 1970, before Roe v. Wade. I never heard from Lise again.

I could not help Lise but I wanted to help the girls of Project Peace. I sent a large check as a donation. I called the director and asked her if I could volunteer at the shelter. She asked me if I had any particular expertise to offer: job counseling, prenatal exercise, instruction in neonatal care? I had none of these skills. There was only one subject my training had prepared me to teach: the study of literature. I could not imagine expectant teenage mothers would be interested in the explication of literary texts, but what about something more practical, such as journaling? I told her that studies had shown that personal writing could help the writer organize and integrate difficult experiences. Perhaps the cathartic act of setting thoughts on paper during quiet hours would bring these girls a sense of calm and peace.

The director liked the idea and asked me come to the shelter the following Thursday at 7:00 p.m. She said she would not be seeing me, since she did not work on site, but would call the residential supervisor, Sister Mary Catherine, and tell her to expect me.

The following Thursday, promptly at 7:00 p.m., I showed up on the doorsteps of Project Peace. The front door was locked (to keep the girls in and the boys out). I rang the buzzer. A gray-haired woman in her fifties dressed in wool pants and turtleneck sweater appeared and introduced herself as Sister Mary Catherine. She asked me to chat with her in her office and then she would introduce me to the expectant mothers, who were waiting for me in the community room.

In spite of the religious differences between us, a Jewish woman and a Catholic nun, we had more in common than I'd expected. She had finished a master's degree in Women's Studies in Boston; I had specialized in feminist literary criticism while completing my doctorate. We were both passionate about the world of books and writing, we both identified as feminists.

The topic we did not discuss was reproductive choice. The mission of Project Peace as a Catholic-sponsored charity was to provide an alternative to abortion through adoption assistance or short-term postpartum support. I knew that Sister Mary Catherine would probably not support my pro-choice position. But I had not come to advocate for that, I had come to help the girls.

Sister Mary Catherine was friendly and interesting, and I found myself wishing I could stay and continue our conversation. But I had signed up to teach, and it was time to get started. As I followed Sister Mary Catherine down the hallway, I wondered what I was in for. This was a far more intimate setting than the college classrooms I was accustomed to. There was no desk to hide behind, no syllabus to hand out, no teacher's mask to protect me.

In the community room were six teenage girls who looked to be in their last trimester of pregnancy. Sister Mary Catherine explained to me that this evening's program was optional, that some residents had chosen to stay in their rooms, and that the girls assembled here had signed up. She introduced them one by one, smiled at me, and left the room.

My muscles tensed as I took a chair and asked everyone if we could sit in a circle. Some of the girls were reclining on couches, and I could feel their resentment as they hoisted themselves onto the nearby chairs. There were a few more folding chairs at the other end of the room, and two of the girls grudgingly went to get them so we could complete our circle. The activity of rearranging the group took several minutes, and once completed left me wishing I had something more relevant to offer, like Lamaze instruction. I found myself looking at six guarded faces that blurred into one and realized I couldn't recall a single name.

I decided to start with a time-honored technique for beginning a writing workshop. "Please say your name, your age, and what town you come from. I am Nancy Gerber, college English instructor, from Montclair." I did not say my age, 35 at the time, and no one asked. Seated around me were Letitia, 16, from Newark; Jennifer, 17, from Montclair; Val, 16, from Newark; Keisha, 15, from Irvington; Maribel, 17, from Newark; and Cynthia, 19, from Newark. Val, Keisha, Cynthia, and Letitia were African-American; Maribel was Latina; and Jennifer and I were white.

A silence followed the introductions. I asked the girls if they knew why we were here.

"Something about writing," one girl offered.

"And what would you be doing now if we weren't sitting here?" I asked.

"Watching television," said another mournfully, and it sounded like she wished she were.

"I'm here because I'd like to teach you about keeping a journal, a private place where you can feel free to write about anything you like—your hopes, fears, things that bother you, anything at all." The girls gazed at me as if I were growing another head. "How many of you enjoy reading?" Silence. "Writing? Do any of you write at all, poetry

maybe?" Two girls started to raise their hands. This gesture gave me hope. "I am going to pass out some paper and pens and ask you to write a few sentences about yourself, describing who you are." After a few minutes the girls put down their pens. "Would anyone like to read aloud what they have written?" Another silence. The girls stared at their rounded bellies.

I glanced at my watch. It was 7:30. These writing and reading activities were supposed to have taken us until 8:00, the end of the program. I wracked my brain about what to do next. There seemed to be no point in giving another writing exercise. "Why don't you just tell me about yourselves?" I asked. The room opened up, and the girls began to talk.

One girl said she had another baby, a little girl, who was cared for by her mom and dad. She wasn't sure whether she was going to keep this new one or give it up for adoption. Another said her family didn't have health insurance, and since Project Peace covered prenatal and parturition expenses, her parents had dropped her off here even though she'd wanted to stay at home. Maribel said her parents didn't want her to live with them now that she was pregnant and she wasn't sure where she would go after the baby was born. Letitia said she couldn't wait till Saturday, when her boyfriend was allowed a supervised visit with her in the community room. This was her second pregnancy, too. Val said she didn't want the baby and couldn't wait to have her figure back. Cynthia also said she didn't want this baby—she had planned to start Essex Community College – but her parents had pressured her into keeping the pregnancy and giving the baby up for adoption.

I was touched by their honesty and shaken by their stories. I was surprised to hear some of these girls had had unwanted pregnancies before. I wondered if they would return to high school and whether Maribel would be homeless. What had made me think their stories were ones they wanted to write about?

Before I left that evening, I asked if anyone wanted one of the spiral notebooks I had brought with me to use for journaling until we met the following week. No one did. The next time I visited, I tried to be more relevant. I brought photocopies of a passage from *The Blue Jay's Dance* by Louise Erdrich, a memoir of pregnancy and birth.

"I lumber up and down these roads hoping to engage my baby's head, hoping she will 'drop.' The last months and weeks of pregnancy are an endless string of hours, the most difficult weeks in which to stay balanced," I read aloud. A silence followed, but it felt different from the ones during our first meeting. I felt the girls connect with something they'd heard, maybe the tension of waiting for labor to begin, maybe the intense physical discomfort that burdens the last weeks of pregnancy.

I asked them if we could write a group poem together. "Each of you will give me a word or a few words in response to what you felt or heard in this piece of writing. It can be a feeling or something descriptive, something from the world of nature or from the world around you."

"Loneliness," said one girl.

"Fear," said another.

"A broken fence," from another.

"My mother's footsteps."

"The sound of crying."

As the responses came, I recorded them on a piece of paper. After the last girl had spoken, I read them back their words. They had written a poem.

Silence. I didn't know if the girls were feeling the profound emotions they'd released or boredom and disinterest. I asked them if they wanted me to type up their words and bring copies to our next meeting. No one answered.

I felt deflated, disappointed, as though the work we'd done together had vanished forever. The sheets with Erdrich's words lay crumpled and scattered on the floor. The sight of those crumpled sheets shut a door in my heart. The girls had rejected my gift, the lovely words that had brought us to writing.

Although it was only 7:30, the girls were tired. I knew they were eager to resume their nightly routine of television and chitchat, so I said goodnight. I stopped in to see Sister Mary Catherine and told her I would not be coming back to lead more workshops.

"I don't think these girls want to write," I told her. "I don't feel useful. I don't think they even want to be in that room with me." Sister Mary Catherine nodded in sympathy.

"These girls are very alone and very afraid," she said. "Writing requires a place of internal safety, and these girls do not feel safe." She stood and shook my hand. "I've enjoyed meeting you," she said. "I hope you'll stay in touch and come see us again."

But I never had the chance. Three months after Project Peace opened, it closed. I heard there was a funding shortage.

The girls of Project Peace were a difficult group to connect with. But I made a mistake. I interpreted their diffidence as dismissal. Had I been more attuned, I would have recognized their ability to collaborate on a piece of writing as a promising beginning, the beginnings of voice. Had I stayed, perhaps I could have shown them that writing can be a path to clarity and illumination, a way to take control of one's life story.

The other possibility, I now realize, is the words they uttered that night seeded themselves somewhere, giving them hope and helping them on their journey.

There's just no way to know.

Nancy Gerber received her doctorate in Literatures in English from Rutgers University. She is the author of *Losing a Life: A Daughter's Memoir of Caregiving*, a chronicle of the aftermath of her father's stroke, and "My Mother's Keeper," an illustrated chapbook about her mother's descent into Alzheimers. Her prose has appeared in scholarly and literary journals, including the *Journal of Aging, Humanities and the Arts*, *The Mom Egg*, and *Adanna*.