

“Breath is Paradise”-

- Anna Mendelssohn



Emmy O’Shaughnessy, Director of Innovation and Growth at Oxfordshire Youth.

The warning sign that some shame about my birth mum’s past remained alive inside me, showed up when I was thinking about writing this piece.

Shame unsettles the self and I felt, initially, unsettled in my body. As an emotional state, shame feeds on fear, self-blame, and persecuting isolation. It’s not a connector, which is why telling our stories is the ultimate act of defiance. Stories bond us together.

My first thoughts: I won’t talk about why she was put in prison because if I do then people in my field of work will associate me with her crime. I will be punished.

Funders might not fund my work! People might think I’m unstable/traumatised/politically radical!

People will feel uncomfortable. Other people...other people might think about me/feel about me (insert series of judgmental accusations which distance me from being respected and accepted).

Stories bond us together. I believe this more than I believe in these fears.

I was about 7 or 8 when I first found out my mum had spent time in prison. I found out from retrieving an article from the kitchen bin. I knew it was there because I’d heard my foster parents discussing it over the phone in hushed voices. I used my super powers of hyper-vigilance to get the information I needed. There was a story about her in the Guardian. Put it in the bin.

I remember feeling alive with anticipation, and a sense of pounding in my chest. It was Truth Time.

Put truth in the kitchen bin. Hide it, conceal it, pretend it was never there.

Children are naturally gifted at lie detecting.

Later in my 20s, I would discover that one of my favourite spoken work artists Kae Tempest had worked in Holloway prison with the women inside. I felt this shimmering thread between my life, then, as an artist working with young women in care homes, young people in Pupil Referral Units, spaces of containment, institution. Monitoring. Spaces I experienced a sense of belonging in, spaces that demanded art be made, and the truth of young people’s stories be expressed, without judgement.

As I’m writing this now, my brother, an artist, has Whatsapped me to let me know he’s working with a child from CHAS and I feel that deep pulsing of connectivity between Anna, her story, her experience, and my brother and mine’s work and life and how we have been called into leadership within the field of arts and social justice. The longing to bring healing spirals through, from our histories into our futures.

My mum apparently taught other women how to read in Holloway, she put on plays, and she wrote and painted. I am yet to have found the right time to go to her archive in Sussex to look through this work. No child wants to really go there, really feel and imagine their parent locked away, isolated, shamed, scared. We want our parents to be OK. And if they're not, we worry.

I hold onto the stories I've heard of her finding a way to make art in prison. Humanity erupting down the corridors and I like to think there was laughter too.

Recently, a few years after I discovered the [Koestler Prize](#) and had visited the exhibition, I learned that she had won the prize whilst being inside. Her prize was a day release, which she used to go to see a William Blake exhibition at the Tate.

I look at the poetry books of Blake on my shelf. I feel the shimmer. It feels warm.

Prison haunted Anna even after she was a free woman. She gave birth to my sister, brother, and me within 5 years and lived in poverty in Cambridge. We were taken into care.

When I met Sarah from Children Heard and Seen, and she described the vision, I felt this incredible wave of relief and peace wash through me. She had noticed us. The children who had stories that no one wanted to listen to.

For children, their parents are their parents, not criminals, not guilty. For society, criminals are criminals, having to think about them as parents makes us feel confused, uncomfortable, like we have to consider that person in their fuller humanity.

I kept that article hidden from my family throughout my life, I took it to university with me, I took it to the first home I lived in when I myself became a mother.

Right this very moment, it's upstairs settled in a box in the storage cupboard my little boys use as their hiding space.

Maybe, it's time for a frame.

My birth mum's name was Anna Mendelssohn, and she was sentenced to ten years in prison for being involved in a political group called The Angry Brigade.

So world, my mum was a 'terrorist', prisoner, mother, mother who had her children removed, and mentally ill.

My mum was an artist, a ferociously intelligent woman. She was compassionate, loving and according to my sister outrageously funny. But, principally, as her obituary stated, she was a poet.

You can read about her if you want, you can decide about whether what she did was moral or not. Whether she deserved her sentence.

She was my mother, and I am proud to be her daughter and to be here now, living my life, loving my children, dedicating my working hours to young people finding their power and using it to change this world.

For the parents, carers of children who have a parent in prison, I send you my love and deep respect. You are living emblems of courage and I hope you can find ways to celebrate you, every single day. Take rest often.

For the parents in prison, I send you compassion and hope, that you find a way through and rekindle your faith in a better future, share with your children many lessons from your life, and be curious about them forever. Listen to their story and pain, without being swallowed up by your own.

Gift them your fullest attention, in whatever way you can. They need you to hear their voice.

For the children who have a mum or dad in prison, you are just absolutely awesome, each and every one of you. I send you courage and permission to feel every single emotion that you feel about your parent. Ask for help, support, reassurance and love. Write, sing, paint the pain out of you. Play! Have fun and be silly A LOT. Release the tension in ways that feel good for you.

Most importantly, your life is your own, your story is incredible, and belongs to you before anyone else.

One of my chosen sisters Emily, who works with the body and trauma, recently wrote this about joy and it made me think about the work of Children Heard and Seen;

“Joy encourages us into PLAY. It supports us to be more creative and to try new things. It is a necessary and vital aspect of how we bond and how we belong.”

Thank you, Sarah, for your visionary power, for bringing healing, community, and compassion to the families you serve. You are creating spaces where people can bond and belong through creativity, and joy.

Thank you to the volunteers, the admins, the trustees, the people who make this work what it is, a deep medicine to shame. A radical act of community care.

I love the feeling of pride, celebration, and unity Children Heard and Seen creates.

It's an act of humanity. Future generations are already thankful.



Dedicated to the wild-hearted one. I love you Anna. Rest in Paradise.

