

## My Experience with Education in Canada and Federal Prisons

Rod Carter

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I quit high school the first time in May 1964 just before the end of my second go at Grade 10. I left again in November 1964 on the heels of a two week suspension for fighting at a school dance. During my years in public school, the teachers' generally commented that I "could do better given my ability". In high school, the remarks became more psychological as I became more rebellious. My file was littered with statements such as "there has been a change in his attitude", "he avoids expression of his inner feelings" and "has a hostile attitude toward the adult world". They were not seeing it wrong!

I entered prison in October 1967 hauling a three and a half year sentence. My two uncles and two cousins, who were all Ontario Provincial Police (OPP) officers, had me destined for a life of crime. I spent reception at the Big House – Kingston Penitentiary – and transferred to Collins Bay Penitentiary a few months later to complete my sentence. Early in my sentence, I recognized a thirst for education, both formal and informal. Kierkegaard (2004, p. 124) said, "Freedom is man's capacity to take a hand in his own development. It is our capacity to mould ourselves, the basic step in achieving inward freedom is 'choosing one's self'". I served cell time reading, working on correspondence courses, listening to one of three radio channels and strumming guitar. During the day, I joined seven other students in the one-classroom school where I worked on my correspondence courses, which included English literature, composition and mathematics. One guy I admired was completing a university degree. He answered any questions I had. I saw a university degree as unattainable but attractive nonetheless. It would be the university – that great proletarian parking lot – that would become my home for many years and remains so to this day.

The big push in corrections then was to take trades training including automobile mechanics, carpentry, electrical, plumbing, welding, barbering and so on. After a few months, I enrolled in the automobile mechanics course and completed my correspondence courses in the evening.

I was also an avid reader and started in the prison library to search for something readable – a massive mission at the time. I did find *My Shadow Ran Fast* (1964) by Bill Sands – founder of the Seventh Step Society, *On the Yard* (1967) by Malcolm Braly – which Kurt Vonnegut Jr. described as "a great American prison novel", and *Man in Black* (1968) by Johnny Cash. Ten years later, Braly (1976) wrote a great piece of non-fiction entitled *False Starts: A Memoir of San Quentin and Other Prisons*,

with Vonnegut once again praising his work as the “clearest account of American crimes and punishment that I ever expect to read”. Braly (1976, p.153) in this second effort said, “most of what we learn only serves to limit us” (education), “easier to hear Freud and Jung than Dillinger and Floyd” (psychology), and “a man is always guilty of any crime he has ever committed” (Hegel/philosophy). He cited as his favourite book Ayn Rand’s (1943) *The Fountainhead*. When he was sent to camp he described it as, “Folsom with Muzak” (Braly, 1976, p. 362).

I fell deeply and hopelessly in love with the printed word. I was beginning to realize and would later have it substantiated many times, that ‘the pen is mightier than the sword’. Manuscripts to the administration – including one by my friend Roger Caron (1978) kept getting scooped – were on par with an escape map, a gun carved out of soap or hacksaw blade. The power of words could transfer a prison bureaucrat to the minimum security in Siberia to oversee the forestry and saw mill program where prisoners regularly sawed off toes and fingers, including their own. But I am getting ahead of myself.

I was becoming a cultural junkie and book lover. Every Saturday night we had a movie in the gym. Clint Eastwood in *The Good, The Bad and The Ugly* (1966), *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964), and *For a Few Dollars More* (1965). Lancaster in *Birdman of Alcatraz* (1962), and Paul Newman in *Cool Hand Luke* (1967) and *Hud* (1963). Back in the cell, I listened to Dylan’s “I Shall be Released” and “You Ain’t Goin’ Nowhere” – which we dubbed the National Parole Board’s favourite song – on the headphones. I also listened to Creedence Clearwater Revival cranking out swamp rock and Hendrix questioning, “Hey Joe, where you goin’ with that gun in your hand?” Not to mention the rough and rowdy early Stones and Animals. Yet it was the printed word that kept tugging. I would go to the library and glean through back issues of Time Magazine – doing time, reading Time. For me education was becoming ‘freedom inward bound’, coursing through my brain cells. This applied as long as I had enough leeway to tap into my creative spirit for assignments and essays. Eric Hoffer (2006, p. 68) stated, “The real ‘haves’ are they who can acquire freedom, self-confidence and even riches without depriving others of them. They acquire all of these by developing and applying their potentialities”.

I was released from prison on parole on December 2, 1968. The National Parole Board was now listening to the Beatles “Ticket to Ride”. I was provided a paper suit, cardboard shoes and thirty dollars worth of monopoly money. I enrolled in the government sponsored *Program Five* to complete my Grade 12 at night school. I registered in English, typing,

mathematics and chemistry. They actually trusted me with chemicals in my hands. Construction work through the day supplemented my meagre stipend. I fought jack hammers, chain saws, picks and shovels. Manual labour provides a form of education, especially in the form of self-discipline. Tracy Kidder (2006, p. 141), an American journalist said, “Presumably the stonemasons who raised the cathedrals worked only partly for their pay. They were building temples to God. It was the sort of work that gave meaning to life”.

One day, my English teacher spotted potential. I wrote pens dry and wore out typewriter ribbons for her. Here again, I met a classmate on his way to university. I was fascinated and slightly tempted to consider the same. I was more encouraged when my English teacher assigned me to a school debate on abortion. Facing the whole school as a member of a four person team in favour of therapeutic abortion, I was simultaneously frightened and challenged. Memory does not serve if we won or lost.

Following completion of Grade 12 I applied to community college in the *Law and Security Management Program*. We were required to undergo a police check. Once mine came back ‘hot’, the college Dean called me into his office in an attempt to have me withdraw from the program and switch into *Municipal Administration*. Hesitating from flattening his face, I went for a long car ride, plugged an 8-track in the dash – Lightfoot, Cohen, Joni Mitchell, Cash and Dylan – vowing I would fight the Dean’s decision. Thoughts of hiring a lawyer, calling my Member of Parliament or going to the press crossed my mind. But I thought any of those choices could backfire, so I called my parole officer whom I trusted and asked him if he would ‘go to the wall’ with me. He assured me he would and did not disappoint. As we met with the Dean, my parole officer spoke with authority and decisiveness as he virtually, which each word, sent off a ‘heat seeking missile’ which the Dean could not duck. As my teaching master in *Law and Security* wanted me to stay, the Dean was effectively stymied. I was allowed to remain in the program. I learned a lot because during that meeting I once again recognized the power of the word, spoken timely, authentically and with radical conviction.

In college, I supplemented my required courses with options in abnormal psychology, the sociology of punishment and criminology. Outside of school, I was into Cream, the Beatles – especially the Magical Mystery Tour – and ‘rolled ones’. As one of the few with a vehicle, I was rented frequently to motor others to Rochdale College – Trudeau’s free university experiment – in Toronto for replenishment.

Upon graduating, I left to attend London Teachers’ College but before leaving I decided to attend my college graduation ceremony. You see,

I was named to the Dean's Honour Roll having achieved a 3.5 grade point average. The sulking bastard had to present me with my diploma at convocation and an additional letter of congratulations which stated: "I would like to offer my congratulations for your outstanding academic achievement ... This distinction will aptly demonstrate your success at Loyalist – a success that, I hope will be extended throughout your career". It was sweet! My friend and poet Al Purdy met me at Ameliasburg. Several beers later, I let the bad memory of that Dean dissolve.

Once in London, I immersed myself in my education courses but began extensive self-initiated studies, delving into local history: the Black Donnellys, the Underground Railroad at Dresden, slave camps, secret societies and poetry. I would go to taverns to seek out information from patrons about local history and started hanging out in libraries. I used the method of the French mystic Simone Weil (1950) whereby she made her students write short notes on many subjects.

With a teaching certificate in hand, I was hired as a public school teacher and taught for the next seven years in western Ontario, the Ottawa Valley and the Northwest Territories. Along the way, I picked up a Bachelor of Arts degree in sociology through summer school and correspondence courses at Trent University. I was also granted a Queen's Pardon by Solicitor General Francis Fox in 1977. This, after the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) probed me and my neighbours – requiring everything except a urinalysis. Far more importantly, I met the woman who would become my wife and our only child's mother. She came from a large family, quite poor, and like me she wanted to travel and live in other cultures. So we did.

The next phase of my education was religious and spiritual. I was raised in the United Church of Canada. My mother saw to it that I was baptized and in the Anglican Church at that, just on the off chance God was not a member of the United Church of Canada. I attended Sunday school and sang in the choir, but I was to rebel at fourteen and although I never denounced my faith, I removed myself from the structures of corporate worship and group enterprises. I maintained a prayer life and regularly read the scriptures. Saint Teresa of Avila (1957, p. 175) said this, "Words lead to deeds ... [t]hey prepare the soul, make it ready, and move it to tenderness". I reconnected in prison and attended Chapel led by an Anglican priest, the type of person God rarely assembles anymore. My fiancé and I were married in the church and our engagement in the church world would strengthen as we each became stronger disciples. We taught Sunday school, sang and gave our testimonies at the local detention centre.

The next phase saw me addressing some personal issues through a unique form of education called *Clinical Pastoral Education* (CPE), generally conducted in an institutional setting. While teaching in the Northwest Territories I felt a ‘tap on the shoulder’, which I determined with the help of mentors to be God, what is normally known as a call or a vocation. I had just been offered a principalship and I had decided that the BA degree was as much formal education as I wanted. So as the New York poet Dorothy Parker would utter every time her telephone or door bell rang, I also uttered, “What fresh hell is this?” (Meade, 1989).

After much whining and denying the legitimacy of such an occurrence, I ended up on the green pastures of the University of British Columbia at the Vancouver School of Theology, registered in the three year *Master of Divinity Degree* program. This was oppressive education or what I would deem ‘assembly line’ education. While walking through the student study room, I noticed everyone had the same books on their desks, were required to complete the same assignments and be placed with the same old supervisors. It is like Greek and Hebrew were not penance enough! To remain sane, I sought out non-approved theological books, rubbed shoulders with non-approved field supervisors and vowed to transfer after my first year. More radically, over the Christmas holiday I was in Arizona at the feet of an Elder seeking sanity and confirmation of direction. He gave me four directions, so there was certainly choice here.

We moved to Ottawa and I entered Saint Paul University, a Roman Catholic seminary, in part because a Catholic priest mentioned to me that “we Catholic types are long on spirituality and short on social justice, while you United Church types are long on social justice and short on spirituality”. It had the ring of truth to me. I studied Greek, ecumenism, missiology and Church history – no Protestant should deprive themselves of studying Martin Luther at a Catholic university.

Then we travelled to Kingston and I completed my degree at Queen’s Theological College. That is when I went back to prison. The Chaplain at Kingston Penitentiary was a Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) supervisor and I registered there for my third year field placement. Our group saw three outsiders and three lifers gather for two days a week for the academic year. I learned to express my anger more appropriately and to cry in that group. That was emotional headway for me as my previous prison experience did not encourage any form of non-violent emotional expression. My supervisor asked me to consider prison chaplaincy as a ministry. I told him I would give it some thought and prayer. It took twelve years, but I eventually took up this challenge.

After a year of internship at Whitehorse United Church in the Yukon – my deepest immersion in the ‘square john’ world – I was ordained and

sent to serve the Cree Nation at two reserves north of Edmonton, Alberta in Goodfish and Saddle Lake. A lot of informal education occurred there as I began, by invitation, to participate in native rituals and ceremonies, and was exposed to the oral tradition, myths and legends. It was a pleasant change to listen and learn, leaving reading and written assignments aside. I would eventually be led to vision quest and experience the arrival of a spiritual guardian. Here I learned the difference between knowledge-based – largely non-Aboriginal – and wisdom-based – largely Aboriginal – ways of seeing life or world views. After four years, I was asked by the indigenous All Native Circle Conference to establish a street ministry in the core area of Edmonton to work with Aboriginal people. As I began this ministry prowling the streets in blue jeans and a clergy collar, people would ask me to visit companions and friends who were serving time either at Edmonton Maximum (federal) or Fort Saskatchewan (provincial) facilities. At least half my time was spent in prisons.

‘Stirrings’ about working in prisons arose. I was becoming a bit more compliant with ‘spiritual buzzings’. I called my prison chaplain friend in Kingston and was encouraged to present myself in competition as a prison chaplain. The timing seemed right. I sought discernment through ratification. I interviewed at Kingston – Prison City, North America – and was successful at landing the Protestant chaplaincy position at Joyceville Institution, a medium security penitentiary. I served five years there, but was nearly terminated after one for publicly denouncing the Solicitor General for cancelling a lifers conference he had committed to. You see, the *Professional Code of Conduct for Civil Servants* says: “one is not to unduly or harshly criticize the government of the day”. In bureaucratese: “don’t bite the hand that feeds you”. In my language: “put the screws on me and I’ll screw right out from under you”.

Following five years of service at Joyceville, I landed the position of Regional Chaplain with Corrections Canada – now Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) – overseeing all chaplains in the Ontario Region. This is a better position than one might think. The opportunity to follow religious or cultural grievances fell on my desk, as well as all that human resources entails – not issuing gag orders to chaplains. I emphasized that “at its best, a prison chapel is a sanctuary and the chaplain a voice of conscience”. Beside my Prison Pardon, this quote was nailed on my office wall, “education is the most powerful weapon that we can use to change the world”, coined by Nelson Mandela who served 28 years in prison.

After five years at Regional Headquarters, Queen’s Theological College wanted to get involved in the restorative or transformative justice movement. An agreement was arrived at, whereby I would be on

secondment to Queen's from CSC for a three year period as Director of the *Restorative Justice Program*. One of our assets after five years is our class diversity and how it lends itself so naturally to adult learning. We draw police and parole officers, chaplains, lawyers, convicts, victims, volunteers and students from psychology, sociology, criminology and theology. We also always have an international student from a foreign prison system. The novices bring their enthusiasm, while the veterans bring their experience.

A lot has come full circle for me. Martin Buber's (1923) *I and Thou* had a lot to say to me. Buber's main point in the book is that there are two ways of relating to other people in our lives: as objects – "how can I use that person?" – or as subjects – "I know what I'm feeling; what is the other person feeling?". In Buber's terms, there are "I-It" and "I-Thou" relationships. In an "I-Thou" relationship, we see the other person as a subject, someone who comes to the encounter with needs and feelings of his or her own. In "I-It" relationships, we see the other person as a means to an end. We are concerned only with our own feelings, not with the feelings of the other person. The prisoner is now a preacher, the high school dropout a university faculty member, and the angry young man is now more poised, more responsive and less reactionary. Stephen Reid (1986, p. 197) captured this phenomenon so well in *Jackrabbit Parole*: "It's strange how real life works in the end. Your heroes are all dead or were never heroes at all; the wretched become the saintly, the disdained, the noble".

I have a lot of learning to continue. Books, story-tellers and teachers have enriched me so. Many people along the way gave me a helping hand with no strings attached. And my experiences were learning places, some tough lessons, while others were easy and comforting. As the teachable moment arrived for me, a teacher would appear. Anything I am able to pass on is my way of saying thank you to all those teachers who stopped to help me take the next step in my life.

As for education and CSC, I see some arbitrariness. The organization conducts most of its own research and statistics. It also formulates (or does not) policy and procedure on the same. Yet it appears from other sources as well that education lowers recidivism rates unlike any other program. In conversation, one prison education director said, "[e]very person has potential. There's evidence that the higher the grade level (of the prisoner), the lower the recidivism rate". Another statistic touted on the television program *Counterspin* on November 15, 2000 was that an offender with a college education sees his or her chance to recidivate drop from eighty five to one percent.

Amid this evidence, CSC still will not pay for university courses for prisoners as they once did. So in essence, CSC does its own research yet policy development may or may not coincide with their own findings. This is a portion of an op-ed piece I wrote in the *Kingston Whig-Standard*:

When a citizen is sent to prison it is as punishment, not *for* punishment. It should never descend to cruelty. Rights and freedoms should not be curbed more than is absolutely necessary. The minimal denial of human and civil rights should be the yardstick. A person doesn't forfeit his or his citizenship when he or she is sent to prison. There are people who still vastly underestimate the loss of physical freedom and wish to heap much hardship upon convicts. Trying to squeeze every last entitlement from a prisoner places the public at risk. The practice creates an unpredictable individual. Excessive deprivation and harsh revenge can create a mean person. The cessation of funding for university courses seemed to fall on the heels of over-zealous media presentations of a high profile offender who was getting his paid. It was that 'credible'; poof it was gone! To keep it gone reference is made to it during every federal election. And it tends to raise the ire of the public when in an op-ed piece a single parent on welfare with a university aged child makes mistaken reference that offenders get their university courses paid for while they do not. Those of us who have utilized higher education to assist in our rehabilitation need to continue to share our stories with fierce conviction. Maybe one day, poof it'll reappear! (Carter, 2000, p. 8).

Voluntary education is a valuable resource to any prisoner so inclined. I do not believe in forced education or the inclination of CSC to bring every offender two grades beyond what they arrive with vis-à-vis their case management plan. I contend that one's personal program is far more important than the official one the 'Man' sets up. It is as evil to force in a so-called positive direction as a negative one. When one discovers or determines on their own to enter the world of education, then we usually see a motivated person likely to learn at an above average rate with an enthusiasm, as that whole realm of personal and social development enters their awareness, resulting in new resources at one's disposal in which to tap as the situation of circumstance calls for.

Whether one bases their decisions on anecdotal or empirical evidence, whether one mixes an element of subjectivity with objectivity, it appears that the call to education is valid, opening one to a whole new world of



thinking and feeling. Education is certainly worth more than a second glance and has opened many a prison door. But the greatest benefit is found in the liberation of the mind whereby one feels released from limited thinking and possibilities, opening the way to new visions and methods of getting by in this modern, fast-paced world. As Karl Marx (2004, p. 126) said, “education has a specific function of keeping us all from becoming ‘de-humanized’”.

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