

The Dignity We All Deserve by Elizebett (Liz) Eslinger

An introduction to Write Around Portland's 57th anthology and special 20th anniversary edition, *Close-up Mirrors/Los espejos de cerca*, Fall 2019

Write Around Portland Executive Director, Elizebett (Liz) Eslinger, has more than 15 years of experience facilitating creative writing workshops, teaching English language learners, developing curriculum, and training workshop facilitators. She has studied creative non-fiction and poetry, and she has a BA in English, certification in TESL/TEFL, and an MPA in nonprofit management. Liz fuels her love of language and the written word by writing poetry, studying Portuguese and Spanish, and recording recipes from her latest bakes.



I recently learned something that has completely changed how I move through the world: *Toddlers are little humans, and we are all little toddlers at heart.*

Maybe this seems obvious or overly simplistic, but it didn't become glaringly real to me until I became the mom of a two-year-old. I've learned that there are some toddler parenting lessons that apply in all interactions and that all humans—teeny and grown—appreciate: 1) being acknowledged, supported and heard; 2) receiving clear and consistent communication; and 3) feeling accepted even when you're not your best self all of the time.

These lessons can all be summed up in one word: respect. We all want to be treated with respect.

One word makes it seem simple. However, giving respect to another person requires effort. If it were easy, we all would experience it all of the time, right? The problem is, many of us have gone without the basic regard we all deserve as people, and we've been on the receiving end of someone else's insecurities. There's that saying, *Hurt people hurt people*, and it's often true. Whether disrespect is intentional or respect is absent, it doesn't matter. When we aren't treated well and our emotional tank is empty, it's challenging to offer respect to anyone else.

What would the world be like if we all experienced and replicated respectful interactions? If we all extended to each other the basic dignity we all deserve? If we treated each other with the love and tenderness we treat little humans?

When Write Around Portland was founded 20 years ago, it started with respect. Respect was *first*. It still comes first today—respect, writing and community—because we need it now more than ever. Respect is our 20-year track record and our directional beacon for the future.

In a time that feels dysfunctional and unfair, Write Around Portland offers spaces where people experience joy and feel self-worth. In a time when people are silenced, Write Around Portland amplifies voices. In a time when we yearn for empathy and dignity for all people, Write Around Portland brings people together to listen, to challenge assumptions and to increase understanding.

Since 1999, Write Around Portland has been at the forefront of activating arts for social change. We have partnered with hundreds of agencies, schools and prisons to hold creative writing workshops in places that often have the least access to the arts. We have published more than 55 books of our participants' writing and held 250 readings to challenge societal norms around whose voices we're reading in books and hearing in public spaces. Tens of thousands of people have been impacted by this work.

At Write Around Portland, writing is the medium for nourishing respect (and community), and it's the way we're building a more respectful and inclusive world. It's these values that guide us as we look to the future to bring our model to more spaces that need our programming, to deepen our equity and community engagement work and to continue to operate an abundant and thriving organization. Respect starts with every single one of us. It starts with how we treat ourselves and each other. We must say, *Yes, we are ALL deserving of respect*. We must say, *Yes*, to spaces like our writing workshops and readings where people experience and replicate respectful exchanges.

We must say, *Yes*, to respect, writing and community.

This anthology is a physical manifestation of all the ways Write Around Portland says, *Yes*. By opening this anthology and reading the words on these pages, you are joining us on our path to build a more respectful and inclusive world. Let's get started.