

Putting my pen in the wind for justice... with Esperanza

By Cathy Marston, PhD

In 1992, I began having pain in my hands, arms, neck and back from the inherently injurious duties of copy editing at the Austin American-Statesman. As an injured worker, society has blamed me for my injury. The AA-S held down my hours; and I had to move in with a boyfriend. The state's workers' comp system granted me lifetime, medical care. When I left for my doctoral program at the University of Iowa in 1994, I left with these permanent, work-related injuries. Iowa's vocational rehabilitation division bought me my first voice-recognition computer that I named Esperanza. This allowed me to continue to communicate – albeit painfully – in a world that privileges the written form.

As a person with disabilities, my employers held down my hours. I won a national research award for my work on occupation-related injuries and journalists; and was an elected official in our journalism educator association. Still, employers picked temporarily-able-bodied others for plum jobs – even if I was more qualified.

This bigotry led to me to moving in with another boyfriend, who was a batterer. When I sought help, it's not that I was in denial about being abused – as suggested by an interviewer last fall. Any battered woman can tell you that many people refuse to help you and say, “You need to leave him” – proof that they don't believe you. If you're lucky, you find people who are willing to help: they'll remind you that his conduct is criminal; assist you in finding stable employment and safe housing; and provide ongoing support. As with my work-related injuries and disability accommodation, the individual is not the problem: it is the society that needs to be changed.

I served more than 9 years in prison defending myself against my batterer. In the 1990s, the state's top, domestic-violence-awareness agency, the Texas Council on Family Violence, recommended 120 persons for clemency under Senate Concurrent Resolution 26. All of those recommended were women, except for one man. The legislature; TCFV; and the citizens of Texas recognized that there was a problem with the police arresting battered women wrongfully. No one was released under SCR 26. The Board of Pardons and Paroles unanimously recommended one of those women for a pardon at that time: two governors refused to sign the pardon. Many have forgotten this history and the pre-prison reality for many of these women who repeatedly called the police on their batterers. I listened to a panel this fall telling victims what WE needed to do, instead of what the police, prosecutors, citizens, and batterers need to do.

One of those TCFV recommendees, Shirley Jones, came home last October. Two others were recently denied parole: Sherry

Nance, who will turn 70 this year, and Sherry Wolf, who is 55. Wolf wrote to me that the board approved her for parole 6 years ago, only to re-vote and deny her. Margaret Crayton was supposed to come home in March. Rita Gómez Vásquez will turn 80 in prison in May.

Those who are released from prison will face societal bigotry. Without a job, I cannot afford health insurance. As for my “lifetime,” workers'-compensation-mandated, medical care for my work-related injuries: since I moved back to San Antonio in 2014, I have been unable to find a doctor that will take workers' comp for an injury as old as mine. The workers in that state system

keep telling me that it's my responsibility to keep searching for a doctor – not their agency's responsibility to enforce their own order. Doctors vary in their excuses for not taking workers' comp – from cumbersome paperwork requirements to minuscule reimbursement for services. I was on SSI before I went to prison, but the state has fought me for more than 2 years to prevent reinstating it; and our current regime is talking

about drastically cutting its already puny, monthly income benefits and guaranteed healthcare.

I listened to Texas Senator Ted Cruz last month debate with Senator Bernie Sanders: our own senator argued that healthcare is not a right in Texas or the U.S. When I was a military brat prior to turning 23, I always went to the doctor when I needed to, because it was paid for. I am 49 now and am fortunate that my elderly dad can afford some healthcare for me when I need it. For-profit healthcare is immoral; and universal healthcare is the worldwide standard.

I have been a regular on “The Prison Show” on 90.1 KPFT in Houston since Oct 2015 to advocate for the dismantling of the Prison Industrial Complex. In January 2016, the only time that I was on the show from Houston, the guy scheduled to go after me saw my Free Battered Texas Women T-shirt and snarled, “You're getting 15 minutes for THAT? You need to give me some of that time!”

I had a similar experience at the July 2016 Nehemiah Reentry Forum in San Antonio, where every woman held to her presentation time respectfully, while almost every male went past time. It was also at that “interfaith” forum where I announced that I was Pagan. I am on the planning committee for our earth-based, spirituality circle at the First Unitarian Universalist Church of San Antonio: the Celestial Celebration Circle. I did so in response to a reading calling for the Pagans to be driven out – in a world and



Cathy Marston speaking at an Anti-Trump rally in Austin, Texas



Cathy with Dr. Doshie Piper, a Nehemiah organizer

planet that is literally being destroyed by male-dominated religions that promote misogyny and other bigotries. I know the heart of Nehemiah's organizer, Dr. Doshie Piper, is for a truly interfaith, permanent resource for citizens reentering from prison to San Antonio. I am fortunate that I could address that with her and the crowd, as opposed to death threats faced by Wiccan lawyer Phyllis Currott; Jewish community centers; and mosques.

In Summer 2004, I stepped into the Esperanza Center for the first time. Everyone was washing the sins of our country out of our flag. I was too afraid to say that the Austin police had arrested me that January after finding my abusive, ex-boyfriend on top of me subsequent to him smothering, strangling, and beating me for 90 minutes. I told a man about it afterwards, who sneered and asked what I had done to deserve to be beaten.

On February 5, 2017, I showed the film *Sin by Silence* about the successful laws providing clemency for incarcerated, battered women in California – in stark contrast to the failures in our own state. San Antonio police arrest battered woman about 50 percent of the time on a domestic-violence call, according to PEACE Initiative. The phrase “domestic violence offender” has no meaning in a state that wrongfully arrests battered women and refuses to fix the problem it knows has existed since the 1980s.

Now we ALL have a president who is a self-admitted profer of women, as well as an anti-immigrant, ableist, classist, racist, journalist-hating thug. It's time for everyone to accept responsibility for changing themselves, then connect with others to hold accountable our government officials whose salaries we pay. Those in power have a myriad of ways to blame those with lesser power. There is always an excuse for blaming the person at the bottom of a power dualism.

Fighting Against, continued from Page 7

conflict resolution workshops, to also attend our fourth meeting. To make things even more interesting, this psychotherapist managed to secure a radio interview spot for herself to talk about our group, the day before our fourth meeting was scheduled, and she hoped that this radio interview might perhaps bring in some more Trump supporters to our group.

As it turned out, our fourth group meeting was relatively well-attended, as there were 10 people at our meeting, but once again we had only our one dedicated Trump supporter attending our group. The hate crimes and discrimination workshop presenter was not able to make it to our meeting, though he conveyed that he wanted to come either to our next meeting or the one after that. However, the experienced conflict resolutions person did attend our group, and helped facilitate various conflicting interactions between our Trump supporter and others in the group. Once again it felt to me like a dynamic and constructive group meeting, and a few people, including the Trump supporter and myself, suggested that it would be good for us to start talking about positive actions that we could take as a group. It struck me as especially meaningful and confirming that in the introductions at the beginning of the meeting, the Trump supporter expressed how he felt valued and not judged in our group, and though I must admit that I do have my own judgments about him, I was glad to hear that he felt so comfortable with us. People also started talking about wanting to promote our group to the public, as well as continuing to try to persuade Republicans and Conservatives to join us.

In prison, we incarcerated citizens “put our pens in the wind” to grieve our conditions of confinement and write our own legal pleadings to challenge our holding convictions. On February 13, I spoke from the South steps of the state capital at the Texas Families for Justice Rally sponsored by criminal-justice reform groups. I then met with staff of my district senator, Donna Campbell, and others with whom I have cultivated relationships. I've come a long way since the November 2014 rally, when I was still on parole and too afraid to step into an office!

I want to thank Gloria, Graciela, and Esperanza – the Center, although my new computer still has that name – for providing a safe space for me to put my pen in the wind for the past 7 years. By giving me hope, I am able to give others hope.

Bio: Cathy Marston, PhD, is founder of Free Battered Texas Women. She was an officer from 1996-1999 in the Media and Disability Interest Group of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication. Contact her by FBTW's Facebook; Google Plus; and Twitter or on email at: cmarston.fbtw@gmail.com or call 210/776-7585.



With members of First Universalist Church of San Antonio

In conclusion, I believe that my initial ideas stemming from Gene Sharp's³ work in regard to moving from a dictatorship to democracy, are in a process of creative and constructive development as they play themselves out in the group arena that I have been describing. It is satisfying to me that my ideas have taken shape as much as they have, and I am excited and curious to see how far they can develop in the context of the group that I have formed. I encourage people in all areas of our country to form their own Citizens Against Hate Crimes and Discrimination groups, with the goal of forging common ground for this urgent theme with both Trump supporters and non-supporters, i.e., with people of diverse political perspectives—who have a problem with the increase in hate crimes and discrimination that has occurred since the campaign and election of Donald Trump.

Note: For footnotes and complete references, please contact La Voz de Esperanza at: lavoz@esperanzacenter.org.

Bio: Elliot Benjamin, Ph.D. is a philosopher, mathematician, psychologist, musician, writer, teacher, and counselor, with Ph.Ds in psychology and mathematics.

