

## Convicts and Communities

*Jorge Antonio Renaud*

---

Restoring dignity to convicts – which is a definition of rehabilitation – is not much in vogue in America. There is little demand for rebuilding broken individuals and reintegrating them into distrustful communities. Bickering between get-tough conservatives and give-love-a-chance liberals has squeezed most convict/citizen interaction into irrelevance, and pragmatic proposals are derided as a) too costly, b) posing security risks, or c) pandering to society’s debris, a charge deadly to a budding politician’s aspirations.

A few lonely programs exist. Other than faith-based, evangelical experiments, convict/citizen interaction can be clumped into three categories: prisoner trustees sent into communities to provide labor; prisoners invited to speak to youth organizations about the nexus of drugs and crime; and at-risk youth sent day-tripping into max institutions by judges held rapt by the “Scared Straight” mythos.

All three categories are exclusionary and non-representational. They limit participation to prisoners handpicked by prison officials. The first two groups in Texas are almost exclusively young, non-violent offenders with short sentences. Armed robbers, rapists and murderers are rarely granted trustee status and will not be fighting fires or building homes in local communities, and they surely won’t be addressing the Boys and Girls Club. Any tangible benefits accruing from these programs are denied to all prisoners not allowed in.

The “Scared Straight” paradigm, along with the boot camp concept, has been mostly discredited. If fear and certain violence were true barriers to recidivism, one trip to prison would be more than enough to dissuade young men and women from further crime. This has never been so. “Scared Straight” programs make for good theater and little else. However much the tattooed, toothless terrors picked for these programs hew to traditional convict caricatures, they still are carefully screened by prison officials to fit certain criteria – here an external fierceness coupled with the ability to follow with a meaningful message.

The truth is, programs of this type aren’t designed to inculcate responsibility in or enhance the rehabilitation of participating prisoners. They aim to provide prison officials a way to bond with community leaders, and to allow each group to then point to these cooperative efforts as examples of what “good inmates” can do, if only they are taken in hand and pointed

in the right direction. The fact that “good” in this instance reflects certain prison officials’ concept of trustworthiness is typical of current prison rehab programs – they are denied to the very prisoners whose history shows a desperate need of them.

Sincere programs committed to helping prisoners lift themselves from the despair of their existence, if inviting real and substantial community involvement, would have the following components:

- 1) They would be cheap, emphasizing volunteers and prisoner peer groups instead of paid prison employees. Politicians cannot resist ranting against prison programs that someone, somewhere, has insisted are a “luxury”. College programs, writing workshops, arts and crafts, and legitimate recreational programs for elderly and handicapped prisoners have been cut in various prisons after citizen complaints. Much as they’d like, politicians can muster little argument against programs proposed, initiated and staffed by community volunteers or unpaid prisoners.
- 2) They would be as inclusive as possible and would in fact focus on the medium, close and high security prisoners that most prison programs now exclude. Texas, for example, offers adequate anger management, cognitive intervention and substance abuse programs. However, the very prisoners whose disciplinary records show violations reflecting poor thinking skills, anger problems or continued substance abuse are the only inmates excluded from those classes. Astonishingly, Texas demands that prisoners attain an arbitrary custody level and remain disciplinary-free for a set period – in other words, to show that they have on their own realized and begun to address their problems – before allowing them the “privilege” of entering programs that should have been mandated once their problems were discovered. It is this mindset, of allowing prisoners into programs based on false security criteria instead of demonstrable need that necessitates the following.
- 3) They would require volunteer professionals to conceive of and provide non-institutional models of cognitive thinking – ideally a Socratic approach to ethical problems – without the input or participation of prison officials or staff. Prison officials would of course retain the right to allow or deny a given program, but the goals, methods and all particulars of classroom or program essentials would be conceived of

and presented by volunteers or prisoners. Prison-initiated programs, and the state employees who staff them, are infused with the belief that all prisoners are game players, all saying and doing anything to get over and get out. This attitude is inescapable; it is gospel, taught at the guard academies. This not-so-subtle contempt taints what good these programs offer, and they offer quite a bit. A recent review of evidence-based programs for criminalized adults evaluated the results from 291 programs over the last 35 years. Programs emphasizing cognitive thinking consistently reduced recidivism rates by significant percentages, especially when coupled with community involvement (Aos et al., 2006).

- 4) Finally, these programs would demand that prisoners give to the community not what prison orders them to give, but what their skills and experience allows them to give, reinforcing the validity of those skills and experience.

So what would these programs – cheap, initiated within the community, focused on prisoners needing immediate help and accepting what they have to offer – actually look like?

They would flow in and out. An inflow program could be initiated by a local philosophy professor, an attorney or anyone with good verbal skills and knowledge of the Socratic teaching method. This approach demands that the student peel away layers of assumption and behavior until arriving at an underlying truth.

In this instance, volunteers could hold round-table discussions with close or medium custody prisoners, preferably in cell-block dayrooms to alleviate security concerns and to avoid taking classroom space. Volunteer moderators would post ethical conundrums relevant to prison life to the prisoners, asking them to explain their solutions.

This tactic is called playing *The Whys*, a game that author Ronald Gross (2002) credits cognitive anthropologist Charles Case with creating. It consists of asking someone “Why?” questions that elicit the reason or motivation for each preceding response. The answers may seem childish or robotic at first, but if honestly pursued they eventually reveal core values.

And the assumption of these round-table groups – or any of these cognitive thinking programs – is that all inmates retain core values, but their behavior has been twisted by the short-term rewards of situational ethics.

Using various cognitive thinking exercises – The Whys being only one – community volunteers use the moral goodness implicit in their altruism and willingness to enter prisons to strengthen prisoners' dormant sense of basic right and wrong. With the reinforcement of the group, prisoners *can* express their frustration with prison's rigid code. Surely, this is better than ordering prisoners to clean a trash-filled alleyway.

The success or failure of this program can be easily quantified. In a pilot program on one or two cell-blocks, disciplinary records of participating prisoners could be tracked and compared with disciplinary records of like-custody prisoners who did not take part. Prisoners completing these courses and moving into minimum custody could then hold round-tables of their own, equipped with necessary materials such as videos and books, with a moderator occasionally sitting in.

Outflow programs present more of an opportunity for extensive convict/community interaction. Prisoners leaving still on paper (e.g. those on parole or some type of supervised discharge) would prepare a Personal Penance Statement, which would set out to the community and government agency overseeing release the manner in which that prisoner felt he or she could best contribute to the community.

While similar to existing programs that require community service, most of those not only *compel* that service; it is punitive, based on the negative reinforcement of humiliation. Personal Penance announces: This is who I am. This is what I can do to give back. By accepting, the community positively reinforces the prisoner/parolee's sense of worth.

For example, inmate mechanics could promise to donate one weekend a month to help repair cars of low-income families. Once released, they would register with an office at the parole agency. Community participants would by then have found a local auto shop owner willing to donate garage space and tools. One weekend a month, low-income car owners would be invited to bring their cars in – or to have them towed in – for repairs and would be charged only for parts, the labor being donated by the parolees.

Every outgoing inmate can be asked to provide a Personal Penance Statement. Every inmate has something he or she can offer – electricians, gardeners, carpenters, janitors, printers, sewing machine operators, clothes pressers – all can promise to use their skills to benefit those who need help, everything done for the community, in conjunction with community assistance.

Crucial to this is that those accepting work from the parolees be allowed to thank them personally. It would not do for a volunteer to be a cutout at the auto shop, allowing no interaction between the owners of the vehicles and the parolee mechanics. If any of these programs are to be of any use besides providing cheap labor, it is necessary that the community not be shielded from the prisoners/parolees, but that they are now integral, respected members of the community.

These are but two examples of possible ways to foster interaction and build trust between free citizens and those they have exiled. Obstacles to their implementation will be familiar: prison officials unwilling to allow outsiders into their fiefdoms; politicians barking that any program is wasted on human scum; and the deadening inertia that plagues any prison initiative suggesting something new. And of course, some prisoners will fail. Some will take advantage where they shouldn't. The naysayers will howl, "You see? They cannot be trusted!"

But the possibility for change is ever present. All we need to do is to believe, to truly believe that each man and woman is blessed with a kernel of redemption, and to then ask ourselves: do we nourish it, or do we let it wither and die?

## REFERENCES

- Aos, Steven, Marna Miller and Elizabeth Drake (2006) *Evidence-Based Adult Correction Programs: What Works and What Does Not?*, Olympia (WA): Washington State Institute for Public Policy.
- Gross, Ronald (2002) *Socrates' Way: Seven Master Keys to Using your Mind to the Utmost*, New York: Jeremy Tarcher, pp. 31-32.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jorge Antonio Renaud is the author of *Behind the Walls: A Guide for Families and Friends of Texas Prison Inmates*, published by the University of North Texas Press. He was a copy editor at the *Austin American-Statesman* and the *Waco Tribune-Herald*. The Houston Trial Lawyers Association awarded him the 2003 First Amendment Award for his defense of free speech while editor of the Texas prisons newspaper, *The Echo*. His short fiction, poems, memoirs, and essays have taken many prizes in the PEN Prison Writing Contest over the years. "Convicts and Communities" took third place in

nonfiction in 2007. Now free, Jorge is involved with reentry initiatives in Texas, specifically working to develop and offer cognitive behavioral programs to all Texas convicts. He offers consultation services to anyone interested in Texas prisons through his website, [exforgood.com](http://exforgood.com).