The Dynamics of Respect by Liza Halley and Ben Moorad

An introduction to Write Around Portland's 56th anthology and special 20th anniversary edition, *Still Light,* Spring 2019

Liza and Ben started Write Around Portland in 1999. Liza lives in the Boston area. She is a school librarian, she's on the planning team for the Boston Kids Comics Fest, and she's the chair of the Arlington Poet Laureate Committee. Ben is a consultant to nonprofits in the Portland area, and he's the Co-Founder of Pass the Mic, a free music education program for immigrant and refugee youth. (Pass the Mic is a program of Portland Meet Portland.)

From the start, we put respect at the center of Write Around Portland, and respect drove the design of the curriculum, how we worked with volunteers and how the workshops were facilitated. We didn't see respect as a tool or a value. We saw it as a way of being in the world, and the workshops would embody that. We didn't see respect as a benign thing, like tolerance or acceptance. Respect is more radical than that. It's an existential stance of empathetic imagination. It's you doing everything you can to see fully the person before you, so that you see how they are as alive and complicated as you are.

We must see the borders around each other, the labels and the identifications that define us and that can oppress us, we must see them and we must see past them to the alive and complicated people that we all are. We do this by seeing each other and by listening to each other as fully as we can, and writing was the best tool that we knew of to gain that view into each other's imaginations and inner lives. Respect is what gives us the power to see and to listen to each other as fully as we can.

In a Write Around Portland workshop, the facilitator helps the group create a space in which everyone knows that they're there to delve into writing as equal members of a community of writers. They give each other permission to explore their writing without fear and to find what shines within it and to develop it, and therefore, to develop themselves, for we are who we are because of our stories.

You might live in the same building as these people and know hardly any of their names, but in a workshop, you learn that the person beside you has never had a strawberry, but he spent every summer picking corn with his family all day long. The person across the table brings you into his grandmother's kitchen, their fort in the backyard, the bus she rides each day, or the walls of their prison.

In a workshop of respect, people share their stories with each other, and they often share how writing helped them find something in themselves that gave them the voice to face what they needed to face and reclaim their lives. As one writer put it twenty years ago:

> All my life, I've been Dee McCarthy's daughter and Bill Charles' wife. But for the first time, I did something on my own. I joined Write Around Portland.

For twenty years, this community of writers and readers, this community of witness has grown and made our lives "fuller and more comprehensible," in the words of the Poet Laureate of the United States, Tracy K. Smith, when she described how it feels after she's read a good poem.

Meanwhile, the world has grown more cruel. This is our 56th anthology, and we need what's in it more than ever, because we need each other more than ever before. We hope that, as you read this book, you agree that when we hear someone's story, we now see her as the person who has that story. She's the person with the life that led to that story. When she tells her story, she shapes it with her voice, and her story becomes her own. No one else will define her. And when we hear her story, our imaginations now hold it and are enlarged by it. When the community hears her story, the community becomes more humane. The community starts to understand a little more what it's like to be her, and it becomes less likely that they will tolerate the locking up in cages of children who had fled violence so bad that they would travel thousands of miles of hell to be safe.