

Update on Adult Education Podcast
Episode 6: Voices from the Field
with Barbara Gibson, Dr. David Coogan, Terrence Scruggs, and Ronald Fountain
July 2018

[Music]

Barbara Gibson: Welcome to Voices from the Field. Today we have with us Dr. David Coogan, Terrence Scruggs, and Ronald Fountain. All three who have written a book called *Writing our way Out: Memoirs from jail*. They have graciously agreed to speak with us on this podcast after conducting a very successful reading and presentation at lunchtime at the Adult Education and Literacy summer conference. And followed that up with another very successful workshop and a lot of book signings from their book they're writing *Writing our way out: Memoirs from jail*. We are going to be hearing some of their readings and hear a little bit about them, their background, and the impact that the writing program had on their lives and the work that they're doing now. I think everyone's continuing to write. So we'll hear more about that. First we'll start with Dr. Coogan who will give a little bit more about the background of the program, his background, and then also do a reading from the book. Dave.

Dr. David Coogan: Okay, yes, thank you for having me here on the program. My name is David Coogan. I'm an English professor at Virginia Commonwealth University. And when I first moved to Richmond, in 2004, I found myself waking up one morning, walking the park overlooking the James River, with boxes of books to unpack and, the semester had not yet started. It was sometime in July or June, I think. And I saw the TV news van. And I realized that they are about to do a story, and I inquired what the story was about. And they told me that they were doing a story on a gang rape that had taken place the night before. And I was immediately found myself with a microphone in my nose and I was interviewed and the media was mostly trying to get me scared to leave the park and not to ever come back and to complain about crime, and I thought it was the stupidest thing.

There was no inquisitive nature in any of the questions. There was no critical thinking. There was no hope. And I thought this is thoughtless. I'm an educator. I like people to be thoughtful so I started to ask myself these questions about why people do what they do. And I had a hard time realizing or admitting that most people rationally decide to get up and hurt somebody one day. And so then the question became, well why do people end up doing something that's not in their best interest or it's against most codes of civility and normal conduct?

And that led me to this writing workshop that I ended up teaching at the Richmond City Jail. In 2006 I brought those questions with me to the jail, and I invited men who I had never met before to open up and answer the questions in the form of a memoir, to write their life story of how they got to this place in life. Where they're coming in and out of jail, they're caught up in the system. And to write with the hope that you can change your life and make your way out of the system and into a better a better life. So I started in the summer 2006, and about 10 years later we published this book, *Writing our way out: Memoirs from jail*.

The original idea for a book was something very small and modest- the kind of zine or journal that you would make in a Xerox room and staple together and give away to your friends. But the commitment level of the men was so astounding and the writing level so interesting to me that I

really dedicated a lot of time in my life as a professor to figuring out ways to make this a part of my job.

And I started teaching classes in prison literature and I developed a program called Open Minds that brings college students into the jail to learn how to write with the incarcerated in search of a better life. While all that was happening, the men that I first taught back in 2006 were finally released. They came out in different times, but the group of them was finally out and coincidentally, the book that we had been working on was finally ready to be published. So the book is my memoir of teaching these ten men to write their memoirs.

It's a teacher's journey, from my point of view. But each of these men is writing their own story. Their own journey from one life to another from, their earliest memories, to their reentry. So I'm going to read to you a little bit from the prologue of the book. The book is organized in three sections. It starts with us in dialogue together at the jail in class where we're, you know, opening up with questions and assignments, and they're writing, and we're sharing and analyzing each other's stories. The middle part of the book is when everybody is shipped off to prison and I'm pen-paling with everybody now. And the last third of the book is when they're released from prison, you know more or less five years later, for the majority of them. Some of them quicker. Some of them later. And that last third of the book is when we're in dialogue with each other in freedom, and they're figuring out their new lives. Okay, so here is the prologue:

“Dave what do I always try to tell you?”

I say nothing, the cell phone pressed to my ear as I wait for Kelvin to lead me to the answer. From somewhere deep within, he sighs. I'm walking fast bearing down in my thoughts, as I approached the picnic tables in the part of Libby Hill Park that overlooks the James River. It was here in the summer of 2004 that four teenage boys raped a young woman, beat her boyfriend, robbed them both, and fled. It was here the day after a crime I had not seen, that I first envisioned criminals, the kind of people I had never known, becoming writers taking control of their stories and plotting their futures away from crime. And it's here that Kelvin tries explaining crime to me now.

“Guys like us, we always take the easy way out.”

“But after you've written to understand why that doesn't work, why would you go on taking the easy way out?”

“Look I know you don't want to hear this Dave, but there is no why. No answering that.”

The cell signal chokes in and out along with my memories of Andre writing his memoir at the jail and in prison and then coming to see me in my office at Virginia Commonwealth University years later, after prison. His memoir complete. Along with Kelvin's and the others. I stare into the fog past the streetlights and stars.

“He could have been high right then.”, Kelvin offers.

“But he wrote against that.” I protest.

“He'd been down that path before, more than once. It's in his story.”

“He could have needed money for something else. A woman maybe”

“But he had a job.”

“Could have been he had no one to talk to with whatever he was going through.”

I walked down the hill toward the parking lot of the Fast Mart. There for the second time in four years. I imagine a crime I did not see. Andre pushing his way out of the store with his carton of Newport's and a few hundred dollars. The police across the street watching the whole thing before chasing him and his driver around the sudden turns and horrendous dips of the road until the truck hit something hard enough to bring it to a sudden stop.

“I know I get depressed like that sometimes. No one to talk to.” I hear Kelvin concluding.

People are pumping gas at the Fast Mart, lost in their routines. I listen to the traffic and finally let go. I have to let go of what I can't know.

“Hey Calvin?”

“Yeah, Doc?” He brightens.

“Do you remember when I asked you in the jail to pinpoint the moment when you choose to go down this path in life? And after a long while you finally said I was the first person who'd ever asked you that. Shoot Dave, now you're the second person who's ever asked me that. I keep telling you you're the only one asking questions like that.”

Barbara Gibson: Thank you so much for sharing that part of your story and the story of some of men that you worked with. We are now going to be hearing from two of the men who participated in the class and in the writing class and who have contributed to *Writing Our Way Out*. We are now going to hear from Terence Scruggs, one of the authors of *Writing Our Way Out*. He is going to tell us a little bit about himself and also do a reading from the book. So Terence, I'll let you take it away.

Terence Scruggs: Hello, my name is Terence Scruggs. I'm one of the co-authors of *Writing our way out*. I'm an ex-offender and I like to share my story of how I came out of recidivism and moved forward with my life. This is one of the stories we had to write in the process of understanding some of the struggles that I had to face with identifying some of my short comings.

I don't ever recall what I did to earn my punishment, but I do recall being sent up to my room I that shared with three sisters. There was the waiting. A time upon me. My fate. Tick tock, tick tock.

Her love was not what I was anticipating. Being there was her entrance; a punishment, a beating, an ass-whopping. Exit. The more this happened, the more I questioned.

“Do you love me?”

“Of course I love you. Don't do it again.”

But I must have enjoyed her pain because there I go again, doing the same thing to bring on another beating. The question of her loving me, I asked that a lot. Not of her, but of myself. Even knowing that I didn't know the answer; who, what, and why became my battle cry.

“Where is my daddy? Why we don't live in a house like Kyle, my best friend? Why can't I go there, do that?”

But there was no answer except, “Leave me alone. I don't know. Ask someone else.”

She gave me even more reason to find an answer on my own.

Have you ever experienced being hit with a cord that leaves wounds even to this day? Or running from being hit and half a bed you were hiding under come down on you? Maybe you were told to go outside and bring in the switch. You know, the tree branch that were everywhere in the projects.

“You better not bring no small branch.”

It would only have made matters worse. Yes and I was whipped with those, and I was a mess. The pain of discipline created within me a conflict between what I experienced and what I believed.

Barbara Gibson: Thank you for sharing that with us, Terrence. We really appreciate your honesty in your writing. I think many of our adult education teachers appreciate having those insights, that's sometimes they don't necessarily get from their students. But this book gives them an opportunity to learn new ways of communicating with their students and teaching their students and learning from their students as well. So thank you for sharing that with us. And now we have Ronald Fountain who will be telling us a little bit about himself and also reading a selection from the book.

I wanted to say, Ronald, that when you told us a little bit about yourself after lunch today something that you said, I really identified with in my own personal life, when you were talking about baby Ronald and how you sort of learn to not feel very much and just sort of go through life without really feeling feelings that you legitimately had and that you that you should have. And I really identified with that because of some things that I've been dealing with in the last six months or so.

And I think that's one of the wonderful things about this book and about the writings in this book. You know, all of us who read this don't have to have been incarcerated in a real prison with walls and bars to have to live in many ways, you know, in the prison of our making, in our mind. I think that's one of the things that, through this book, all of you who contributed to it are talking about how you're moving your way out of a real prison, but that the real prison is in your mind. And that you have to overcome that in order to truly be free.

That was something that, when I heard you today, it really spoke to me. I think that's beyond the value and this really important value that you have, that all of you have, in writing. I think that the fact that you touch other peoples' lives and help other people change their lives is a tremendous gift that you've given to all of us. So I'm going to let you tell us a little bit about yourself and share a selection from the book.

Ronald Fountain: Well, thank you. My name is Ronald Fountain. I currently am a resident of Baltimore, Maryland, but I'm also a co-author to the book *Writing Our Way Out: Memoires From Jail*. And I guess today I would title my piece "Living My Truth", but when I began the writing process I was unveiling my truth. And I didn't quite know exactly, what that looked like, what it sounded like, how people was gonna receive it. I was just excited. I'm a very optimistic, hopeful person. And I remember coming to class with Dr. Coogan and he said, "You always have a smile." So as the work first began, my first section of the book was supposed to be called "Seeing Me Smile".

But I can remember getting to those rough points where I wanted to stop. And Dr. Coogan and the rest of my brothers within the book inspired me to keep going and keep pushing through. And so I always celebrate my freedom date and that's my date, is the date I was released from incarceration, which is July 10, 2007. On that day I didn't know that something had happened with inside me that was going to compel me to dig deeper inside myself to what I call it today, destroy the box. The box is societal norms or regulars that everybody believes they have to live in.

Ronald, simply said, does not like that. He's a rebellion that a lot of days, today I'm a rebel with a cause, but back then I was a rebel without a cause, but starting to unlock some mysteries within my life, how to deal with abandonment, has propelled me into my life purpose. So I am a motivational speaker. I also, I call myself an inspirational leader, but I'm a person who loves to inspire. Because I believe hope is the basis of everything and the foundation, and without it you can't get to belief or faith. And also I'm a life coach and my life coaching deals with humanity.

And, as of right now, there's not a profession that actually titles that so I'm once again living outside the box, because I believe in so passionately that it's your own lived experience that

creates a journey that is a teachable moment. So this book has propelled me into a place where today I like to say I'm a community resource worker, where I work with a diverse population and I make myself face things that normally I wouldn't.

And people push me out there to be out front and speak, but the LGBT community, the re-entry society, substance use disorder, and mental health disorder by diagnosis. Those communities, trauma-informed care, a lot of times it's the voice that is silent. And, from your brief introduction, that's that place that I believe it's the point of humanity where we all could connect. If we could see our differences as a place of opportunity and growth, we can change the world for a better place. And so that's kind of like what the book helped me get to, but I always had the optimism that this is gonna be more than I asked for. And it was. I've lost some people along the way, but I've gained so much more in perspective of where I'm going and who I want to be. And today I just want to be authentic and true to who I am.

So the piece that I'm gonna read from the book is actually going to be at my ending, and it's kind of what my hopeful would be, and this is just to give the audience a little taste what's yet to come, but it's actually here now, what was yet to come then.

After 14 long months, I heard my name being called. I quietly grab my things, I traveled to the mess hall, where a sergeant is waiting to receive me. This is my final walk to freedom. My excitement is mounting. I'm given a pair of brown slacks and a brown shirt to put on. The voice in my head says my past is done and will not change, but today is my present. A gift from my Creator and my future and it's not done yet. Stay in today, make positive choices so tomorrow will be brighter. Let's go, and take on the world. I take my last breath of confinement, and I gaze up at the fences of sharp steel that have been daring me to across them. Then I say goodbye forever.

The gate is open, and the officer allows me to walk through without him following.

"I wish you well and hope you never come back!" He says seriously.

"Thanks and you take care too and remember, we're not all criminals."

I see over my shoulder a female officer there to transport me to Richmond. Now I know I'm truly free, because they trusted a female to carry me by myself. I want to cry, but instead I stuff it away and proceed on. I have my clothes, a box, and a few dollars in my pocket. I purchased a bus ticket only to find that my bus is late. Wanting a cigarette, I go outside. I try to control my desire to roam the city and find something or someone to get into. A man appears in the bus station and we strike up a conversation. I tell him I'm trying to reach my mother and he lends me his cellphone.

Finally, a familiar voice. I tell my mother I'm free and in the bus station in Charlottesville. I'm hoping that she has made plans to come pick me up from the bus station, but this is a difficult task for her these days. Fanny no longer has a driver's license or a car to drive. I know she would do everything in her power to help me, but I have to do my part to make it a success. I thank the gentleman for letting me use his phone. The bus arrives and we board for Richmond. There are two seats available and we sit next to each other.

“Excuse me no offense, but did you just get released from the penitentiary?”

I'm surprised but relieved when he recognizes the clothes. This mean he's even been there or he knows someone who has. I close my eyes and try to isolate myself, but I have this feeling that everyone knows what I've done and is watching. But this man is a god-sent angel. He was sent to relieve some of the pressure I'm feeling about making it on the outside. He shares with me his testimony since he's been home, the struggles he's encountered on the street, the low points, high points, let downs, and successes. After talking with him I feel more assured that I can be a conqueror. That success is mine for the taking.

Barbara Gibson Ronald thank you so much for ending this podcast on such a hopeful note, and I feel that that's one of the great things that this book offers is an opportunity for adult educators to learn how to help students use writing as a way to think differently about their lives and act differently in their lives. So thank you all, Dave, Terence, and Ronald. For sharing your stories with us and being with us today.

Thank you

[Music]