

## *The Path-walkers' Tools*

Long before the keepers of the law thought to ask people they locked away how justice should be shaped, a woman called Paula lay in a grey cell and started to imagine how the people in the cages could be turned back into people with futures.

Paula did not grow up in a quiet house. It was one full of stories of places stolen and of people who would not stay bowed. Her father took care of the town's matters and believed that looking after the common good was important work. Her mother re-told stories of people treated badly yet unbroken. In these stories, one woman - great aunt - stood tall. A Suffragette who was locked away for insisting that voices like hers be counted: her prison story was of pride and courage. Paula came from a line of people who mended things together. She learned that change rarely belonged to one person alone.

Years after her great aunt's hardship, Paula finds herself confined in a cage. Detained for trading in elements the kingdom had forbidden, the air is now full of the absence of her children, left home without her. A deep guilt coils, yet she struggles to find anything like what her keepers call 'justice'. Nothing here feels like repair or care. As her eyes adjust to the darkness, she begins to see the women who fill this place. People whose lives had been made small before they reached a cell, their choices made thin by being poor, by needing to migrate or by coming from their own lines of suffering. She had heard stories like this before, of people seen as lesser and treated as problems to be controlled.

Prison was not a place where Paula felt tall; she had not found success in her trade, nor as the mother she wished to be. Stripped of pride, she looked inside herself for what did remain. There she found gems: the ability to think, pray and be of use to others. An idea blossomed. What if the prison could become a place of learning and growth? With a friend, she laid pathways to learning. Women came. They added their name to class lists and began to believe that success might belong to them. Helpers beyond the prison walls provided assets and Paula became a channel, guiding others to treasures beyond the gates. Tables became desks and homework unfolded under fluorescent lights. In this unlikely place, women once known only by their mistakes and sorrows began to speak of lessons and brighter tomorrows.

In her years locked away Paula struggled to find people she could look to for a sense of what was possible. There were few maps to follow. The only stories she read behind bars were isolated and written by men. They seemed to hum with possibility, but she could not find the stories of women. Only one, far away in Berlin, who had once walked through locked gates herself, offered a faint light across the distance. It was only much later, after journeys of reading and wandering, that she discovered women like her who had felt the darkness and found ways to bring light.

The prison itself was not a place well practiced in guiding people toward better roads. It revealed itself to Paula as a strange and wasteful place where the rulers sent people that they did not know how to hold or heal. The women here were spirited, sometimes wounded and often wronged. To cope with seeing these lives restrained, Paula turned to the wisdom of guides who had steadied her before. She retraced steps which had led her in the past to reflection, kindness and care for the self. Steps that had been laid long before by others who had suffered yet found ways to craft paths toward healing.

Friends beyond the walls became as important as teachers within. Paula came to know powerful women from the kingdom who had influence over how the cages were shaped. She realised she could talk, and that the women in this world would stop and listen, even when the guards saw little value in her voice. She was transported beyond the walls to a meeting of women working to try and mend things. She discovered an important manuscript they were producing, which had the power to lighten the darkness of the cages all across the land. She began to see a way that her powers as an organiser and voice could find a place.

After many years, Paula's cage was unlocked, though the mark of those years did not leave her. Soon she found herself working to help the young, those living at the same edges she had known. Her path led to a man she recognised. She had read his story in a book from her grey cell and later in the kingdom's gazette. The prince's own charity had supported his work, which was also helping young people recover from pain and conflict. This man, like her, had known cages and forbidden elements. He invited her to come and build a place where paths could be laid toward lives free from old judgments. A place where she could remain whole.

Hesitantly at first, they laid the foundations for a different kind of world. From inside the cages, people were invited to speak and steer. Professors joined them, teaching the craft of asking questions. Soon, more allies arrived, carrying tools of democracy. A school grew, offering qualifications and recognition to those who had long been denied them. For a time, it seemed a new story was being written, where people became authors of their own futures. But as the work flourished, the state watched. In the end, it carried these practices back into its own fortress, folding them back into heavy, blockaded systems.

Alternate gatherings grew. Small circles became great meetings where every day folk could send ideas to the policy-makers of the realm. From these circles came scrolls; guidance on how peers might support one another. As this work travelled, the kingdom's treasuries opened, offering resources to weave networks of helpers; strengthening the voices that had once been faint. Conversations reached the highest in the land and doors opened that had long been closed. Yet shared control often narrowed, drawn back into the very structures the people had hoped to transform.

Perhaps it was not the grand halls of the realm that would change things, but the quiet networks that wove through the kingdom like hidden roots. From these networks, new leaders grew, shaping their own paths and teaching others how to lead. Their strength came from listening and lifting others with shared purpose. More allies appeared; scholars from distant academies, storytellers from the radio towers. The wisest of them knew that the task was not to speak for people, but to step aside, clear the path and let the voices rise on their own. So, networks grew, a quiet revolution of lantern-light and learning.

As linkages strengthened, the people within them became more conversant with the great libraries of the realm. They discovered the knowledge of scholars, storytellers and healers who had shaped their own lives. These writings offered a way of naming what they knew in their bones. These teachers spoke of claiming one's own knowledge and refusing silence. This learning did not come from a single hero. It was a weaving of many minds and voices. Some were curious to learn, others mapped the kingdom's knowledge, weaving a tapestry of understanding.

Before long, in a busy Northern city, a gathering sparked a moment where hope for the future began to take shape. Paula was encouraged to step into the highest seats of leadership. People were turning toward her, because if she could rise from the places she had travelled, others could too. There was an organisation founded by people with lived experience, but for many years, its lantern had been held by other hands. Paula stepped up with a goal to bring it back to its roots: to the people whose stories had first given it life. She imagined a place led by those who had walked the hardest paths, strengthened by a shared effort between lived and learned wisdom. A place where people could work together as a powerful force for change.

And if such a place could be built, even in one corner of the kingdom, then the old stories would no longer be the only ones told.

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