

RESPONSE

A Symphony in Two Parts: The JPP and The PEN Prison Writing Program Susan Nagelsen

As this issue of the *Journal of Prisoners on Prison* goes to press, the United States incarcerates its citizens at a rate six times that of Canada, leading the world in both actual and per capita figures. Rehabilitation has assumed a pejorative connotation, and the continual reduction or elimination of programs is lessening the possibility of being able to effectively prepare prisoners for re-entry to society. In a recent article in *The New York Review of Books*, David Cole (2009, p. 41) succinctly explains this pattern, remarking on the profound lack of empathy for those in prison: “For the vast majority of us ... the idea that we might find ourselves in jail or prison is simply put not a genuine concern”.

There are, however, and we are grateful for their presence, men and women who recognize the dysfunctional philosophy that continues to drive the tough-on-crime attitude that has prevailed in the United States for four decades. Bell Chevigny and her colleagues at the PEN America Prison Writing Program have worked tirelessly to remind us of our shared humanity with prisoners and to demonstrate that affinity by showcasing the intellectual and creative products of minds that society has exiled and marginalized to the point of near voicelessness. It is significant that this issue of the *JPP*, edited by Bell Chevigny, appears just as the global recession is forcing retrograde elements in the United States to rethink criminal justice policies that are no longer economically sustainable while the Canadian government continues to move towards increasingly punitive and expensive policy making on prison issues.

The strength of the voices in this issue will not disappoint the reader; the content in the pieces will provide academics and prisoners avenues for discourse whether in the classroom or on the pod. Students will find themselves questioning the wisdom of isolating prisoners in concrete boxes for prolonged periods, while prisoners will nod their heads knowingly. The readers will find humor, even where one might think there should be no joking allowed. In this issue we are regaled with stories that showcase the problems that are prevalent in our prisons today: mental illness, HIV/AIDS, the Three Strikes laws, the violence that permeates these places, and the

death penalty. The reader is given insight into the absurdity of living behind the walls, something that the lay person will find interesting and frightening all at once. There are pieces that deal with the continual problems of cultural difference within our institutions of incarceration, and engaging works that offer opportunities for us to rethink the way we view prisons – might we consider them communities? We are asked to ponder the effectiveness of this concept on the rehabilitative nature of the prison complex.

How might the community be able to help is a question we are asked in this issue, and one that is addressed by two different writers. One looks at the affect volunteers can have on the prison community and as a result what the prisoner can then give back to the community upon release. The second looks at programs and partnerships formed with prisons to provide chances for prisoners to enrich their lives through writing, art, and theatre. These programs provide much needed life-altering opportunities for prisoners and volunteers alike, and without programs such as the Prison Creative Arts Project (PCAP) the chance for growth and development might be lost for both parties.

At a time when the Supreme Court of the United States is revisiting current laws that sentence juveniles as young as thirteen to prison for life without parole for non-homicide crimes,¹ the writers in these pages remind us of the contradiction on all human hearts: the urge to punish and the need to forgive. These writers, prisoners and academics alike, urge society to summon the will to accommodate both without denying either.

We must continue the collaboration we have begun, this partnership between scholars, prisoners, and the *JPP* in an environment to facilitate the shifts in policy and philosophy necessary to reform the current system. The authors whose work is featured within these pages, the dedicated scholars and authors who contribute to push the issues of incarceration to the forefront of the discussion all play a vital role in the battle to work for change. Without the dedication and intervention of scholars, authors and volunteers like those associated with the PEN Prison Writing Program, without the commitment and perseverance of journals like the *JPP*, and without the courage and determination of the incarcerated writers featured here, those on the outside working for change would be in danger of what the ancient Greeks warned us about 2500 years ago: “The worst and final temptation... is to stop the fight [against injustice] and slide into inactivity of heart and will” (Roche, 1962, p. xvii).

Apathy in the face of injustice is not an option. To force a system to change one must throw back the curtains and allow the light to pour into the room illuminating the dirt and the cobwebs as well as the places in the corners where the filth can hide. These writers, this journal, and the volunteers who keep the PEN Prison Writing Program alive and well teach this lesson as few can.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ *Johnson v. Florida*. Oral arguments before the Court were heard on November 9, 2009.

REFERENCES

- Cole, David (2009) "Can our Shameful Prisons Be Reformed?", *The New York Review of Books*, page 41 – November 9.
- Roche, Paul (ed.) (1962) "Introduction", in *The Orestes Plays of Aeschylus*, New American Library of Canada.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Susan Nagelsen is Director of the Writing Program at New England College in Henniker, New Hampshire, where she has taught for twenty-four years. She is an essayist and a fiction writer as well as the author of two writing manuals. She teaches first-year courses as well as advanced essay writing courses such as the art of the essay and content based writing. She also teaches in the Criminal Justice program where her course focuses on teaching students about prison from the point of view of prisoners. Her most recent published fiction can be found in the fall 2005 edition of the *Henniker Review*, *Tacenda*, *Bleakhouse Review* and in the *Journal of Prisoners on Prison* Volume 14(2), an issue addressing aging in prison. She is a frequent contributor to the *JPP* and is currently Associate Editor. She is also the editor of an anthology of work by incarcerated writers entitled *Exiled Voices, Portals of Discovery* (New England College Press, 2008). The book features 13 incarcerated writers with an introduction to each written by Nagelsen and is being used as a textbook in courses focusing on criminal justice issues.