Discussion Guide

What I Want My Words To Do To You

A Film by Madeleine Gavin, Judith Katz, and Gary Sunshine

www.pbs.org/pov
Dear Viewers,

An invitation to watch a documentary about women in prison may be met by a hesitant, ambivalent response. On the surface, the subject concerns an element of our society that most of us would prefer remain invisible. Indeed, when, in 1998, I was first invited to Bedford Hills Correctional Facility by the playwright Eve Ensler, I too had such a reaction.

Yet, that first visit would become the impetus for making our film, and would fundamentally change my perceptions about many things, not the least of which are my attitudes about women in prison: why they are there, how they feel about their crimes, how they live their lives, that they do live their lives, and how possible it is for any of us, no matter how smart, how good, how victimized ourselves, to make a bad choice that results in tragic consequences.

Our film focuses on a group of 15 women who participate in a writing workshop at the Bedford Hills Correctional Facility. Eve Ensler began facilitating the workshop in 1997 and still leads it today. The members of the workshop are serving out sentences which range from ten years to life without the possibility of parole. They are part of a population of 850 women, and share their status with the more than 90,000 women in prison in the United States today, an increase of 138% over the last ten years. An alarming statistic, yes, but it is my hope that our film transcends numbers, and prison garb, B-movie stereotypes, derisive jokes, and even the crimes the writers have committed. Ultimately, I hope our film shows that these women are, like all of us, complex individuals.

What I Want My Words To Do To You documents the writing workshop over a period of four years. Through a series of exercises Ensler assigns them and the discussions these exercises provoke, the women discover how writing allows them to understand, cope with and to take responsibilities for their actions. Structured by my fellow filmmakers Gary Sunshine and Madeleine Gavin, the film slowly reveals how each woman grapples with her own culpability and confronts the lives she's destroyed, the families left behind, and her own life as it might have been.

The film culminates in a performance of the work of the 15 authors, given in the prison, by a group of actors including Glenn Close, Rosie Perez, Marisa Tomei, Hazelle Goodman, and Mary Alice. The emotional responses of the inmate authors, as they hear their own words read out loud by these acclaimed actors, shows how profoundly they crave and appreciate being recognized for something other than their crimes.

It has been said that we build our own prisons and serve as our own jailers; we offer this film so that you might free yourself of assumptions about, or apathy towards women who live in prison, and allow yourself to see the need for transformation and purpose in a population society has written off. And most importantly, to show how taking responsibility for wrongdoing, even murder, can change the direction of a life, wherever it is lived.

You will be surprised by who you will meet. I certainly was.

Judith Katz

Producer, What I Want My Words To Do To You

New York, 2003
MISTAKES

By Eve Ensler

From Eve Ensler’s introduction to a performance of her students’ works at the Bedford Hills Correctional Facility

Everyone is here at Bedford because of a mistake. Some of those mistakes occurred within months—some within minutes. Most of the mistakes were dreadful, catastrophic. Now we have frozen you in your mistake. Marked you forever. Held captive. Discarded. Hated for your mistake. You have essentially been forced to become your mistake, the walking daily embodiment of your mistake. Held in the monument constructed to punish mistakes.

Before I came here to Bedford, I imagined you the women here—mistakes lying on mistake cots behind steel mistake bars.

Mistakes do not have faces or feelings or histories or futures. They are bad. Mistakes. We must forget them—put them away.

Then I came to Bedford.

Slowly I began to meet the mistakes—one by one. They had soft, delicate voices, strong hands, beautiful faces, feisty spirits, outrageous laughs. These mistakes were mothers, daughters, sisters, aunts, Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, Jews—they had fantasies and toothaches and bad moods and funky t-shirts.

Then we began our writing group. 15 different mistakes in one room. I began to see how it worked:

There was the mistake and the woman.

There was the mistake and the woman who got Kleenex anytime anyone remotely cried.

There was the mistake and the great deep love of one’s child.

The mistake and a brilliant poetic mind.

The mistake and the woman who teaches, who writes, who sings, who braids, who hates herself for her mistake.

There is the mistake and the woman who waits to move on from the mistake, who is desperate for the tools to transform the self that made the mistake, who longs to be seen, to be seen as something other than a mistake.

In our group, I watched women struggle week after week to give words, to give voice to the guilt, the sorrow, the fear, the despair that had formed around their crimes.

I was honored—and I mean this—privileged—to experience the depth of their seeking and reflection. I was moved and changed by their courage and willingness to take full responsibility for their lives and deeds.

There is the mistake. It is one moment. It is in the past. It is ruined. It cannot be changed.

Then—there is the woman.
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Introduction

On its surface, What I Want My Words to Do to You is a feature length documentary about a writing workshop in a women’s prison. But more than a simple look inside the walls of Bedford Hills Correctional Facility, this film is about the power of words to humanize.

The writing group began in 1997 when activist and playwright Eve Ensler (The Vagina Monologues), invited to Bedford Hills Correctional Facility by Glenn Close to research a script, found herself moved by the women’s stories. Through a series of exercises and discussions, the workshop participants, most of whom had been convicted of murder, delved into their most terrifying realities as they grappled with the nature of their crimes and the painful truth about their choices and their own culpability. Witnessing this process allows viewers to see past the crime to the person, to see “the woman” and not just “the mistake.”

Watching women come to terms with lives that “might have been” not only gives viewers significant insight into the individuals on screen; it also provides viewers with a model for reflecting on their own lives. As an outreach tool, What I Want My Words To Do To You, can function as a looking glass through which communities and families examine the nature of crime and those whose lives are changed by it. It offers an extraordinary chance for viewers to learn from inmates’ hindsight about what can be done to prevent future tragedies.

In the climax of the film, sitting among 300 of their fellow inmates, the writers listen as their own words are read by a group of renowned actors gathered by Ensler for this special performance. The camera cuts back and forth between the performer and the writer, creating a complex dialogue that underscores the power of writing to transform experience into wisdom. Similarly, discussion can transform What I Want My Words to Do to You from a simple film into a powerful springboard for examining and learning from the personal and political stories usually hidden behind prison walls. As inmate Judith Clark puts it, what I want my words to do to you is, “Open up a dialogue. Disrupt your day…I want to leave you dissatisfied with simple explanations and rote assumptions, thirsty for complexity and the deep discomfort of ambiguity…I want to make you wonder about your own prisons. I want to make you ask why.”
What I Want My Words to Do to You offers an excellent model for self-reflection and inquiry that gets past labels to reveal incredible wisdom and human connection. It is well suited for use in a variety of settings and is especially recommended for use with:

- Families of inmates
- High schools and youth programs
- People involved with the justice system (e.g., prison guards and inmates, judges, attorneys, police officers, parole officers, social service providers, educators)
- Colleges, universities, and community colleges, especially in conjunction with departments of Women’s Studies, English / Creative Writing, Sociology, Law, Criminal Justice / Law Enforcement, Social Work / Counseling, Psychology
- Substance abuse prevention and recovery programs
- Civic groups
- Churches, synagogues, mosques, and other religious institutions
- Your local PBS station and their Program Club: www.pbs.org/pbsprogramclub/about.html
- Community Organizations with a mission to promote education and learning such as P.O.V.’s national partners Elderhostel Learning in Retirement Centers, members of the Listen Up! network, or your local library.

What I Want My Words to Do to You raises issues that will touch a wide range of people in your community, including people of different races, ages, socioeconomic classes, religions, and political perspectives. People who are involved with the issues listed below will especially relate to the film:

Acting / Theater
Conflict resolution / violence prevention
Creative writing / autobiography / prison literature
Death penalty
Domestic violence
Feminism / gender issues / women’s rights
Human rights
Incarceration and re-entry
Justice system
Mental health issues
Psychology
Stereotyping
Sentencing Guidelines / Mandatory Minimum Sentences / Rockefeller Drug Laws
Social services / social work
Substance abuse treatment and prevention
Therapy

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The Women We Meet

The Writers/Inmates

Cynthia Berry
Kathy Boudin
Judith Clark
Betty Harris
Donna Hylton
Migdalia Martinez
Michelle McWilliams
Nora Moran
Keila Pulinaro
Betsy Ramos
Anna Santana
Pamela Smart
Roslyn Smith
Monica Szlekovics
Jan Warren

The Actors

Mary Alice
Glenn Close
Hazelle Goodman
Rosie Perez
Marisa Tomei

Eve Ensler – playwright, activist, workshop leader

Photo: Jeff Vespa

Photo: Courtesy of What I Want My Words To Do To You

Actors Hazelle Goodman, Marisa Tomei, Glenn Close, Mary Alice and Rosie Perez
Women In Prison

Demographics

- In 2002, there were 96,000 women in state and federal prisons, a seven-fold increase since 1980.
- Seven percent of all prison inmates are female. About 40% of women in prison violated drug laws. About 25% are in prison for committing a violent crime.¹
- Black women’s rate of imprisonment is more than 8 times that of white women. Hispanic women’s rate of imprisonment is nearly 4 times that of white women.²
- More than half of the women in state prisons have been physically and/or sexually abused. Seventy-five percent used drugs regularly prior to their arrest. Nearly 25% have a history of mental illness.
- Seventy-five percent of women currently behind bars are mothers, two-thirds of them with children under 18.
- Approximately 37% of incarcerated women had monthly incomes of less than $600/month in the year prior to their arrest.
- About 1.5 million children had a parent in jail or prison in 1999. For 126,000 of them, it was their mother.³ One of 14 African American children has a parent in prison.⁴
- Children of mothers in prison are five times more likely than their peers to end up in jail.⁵
- 41.3% of the correctional population in America has attained only “some high school or less.” This compares to 18.4% of the general population.⁶
- The more education an inmate received, the less likely he or she was to return to prison.⁷ In a Massachusetts study, not a single inmate who earned a college degree had been re-incarcerated for a new crime.⁸

- In 1994, Congress eliminated Pell Grants for incarcerated men and women, decimating most prison college programs. Nationally, the only higher education program that’s still publicly funded is for youthful offenders.
- A study at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility showed that the population of women inadequately served by the New York public schools on the outside--low-income African Americans and Latinas--were the same demographic group, ages 17-58, pursuing a college education behind bars.
- Nearly all people who are incarcerated today will, at some point, be released.

Source: www.sentencingproject.org unless otherwise noted.

¹ Amnesty International
² Amnesty International
³ Aid to Inmate Mothers, Montgomery, AL
⁴ Amnesty International
⁵ Aid to Inmate Mothers, Montgomery, AL
⁷ Bureau of Prisons, 1987
Bedford Hills

The women you see in *What I Want My Words To Do To You* are incarcerated at the Bedford Hills Correctional Facility, a maximum security prison housing more than 800 women. The prison began in 1901 as a reformatory for women aged 16-30 who were convicted of lesser offenses. Located just north of New York City, throughout its history, the facility has had a reputation of creating and adopting the most progressive correctional ideas available.

Many of the women profiled in *What I Want My Words To Do To You* talk about the jobs they do in Bedford. Current initiatives include help for inmates dealing with the challenges of domestic violence, substance abuse, and AIDS. There is also a program in which inmates train guide dogs. Several projects help women deal with parenting issues, including a nursery—the oldest prison nursery in the United States—where new mothers may keep their babies for up to 18 months. What is striking about these programs is that, though managed by employees, they are staffed by inmates.

The Writing Group

In 1997, award-winning author Eve Ensler first visited the Bedford Hills Correctional Facility for Women. Ensler, who had taught at the university level, volunteered to be a writing instructor. Known for her ability to get women to talk about things that would normally go unspoken, Ensler began her work by creating a safe and challenging context for the inmates to explore the circumstances that had led them to prison.

Most of the 15 participants had been convicted of murder. They included the well-known, like Weather Underground members Kathy Boudin and Judith Clark, as well as women who were not known by anyone beyond their immediate neighborhood, friends, and family.

Through the trust she built and the exercises she designed, Ensler helped the prisoners to use writing, not to distract themselves from their situation, but rather, to go into its causes, details and consequences. The result was a writing community that has flourished for over five years and continues to this day.

The initiative also produced some astounding writing, giving rise to several theatrical performances. Over the years, Ensler and playwright Gary Sunshine have used this writing to create several performance texts, and then arranged performances of these texts at the prison and at various venues outside, including a benefit at Lincoln Center’s Alice Tully Hall that raised significant funds for the prison’s college education program.
This guide is designed to help you use *What I Want My Words to Do to You* as the centerpiece of a community event. It contains suggestions for organizing an event as well as ideas for how to help participants think more deeply about the issues in the film. The discussion questions are designed for a very wide range of audiences. Rather than attempt to address them all, choose one or two that best meet the needs and interests of your group.

**Planning an Event**

In addition to showcasing documentary films as an art form, P.O.V. films can be used to present information, get people interested in taking action on an issue, provide opportunities for people from different groups or perspectives to exchange views, and/or create space for reflection. Using the questions below as a planning checklist will help ensure a high quality/high impact event.

- **Have you defined your goals?** With your partner(s), set realistic goals. Will you host a single event or engage in an ongoing project? Being clear about your goals will make it much easier to structure the event, target publicity, and evaluate results.

- **Does the way you are planning to structure the event fit your goals?** Do you need an outside facilitator, translator, or sign language interpreter? If your goal is to share information, are there local experts on the topic who should be present? How might you involve inmates, former inmates, or other groups under discussion so they can speak for themselves? How large an audience do you want? (Large groups are appropriate for information exchanges. Small groups allow for more intensive dialogue.)

- **Is the event being held in a space where all participants will feel equally comfortable?** Is it wheelchair accessible? Is it in a part of town that’s easy to reach by various kinds of transportation? If you are bringing together different constituencies, is it neutral territory? Does the physical configuration allow for the kind of discussion you hope to have?

- **Will the room set up help you meet your goals?** Is it comfortable? If you intend to have a discussion, can people see one another? Are there spaces to use for small break out groups? Can everyone easily see the screen and hear the film?

- **Have you scheduled time to plan for action?** Planning next steps can help people leave the room feeling energized and optimistic, even when the discussion has been difficult. Action steps are especially important for people who already have a good deal of experience talking about the issue(s) on the table. For those who are new to the issue(s), just engaging in public discussion serves as an action step.
Controversial or unusual topics often make for excellent discussions. By their nature, those same topics also give rise to deep emotions and strongly held beliefs. As a facilitator, you can create an atmosphere where people feel safe, encouraged, and respected, making it more likely that they will be willing to share openly and honestly. Here’s how:

**Preparing yourself:**

*Identify your own hot button issues.* View the film before your event and give yourself time to reflect so you aren’t dealing with raw emotions at the same time that you are trying to facilitate a discussion.

*Be knowledgeable.* You don’t need to be an expert on issues related to incarcerated women to facilitate a discussion, but knowing the basics can help you keep a discussion on track and gently correct misstatements of fact. If you need more background information than is provided in this Guide, check the Resources listed on p.19.

*Be clear about your role.* You may find yourself taking on several roles for an event, e.g., host, organizer, projectionist. If you are also planning to serve as facilitator, be sure that you can focus on that responsibility and avoid distractions during the discussion. Keep in mind that being a facilitator is not the same as being a teacher. A facilitator must remain neutral, helping move along the discussion without imposing their views on the dialogue.

*Know your group.* Issues can play out very differently for different groups of people. Is your group new to the issue or have they dealt with it before? Factors like geography, age, race, ethnicity, religion, gender, health, education, and socio-economic class, can all have an impact on comfort levels, speaking styles, and prior knowledge. If you are bringing together different segments of your community, we strongly recommend hiring an experienced facilitator.

**Finding a Facilitator**

Some university professors, human resource professionals, clergy, and youth leaders may be specially trained in facilitation skills. In addition to these local resources, groups such as the National Conference for Community and Justice, Inc. (www.nccj.org), The Fortune Society (www.fortunesociety.org) or The Women’s Prison Association & Home, Inc. (www.wpaonline.org) may have trained facilitators available.
Preparing the group:

Consider how well group members know one another. If you are bringing together people who have never met, you may want to devote some time at the beginning of the event for introductions.

Agree to ground rules around language. Involve the group in establishing some basic rules to ensure respect and aid clarity. Typically, such rules include no yelling or use of slurs and asking people to speak in the first person (“I think…”) rather than generalizing for others (“Everyone knows that…”).

Ensure that everyone has an opportunity to be heard. Be clear about how people will take turns or indicate that they want to speak. Plan a strategy for preventing one or two people from dominating the discussion. If the group is large, are there plans to break into small groups or partners, or should attendance be limited?

Talk about the difference between dialogue and debate. In a debate, participants try to convince others that they are right. In a dialogue, participants try to understand each other and expand their thinking by sharing viewpoints and listening to each other actively. Remind people that they are engaged in a dialogue.

Encourage active listening. Ask the group to think of the event as being about listening, as well as discussing. Participants can be encouraged to listen for things that challenge as well as reinforce their own ideas. You may also consider asking people to practice formal “active listening,” where participants listen without interrupting the speaker, then re-phrase to see if they have heard correctly.

Remind participants that everyone sees through the lens of their own experience. Who we are influences how we interpret what we see. So everyone in the group may have a different view about the content and meaning of film they have just seen, and all of them may be accurate. It can help people to understand one another’s perspectives if people identify the evidence on which they base their opinion as well as share their views.

Take care of yourself and group members. If the intensity level rises, pause to let everyone take a deep breath. You might also consider providing a safe space to “vent,” perhaps with a partner or in a small group of familiar faces. If you anticipate that your topic may upset people, be prepared to refer them to local support agencies and/or have local professionals present at your event.
Immediately after the film, you may want to give people a few quiet moments to reflect on what they have seen or pose a general question and give people some time to themselves to jot down or think about their answer before opening the discussion. Unless you think participants are so uncomfortable that they can't engage until they have had a break, don't encourage people to leave the room between the film and the discussion. If you save your break for an appropriate moment during the discussion, you won't lose the feeling of the film as you begin your dialogue.

One way to get a discussion going is to pose a general question such as:

- If you could ask any woman in the film a question, what would you ask and why do you want to know the answer to that particular question?
- If tomorrow you were having coffee with a friend and they asked you what this film was about, what would you say?
- Two months from now, what or who do you think you will remember from this film and why?
- Did anything in the film surprise you? If so, what? Why was it surprising?
- What insights or new knowledge did you gain from this film? How do you think the new insight might change you?
The questions in this section are divided into three sections. The theme of each section is taken from the explanations of the inmates about what they hope their words will do.

I. SEEING THE WOMAN

“I wish with my words to give you glimpses of the life I’ve lived, of the life I am living. So that you will know me, and therefore be able to judge me on the merit of who I truly am.” Betsy Ramos

• What did you learn about the women in the film? Can you identify any patterns in their lives? Do the patterns point to anything that you or your community might be able to help improve, if not for the women in the film, then for others?
• What sense did you get of what the women’s lives are like in prison? Did this match the picture you had of prison life and prisoners prior to viewing the film? If not, what was different? When you hear the word “murderer,” what image comes into your mind? Where did that image come from? Did your image match the women you saw in the film?
• Group members are instructed to listen and respond to one another’s work, but not to stand in judgment of others’ lives or actions. What is the difference between understanding and judging? In what other kinds of situations would it be helpful if people focused on listening and understanding instead of judging? In what kinds of situations is judgment appropriate?
• The issue of being pitied comes up several times. Anna Santana says she hopes her words will help people, “Not to feel sorry for me, but to try to understand.” And Roslyn Smith describes her encounter with a man who funds the puppy program in which she is both angry and moved by his tears. What is the difference between pity and compassion? How does either help someone back to health or productivity?
• Several of the inmates talk about their crimes as being the result of either not knowing they had choices, or poor choices they made. How does recognizing the existence of choices make it possible for people to take responsibility for their actions? What indications do you see that the women in this film have taken / are taking responsibility for their crimes?
• The scene about what has changed for these women since they have been in prison ends with the conclusion “So people can change in prison.” In your opinion, does prison usually change people for better or worse? What were the changes that the women named and were they positive? How might prisons produce positive change for all inmates? What might you do to help in that process?
• Ensler observes, “We have frozen you in your mistakes…You’ve essentially been forced to become your mistake. The walking daily embodiment of your mistake.” Have you ever made a mistake that had significant consequences? How does one get past their mistakes if they are defined by them? Are there some mistakes that one never gets past? How might you prevent those kinds of mistakes?
• Several of the women are struggling to forgive themselves for their crimes. What might you say to those women? What kinds of things can people do to create circumstances that foster forgiveness?
• What do you learn from the inmates’ stories about the impact of physical and sexual abuse on people’s lives and on the likelihood of a woman to commit a crime? What did you learn about what some of the women in the group had experienced? How is your community addressing abusive behavior?
• What do you learn from the inmates’ stories about the impact of substance abuse and on people’s lives and on the likelihood of a woman to commit a crime? What might you do to decrease the levels of substance abuse in your family or community? How can law enforcement agencies and penal institutions best deal with addicts who come into the system?
• Several inmates share stories about the importance of having a relationship with a caring adult and how the desire for attention, connection, or love from their mothers influenced their actions. In your life, has there been a caring adult present and what difference has it made for you? Does your community have programs that facilitate connecting caring adults with people who need them?
Discussion Questions

- Looking back, several of the inmates wish that they had talked with someone about their problems prior to their crime. What do you think prevented them from talking? Who could talk with you about your problems? How can you help everyone in your community have someone to talk with?
- How do these women build connections with one another? What kinds of factors exist that allow for trust to develop? Why is it important to have someone in your life you can trust? What do these women gain from being able to trust some of the women around them?
- Nora Moran says that as a girl, “not truly being known by anyone...gave me a sense of freedom. I was free to change my image according to what I believed others would be attracted to. Yet my own mystery locked me in hell.” What do you think she meant? How might isolation or independence feel safe? How might opening up to others make one feel vulnerable? What kinds of situations could you create that would make it safe for people to reveal themselves and build relationships?
- Michelle McWilliams writes a letter to herself from her child in which she imagines that her child misses her and feels betrayed. How did that make you feel? How might inmates who are mothers maintain and/or rebuild relationships with their children? What might the women do to maintain and/or rebuild relationships with their own mothers? How are the inmates’ relationships with their children related to their relationships with their mothers?
- Pamela Smart identifies a feeling internalized by many inmates when she says, “…you’re not supposed to care about me.” Before seeing the film, did you care about these women? How about after seeing the film? How does hearing a person’s story influence the way we think about them? How might people on the “outside” connect with women in prison? What kinds of things might be done to, in Pam Smart’s words, help incarcerated women “matter to people outside of here”?

II. SELF-REFLECTION

“What I would like is to make you think about what you are about to do with your life…” ANNA SANTANA

- Keila Pulinaro says about her rapist, “The scar he left on my body does not compare to the scar he left on my soul.” What do you think she was talking about? Can you relate to that? Have there been scars left on your soul? If so, what kinds of scars have been left on your soul and how have you healed them? What have you learned from your own healing process that might help others, like Keila Pulinaro, heal? If you have scars that have not healed, have you learned anything from the film that might help? Where might you go or what might you do to begin the healing process?
- When challenged with a very hard topic, Pamela Smart says, “I feel really scared…I feel like I’m going to throw up.” Why is it scary for Pamela Smart to talk? What kinds of physical cues does your body give you when you are frightened, tense, nervous, or angry? What kinds of things are you afraid to talk about?
- During a rehearsal, Eve Ensler asks the actors, “Does murder feel too far away from people as a possible thing that you would do?” How would you answer that question? What role does circumstance play and how much control do you have over the situations in which you find yourself?
- As she sees Donna Hylton struggling with the kindness they have received in prison, Eve Ensler notes that “…kindness can be very disturbing if you’ve managed your life without it for a long time.” What do you think she meant by ‘kindness’ and why might kindness be disturbing? Where does kindness fit into the pattern of your life? Is it something you expect to receive or something you have learned to live without? What are the sources or possible sources of kindness in your life? How might you increase the amount of kindness you experience? How might you increase the kindness you show to others?
- In reflecting on how she has changed, Monica Szlekovics says, “Before coming here I felt like I didn’t have any choices, that what was happening to me I had no control of, but now I know I had choices and just didn’t see them.” What kinds of

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things do you think Monica sees now that she didn’t see then? Can you think of a situation where you made a poor choice because you thought you didn’t have an alternative? Were there things that people around you might have done to help you see the alternatives? Can you think of things you could do or questions you could ask that would help you to see all the available choices in future situations? Can you think of ways that you could help others see alternatives?

- Many of the writing prompts encourage women to think about families and to be honest with those closest to them. Why do you think that is so? Do you think family relationships impact our choices?

- Actor Mary Alice says, “I really felt they captured how fragile life is…how in two or three seconds one’s life can change”. Have you had such moments? What did you lose (or gain)? If you could turn back the clock, what, if anything, would you change?

- Eve Ensler describes writing as conduit to change, “because I think sometimes when you go to new places in yourself, new things can happen.” Did anything new happen for you in viewing this film? Can you describe the new feeling or insight?

III. POLITICS, POLICY, AND SOCIETY

“I want [my words] to leave you wondering why two million people in America today are locked up”

JUDITH CLARK

- How would you answer Judith Clark’s challenge in the quote above? Is incarceration the best alternative we have for dealing with serious crime? What are other possibilities?

- When asked about why she didn’t go to the police after being raped, Keila Pulinaro says, “I didn’t look at the police as my allies.” Roslyn Smith adds that “a lot of the powers that be don’t realize where African-Americans and Hispanic people that our world is different than their world.” In your community, who sees the police as an ally and who as a danger? What is your experience with the police in your community? Would you call the police and assume they would help you? How does race or gender factor into your experience? How might your community improve relations with the police? How might the police improve relations with your community?

- Keila Pulinaro says, “I took a gun with me so I can feel safe.” What feels safe about having a gun? Did having it increase Keila’s safety? What do you think the government’s policies or laws on guns should be?

- Eve Ensler asks, “Are you allowed to be loved if you’ve done something bad?” How would you answer her? How would you answer Roslyn Smith’s follow-up that taking love away is “what the prison system is all about”?

- Michelle McWilliams imagines that her child would joke about committing a crime in order to end up at Bedford Hills so they could spend time together. In reality, children whose mothers are in prison are five times more likely than their peers to end up in jail. Do you know what kinds of programs exist in your community to help children of incarcerated parents? How might you help improve the support available to these young people?

- Some of the women featured in the film work in Bedford Hills’ parenting center, an exemplary program that helps mothers maintain connections with their children. Across the country,
seventy-five percent of women who are incarcerated have minor children. Do you know what programs exist to facilitate positive visitation between parents and children in the jails and/or prisons in your community? Why might it be important for a child to visit a mother in jail or prison? What could be done to make visits easier?

- Cynthia Berry believes that justice will not be served until “God takes for me what I took from him [my victim].” How do you define justice? What is the difference between judging and justice? Is our “judicial” system designed to achieve “justice”? If you could re-design the judicial system, what, if anything, would you change?

- Some people believe that the death penalty is a just response to murder. Do you agree? Judith Clark opposed the death penalty because the death of the murderer would stop the process of atonement. In your view, what is the role of atonement? What does atonement look like? What is the difference between atonement and justice?

- Roslyn Smith encourages one of the group members to get beyond her past: “If you keep beating yourself up, you going to get lost in that. You not going to get there, because you’re so busy worrying about what…what should have, could have been.” Yet, the entire workshop is based on delving into one’s past. What is the difference between asking people to confront their past and live in their past?

- Eve Ensler encourages the women to assume culpability for their crimes because “…when you get to own full responsibility, you get to be free.” What do you think she meant? How does someone demonstrate that they have taken responsibility for their actions? Does our current societal response to crime allow or encourage people to take responsibility?

- Roslyn Smith describes working in the puppy program as important because, in part, it gives her a chance to do “something for society”. What is the importance of feeling needed, of doing valuable work? Why might it be important for prisoners to have an opportunity to do “something for society”?
Because good writing includes details and requires clarity, writing assignments can be an effective tool to help people reflect on their experience and consider options. For that reason, you may wish to use writing exercises, as well as discussion, as a follow-up to viewing *What I Want My Words To Do To You*. Below are some suggestions on how to do that effectively.

**Writing helps clarify because it provides an opportunity to:**

- **Explore an experience from multiple perspectives.** Notice how Ensler’s prompts encourage writers to consider their lives from both their own and others’ points of view.
- **Explore a single perspective to its logical conclusion.** For example, Ensler encourages one woman to recount her story where she holds herself completely responsible and to recount her story in a version where she takes no responsibility.
- **Explore feelings.** Ensler asks workshop participants to go beyond simply describing their crimes to describe what they were feeling at the time. She also encourages writers to look for feelings underneath the main feeling. Having to describe emotions requires writers to become self-aware and to consider what produced the feelings that they experienced.
- **Consider alternative realities.** Writing allows people to create new possibilities, to envision a positive future. For some, it can be a way out of depression. As Ensler directs a woman lost in guilt over her crime, “I’m just going to ask you for a second to say you don’t know what the future is.”

**As a writing facilitator, be prepared to:**

- **Match your expectations with available time.** Keep in mind that the women you see in the film were involved in the workshop for four years and had weeks to write and re-write each piece.
- **Provide positive feedback.** Acknowledge the power of writing, especially when it is honest. Note that in this kind of exercise, power comes from content and deep thought, not from insistence on proper grammar or spelling.
- **Gently challenge the writer to go further.** When you view the film, watch carefully for how Ensler prompts women to add details to their chronologies, emotions to their facts, and open-ended possibilities to their futures.
- **Listen, accept, and offer emotional support.** This kind of writing is about deepening understanding and finding new truths, not about judgment.
- **Help participants think about the value of writing.** Let participants consider these thoughts from people in the film as they think about what they might get out of doing a writing exercise:
  - “It’s almost like when you write it, those words can become that truth for that time and you can feel the truth at that time…so it’s going to allow you then to go on to another part of the truth.” – Kathy Boudin
  - “I think sometimes when you go to new places in yourself, new things can happen.” – Eve Ensler

Discuss what people think the speakers meant. You might also talk about how writing can help clarify thinking.
P.O.V.’s What I Want My Words to Do to You Website
www.pbs.org/pov/whatiwant

Meet Eve Ensler
Exclusive interview with playwright/activist Eve Ensler. Find out what Eve is up to with her new project, V-Day, a global movement to stop violence against women and girls, and her upcoming two new plays and books, including “The Good Body” and “I am an Emotional Creature.”

Prison: To Punish or to Reform?
Are all prisoners entitled to programs aimed at reform? Find out what prison reformers, victims’ advocates and criminal justice policy advisors think about the objective and role of prison.

Behind the Lens
Filmmakers Madeleine Gavin, Judith Katz, and Gary Sunshine talk about their goals for the film, the challenges of shooting a documentary inside a prison, and the surprises they had during filming.

What’s Your P.O.V.?
P.O.V.’s online Talking Back Tapestry is a colorful, interactive representation of your feelings about What I Want My Words to Do to You. Listen to other P.O.V. viewers talk about the film and add your thoughts by calling 1-800-688-4768.
www.pbs.org/pov/talkingback
PRISON EDUCATION

Federal Bureau of Prisons Inmate Programs and Services
www.bop.gov
Visit the Public Info section of the Federal Bureau of Prisons site and click on "Inmate Programs and Services" to find out more about education, vocational training, and job training programs, which feature literacy classes, English as a Second Language (ESL), parenting classes, recreation activities, wellness education and adult continuing education.

Center for the Study of Correctional Education
http://soe.csusb.edu/csce
In 1991, California State University, San Bernardino, established the unique Center for the Study of Correctional Education. Center activities include teacher preparation, research, and support services for correctional educators. The website offers articles on the history of correctional education in America and the effects of educational programs on recidivism statistics.

National Institute for Correctional Education (NICE)
www.iup.edu/nice
NICE is a collaborative initiative that provides support and service to the community of correctional educators in order to enhance their ability to create positive and effective learning environments.

U.S. Dept. of Education: Office of Correctional Education (OCE)
www.ed.gov/offices/OVAE/AdultEd/OCE
The OCE provides technical assistance to states, local schools and correctional institutions and shares information on correctional education.

Correctional Education Association (CEA)
www.ceanational.org
The CEA, founded in 1946, is a non-profit, professional association serving educators and administrators who provide services to students in correctional settings. The CEA is the largest affiliate of the American Correctional Association.

WOMEN IN PRISON

Women in Criminal Justice: A Twenty Year Update
www.ojp.usdoj.gov/reports/98Guides/wcjs98
Read the 1998 report from the U.S. Department of Justice’s Office of Justice Programs from the Coordination Group on Women. The study shows that women are primarily incarcerated for drug-related offenses and larceny.

Women’s Prison Association
www.wpaonline.org/WEBSITE
The Women’s Prison Association & Home, Inc. (WPA) is a nonprofit agency working to create opportunities for change in the lives of women prisoners, ex-prisoners, and their families. WPA provides programs through which women acquire life skills needed to end involvement in the criminal justice system and to make positive, healthy choices for themselves and their families.

Women Coping in Prison
http://curry.edschool.virginia.edu/prisonstudy
Learn more about the University of Virginia’s study of women’s experiences while living in prison. The site features fact sheets, reports on individual studies and links to resources.

A more comprehensive list of resources is available at:
www.pbs.org/pov/pov2003/whatiwant

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P.O.V. Interactive
www.pbs.org/pov

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