The Big Lacuna

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Under a steel-grey sky, behind Attica's concrete wall, a grizzled counsellor arrived at his office with a tall paper cup of coffee – black, two sugars. Seated behind a brown faux-wood desk, in a sterile, unadorned office, he booted up his computer. The inbox held a message from Albany. Sipping the somewhat bitter brew, he opened the e-mail.

It was a memo from the DOCCS Commissioner: "Department of Corrections and Community Supervision counselors will no longer be referred to as 'counselors'. Effective immediately, the new title shall be 'Offender Rehabilitation Coordinator'. Furthermore, prisoners shall be referred to as 'offenders'. These changes in policy will be discussed at administrative meetings in each correctional facility. See the schedule below for further information". Scanning the list, the counsellor noted Attica's meeting would be Monday morning in the chapel. As he unconsciously fingered the blue nametag on his shirt pocket, he looked out the narrow window of his office. A steady drizzle had begun to fall.

Although it seemed to be a matter of semantics, I could understand the Department's reasoning for the change in titles. DOCCS staff does not provide counselling per se. They coordinate prisoner participation in prison programs. However, due to few openings in those programs, especially at Attica, such coordination often consists of merely informing prisoners that they are on a waiting list.

I was hopeful that the new emphasis in rehabilitation signified a change in direction – that rehabilitation would be recognized as an important part of incarceration. Perhaps it would be just as important as the punishment, which often appears to be Attica's priority.

My optimism, however, was short-lived. On the day of the administrative meeting to discuss the changes in titles for counsellors and prisoners, the entire prison was locked down. No 'offenders' were allowed out of their cells. The school building was closed; classrooms were empty. Alcohol and substance abuse programs were shut down. The library was dark. Recreational yards were silent except for the keening cries of seagulls circling and diving for scraps of food. No explanation was offered by the guards as to why the cells remained locked. I stood at my gate, dressed, ready for work at my assigned program. The prison was eerily silent except for the banter of prisoners who sat in their cells, wondering what was going on. Giving up hope of going to work, I took

off my boots and lay on my bunk, reading Ralph Ellison's brilliant novel, *Invisible Man*.

About an hour later, my neighbour's cell gate cracked open. An officer yelled down the gallery, "Get dressed. They want you in the chapel". Since my neighbour worked in the mess hall, which also served as the chapel, I did not think much of it But when he returned after only twenty minutes, I asked him what was going on.

He laughed. "What a bunch a dumb-asses. I go down to the chapel, and all these civilians are sittin' 'round, starin' at each other. They tell me, "The sound system doesn't work. Can you fix it?" So I look at it. There's no power to it. They didn't know how to turn the damn thing on. So I flip the switch, test the microphone. It works. What a bunch a 'tards".

"Well, how long you think they gonna be down there?"

"Probably all day. They're just getting started".

At noon, the clomp of boots indicated that an officer was walking down the gallery.

"C.O., what time we comin' out?"

"Dunno".

At 1:00pm, the officer returned with a clipboard to take the chow list. Beef cubes were on the menu. I stayed in my cell until 3:00pm when the 3-to-11 shift came on duty, and the cell gates opened. No one ever explained why the prison was locked down. I had an uneasy feeling about the administration's new emphasis on rehabilitation.

About a week later, I met with my counsellor for my quarterly review. A sheet of paper with his new title printed in large font, "Offender Rehabilitation Coordinator", was carelessly taped to his computer. The usually brief meeting serves as an opportunity for me to review my correctional status – Security Level: max; Transfer Status: not eligible; Mandated Programs Status: wait-listed. I am required by the DOCCS to complete two rehabilitative programs, ART (Aggression Replacement Training) and ASAT (Alcohol and Substance Abuse Therapy). I would really like to participate in those programs, but I have been wait-listed for five years. However, all of those programs have over 1,000 men on their waiting lists. According to my rehabilitation coordinator, I will most likely never see those programs while I am at Attica.

Presently, there are only two ART classes running, with fifteen men in each class. Approximately 120 men per year complete the program. At that

rate, it will be nine years before the current waiting list is exhausted and that does not include the 1,200 new prisoners that arrive at Attica every year.

The situation in the ASAT program is even more dire where there are presently 1,400 men are on the waiting list. However, there is only one ASAT counsellor. Sixty men per year complete the program, which means it will take twenty years to exhaust the current waiting list. There used to be two ASAT counsellors. The other one quit and went to work at another prison. So did the ART counsellor.

The exodus from Attica of rehabilitation coordinators (there are presently four vacant positions) creates a problem not only for the administration, but for us prisoners as well. Fights break out at Attica nearly every day. Most likely those men need the ART program. The officers, who risk injury every time they have to respond to an altercation, would also benefit from prisoners having more access to anti-violence programs.

Even those of us seemingly unaffected by a fight in another block, or another yard, are impacted by prison violence. When an alarm sounds, all corridor movement stops. Programs are halted. Classes may be interrupted. The schedule of the entire prison is set back, sometimes causing men to never reach their assigned programs. I have seen men miss an opportunity to speak with the Deputy Superintendent of Programs, their rehabilitation coordinator, or attend religious services because one-thousand feet away two men cannot control their emotions, choosing instead to punch each other in the face.

One would think, in view of the ramifications from a single fight, that the administration would welcome programs taught by volunteers, community members willing to donate their time and efforts to help prisoners, officers and the administration to maintain a peaceful environment. The Alternatives to Violence Project (AVP) is a nationally recognized program designed to do that and is taught at hundreds of prisons throughout the United States. Yet, Attica refuses to pay the salary for one officer for the three days of the program so that AVP can take place in Attica's visiting room. Instead, AVP is permitted to take place only four times a year when the school is shut down, its classrooms empty and standard officer coverage is available. In other words, at no additional cost to the administration. Yet, I wonder what the cost is to the prison for the infractions and hearings needed for those involved in fights, for maintaining special housing units overflowing with prisoners convicted at those hearings of fighting with weapons, and the sick leave and medical costs for officers injured breaking up those altercations.

The Alternatives to Violence Project succeeds at reducing prison violence through a very simple method: communication. The first time I participated in one of the workshops, I was surprised to find that much of it involved fun exercises like pantomimes, musical chairs or tossing and catching funny-shaped balls and bean bags. At first, I thought this was silly. What has this got to do with reducing prison violence? But I slowly came to see that the familiarity and camaraderie built during AVP exercises serve to form friendships and understanding that continue long after the workshop is over. Much of the program also involves dealing with serious issues like racism, misconceptions and stereotypes. However, simple things like nicknames for the participants stayed in my mind. Months after I had attended a workshop, I ran into a participant in the mess hall. Immediately, I recalled his nickname: Shinin' Shelley. We greeted each other, smiling and laughing like we were still in an AVP workshop.

In order to help maintain relationships and understanding built during workshops, the AVP volunteers conduct monthly maintenance meetings. Open to all prisoners who have participated in AVP workshops, the maintenance meetings reinforce the principles learned in the program: communication, compassion, patience and empathy.

I often wonder what Attica would be like without its army of volunteers, without the AVP workshops, Cephas meetings (a prisoner support group created in response to the 1971 riot), meditation classes, religious studies, Alcoholics Anonymous and Grief Support meetings. What if the volunteers were to tire of the problems associated with getting in and out of this prison, the periodic hostile reception at the front gate, the requirements for medical clearances, the hassles of being fingerprinted, the frustration of driving hours to get here (and get back home) only to be told, "There's no gate clearance here for you. Try again next week". How much uglier and more violent would this place be?

Without volunteers, the Department of Correction, and therefore its system of rehabilitation, has very little to offer me besides a cell, a mattress and a toilet. Of the 2,200 men at Attica, nearly one-third, 700 men, have no program whatsoever. No access to school, no prison job, nothing to do except go to the yard or watch TV. Their days are filled with Cinemax and TMZ.

Sadly, they have few options. Simply reading a book at Attica requires dedication and enormous patience. Most men have no access to the library; it holds only twelve men at a time. Because of its limited hours, 150 men

can visit it over the course of a week. Since call-outs are repeated each week, that means 2,000 men cannot get there, and stand little chance of reading a novel or even a newspaper.

Our families are prohibited from sending us books due to inane package room rules. On my prison salary of seven dollars a week, buying books is prohibitive. My prison pay is spent on stamps, deodorant and food. Because of the state's fiscal crisis, that seven dollars must also go toward tee-shirts, socks and underwear.

In order to deal with the frustrations of prison life, DOCCS created a new program called Thinking For Change, tagged with the cute acronym of T4C. Intended for prisoners with no program, it emphasizes techniques for dealing with the correctional environment: embracing patience and transformation. Counsellors travelled to Albany to learn the curriculum and how to facilitate the program. After conducting a few twelve-week modules, Attica shut the program down, citing a lack of manpower, even though only two counsellors were needed, four hours per week, to run the program. Evidently, Attica's administration was not too concerned about change.

In an effort to provide education to the incarcerated, at no cost to them or the administration, a prisoner organization called PULL (Prison Urban Leadership League) proposed a writing class. Volunteers from SUNY at Buffalo, professors with master's and doctorate degrees in English, offered to come to Attica to teach writing skills. The syllabus consisted of classes in spelling, grammar and sentence construction, with the goal of essay writing. The curriculum indicated the study of renowned writers like Hemingway and Steinbeck, essays by prison writers such as Nelson Mandela and Martin Luther King, Jr. The administration said they were not interested in such a program, refusing SUNY professors the opportunity to teach Attica s prisoners.

My first experience with volunteer programs, over five years ago, was a creative writing class taught by an English professor, Doran Larson, from Hamilton College. After teaching all day at Hamilton, he would drive three hours to reach Attica. The class presented a real challenge to me because I had never done any creative writing. My only experience with putting words to paper consisted of high school essays, not exactly erudite works of brilliance.

After first arriving at Attica, while I languished in my double-bunk cell with no program and no prison job, a prisoner passed by and saw me holding a collection of works by Edgar Allen Poe. As I read "The Cask of Amontillado", horrified by the sounds of bricks and cement forming a permanent prison, he

interrupted my reading and asked if I was interested in attending a writing class. Without pausing for careful consideration, I said sure. I was desperate to participate in anything that would free me from my dark cell.

I had to wait about a month before attending the class, so I filled my vacant hours (of which I had many) by writing about something that had deeply affected me – my mother's death from ovarian cancer when she was still a vibrant, healthy woman in the midst of a career. The writing was slow and painful. I had to stop after each sentence. But as the clumsy paragraphs gradually formed pages, my thoughts on the horrific experience began to clarify, giving me insight on a hazy, alcohol-and-drug suffused period of my life.

By the time I attended the writing class for the first time, I had a small pile of pages, disparate thoughts scratched onto a yellow legal pad. After submitting to Professor Larson that first draft exploring my mother's mortality, I expected to get it back with some minor corrections and advice, and I could move on to another subject, something less painful. Instead, I had to labour through five more drafts, revisiting my mother's deathbed, in her home, many times. Yet, after one year of frustrating toil, when I nervously held a magazine containing my published work, the thrill gave me new purpose, a raison d'être.

I soon realized that volunteer programs were my only avenue for self-improvement. The creative writing class motivated me to become a voracious reader, devouring collections of essays and short stories, tackling novels by eminent writers like Hemingway, Steinbeck and Fitzgerald. My vocabulary slowly grew, augmented by *New York Times* crossword puzzles, a Webster's dictionary and a Roget's thesaurus (references that Hamilton College generously donated to the writing class).

My educational path led me to another volunteer program at Attica, the meditation class. I had only a vague idea of what meditation entailed, mystical gurus sitting cross-legged on thin mats, their serene vibrations spreading across continents in an attempt to effect world peace.

I was fascinated by the concept of inner peace. I had my doubts whether I could ever achieve such a thing, but if its pursuit would get me out of my cell, away from the swirling chaos and raucous din that pervades prison, I was all for it. I soon found myself cross-legged too, motionless and in pain, on smouldering black mats in a decrepit classroom painted dentist-office green. But after some practice, struggling to rein in my agitated mind, the

resentments to which I had clung for many years began to dissolve. The anger encoded in my DNA, my immanent hostility toward the world, abated. Antipathy left my body, escaping through the steel casement windows of the meditation room, absorbed by the fat clouds of a tangerine sunset.

While the view from that second floor classroom was inspiring, the reality of prison education soon set in. Many men, once their initial curiosity was satisfied, lost interest. They were not willing to do the work. Some men, frustrated by the inability to even set foot in classrooms because of limited space and long waiting lists, gave up. The meditation room could accommodate no more than twelve men. The creative writing class offered seats for only eight men.

Some programs offered no seats whatsoever. The Sex Offender Program (SOP) has not existed at Attica for over five years. I do not know if that is a result of prison retribution or simple apathy. The IPA (Inmate Program Associate) class, which teaches men to be facilitators, to teach rehabilitative programs like ART (Aggression Replacement Training) or GED study, has not been offered in sixteen months.

Teaching fellow prisoners has transformed my life. Facilitating programs has given me a sense of accomplishment, a chance to improve my self-esteem, something that has suffered greatly as the years of incarceration have accumulated. Unfortunately, many prisoners who seek that same opportunity have no access to it. The desks are vacant. The chalkboard is blank.

One of the best methods for changing the lives of prisoners and keeping them from returning to prison once released is higher education. Those who obtain a college degree while incarcerated have the lowest rate of recidivism. The Bard Prison Initiative offers college degrees at five New York State prisons. Less than 2 per cent of its 150 graduates have returned to prison. The rate of recidivism for those who leave prison without a higher education degree is about 60 per cent.

During the 1980's and 1990's, politicians like Ronald Reagan and George Pataki took a 'tough-on-crime' stance. Prison educational programs were cut. Governor Pataki ended New York State's Inmate Higher Education Program (IHEP). Congress eliminated Pall Grants for prisoners. Nationally, the three hundred prison college education programs dwindled down to three. Not coincidentally, the rate of recidivism soared to 68 per cent. Societal demand for retribution boomeranged. Instead of educated, rehabilitated ex-prisoners returning to their communities, unchanged individuals left prison and

picked up where they left off – committing crimes like burglary and drug dealing in order to survive. Without an education, they stood little chance of finding employment. Society shot itself in the foot. The 'get tough on crime' attitude resulted in high unemployment and economic deterioration for inner cities. Further, the skyrocketing cost of mass incarceration ($60 billion a year) ballooned state budgets, driving up property taxes and state income tax rates. All of society suffered by footing the bill for America's more than two million prisoners. A study by the Pew Institute demonstrated that every dollar invested in prisoner higher education reduced prison costs by two dollars. Yet, America's hell-bent desire to punish prisoners obfuscates the facts and logic.

Approximately 95 per cent of all prisoners eventually leave prison and return to their communities. If you were to ask anyone, who would they prefer for their new neighbour, an angry, bitter ex-con with no education who cannot find a job, or an educated, transformed ex-prisoner eager to work and contribute to his or her community, the answer would be obvious. Yet resentment toward criminals, whether they are thieves, drug-dealers, addicts or alcoholics, often obliterates clear thinking and common sense. If logic prevailed, ex-prisoners would not be prohibited from holding jobs such as hair-cutting, nursing, teaching or health care. Ex-prisoners would be eligible for subsidized housing so that neither they nor their children become homeless. As U.S. citizens, they would be allowed to vote. Yet, ex-prisoners are prohibited by state laws from all of these things. Jobless, homeless, and rejected by society, it is no wonder that half a million men and women return to prison every year. High rates of recidivism prove mass incarceration does not offer rehabilitation. Our penal system is an abject failure.

Faced with battling an intransigent administration in a feckless environment, Attica's Offender Rehabilitation Coordinator leaned back in his office chair. As he went to take another sip of his coffee, he noticed the paper cup held nothing but cold dregs. Deciding that it was time for meaningful change, he opened Microsoft Office, typed a letter, and sent it to the printer. Once it emerged, he proofread and signed it. He powered down his computer, shut off the lights and locked his office door.

Before heading home, he dropped off his letter of resignation on the superintendent's desk. As he walked toward the front gate, he felt lighter, as if he had shed some pounds. An electric motor whirred as the iron gate

slowly opened. Walking toward his car, he looked at the sky and noticed that the weather had begun to change. The rain had stopped, and the clouds were clearing. He got in his car and left Attica's parking lot for the last time.

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