

Years Mired In Thought

Mark Landry

That there should one man die ignorant
who had capacity for knowledge, this I call a tragedy.

Thomas Carlyle

The central core of education, particularly in the prison environment, should not simply be the discovery and development of one's intellectual capabilities. Cultivating in students the ability to determine the surface area of a sphere, or the propensity to treat most indefinite pronouns in the singular form, or even the most basic reading skills, are all valid and extremely credible endeavors. There is, however, a goal far more important, particularly in a prison setting. I have encountered more than one psychopath in my journeys who could accurately articulate endless passages of great literature one moment, and then assault your senses with their delusional appetites for the unfathomable the next. No, education is about rational thought.

The role of acquired knowledge in changing preconceived ideas, or altering learned, destructive, and erratic behaviors, is not a novel concept floated for public consumption by some out-of-touch academic or social scientist. Thinking women and men have always grasped this truth whenever and wherever honesty prevails. Plato explained that once the fetters of ignorance are removed, it is absolutely critical to extend an opportunity for habituation; otherwise, the person simply flees from the light and returns to the shadows. Plato also understood the human resistance to change, something particularly repugnant to convict life, along with the probability that "the last thing to be seen and hardly seen is the idea of good... and that anyone who is to act wisely in private and public must have caught sight of this.

Often the significant difference between the educated and the uneducated is the ability to employ informed rational thought at a crucial moment. Lawmakers and power brokers mistakenly believe they can legislate morality or that the threat of excessive incarceration is enough to deter individuals from engaging in a criminal act. The truth is they frighten only those citizens who in all probability would not commit a criminal act regardless of the government sanctions in place. The men and women today who fill our prisons to shameful capacity have in many cases developed a flawed thinking pattern. Six-time losers do not believe they will be captured

for criminal act number seven. Tunnel vision, coupled with the inability to rationalize behavior and reactions to a situation, permits them to focus solely upon the financial gain as it relates to their need for immediate self-gratification. They, we, cannot think rationally beyond that single-mindedness without the benefit of education.

The voices that lay claim to being representative of the people's will vigorously oppose the concept of prison education. The single greatest blow leveled at prison education came wrapped within a law preventing further convict access to Pell Grant money. The voices bemoaned the outrage of convicts being afforded entrance into America's colleges and universities at the expense of the children of law-abiding citizens. Facts and numbers were skewed, manipulated, and outright falsified to substantiate this fallacy and further enrage public sentiments.

These voices also claim it is time to take back our streets and neighborhoods, reclaim our lives, and ultimately live without fear of violence. No rational human being would argue these premises. I am always concerned for the safety and well-being of my family and friends I have left behind. But if you suppose for a moment that society has gained an advantage by removing a citizen from the community for years, perhaps decades, without extending an opportunity to access educational programming, then you are either foolish or seriously misinformed. How can you force prisoners to languish in the systems now employed across America, and then not anticipate their angry, bitter, violent and revenge-filled return? And what does the voice of the people say to his/her next victim? Nothing, because the government will not acknowledge responsibility for its duplicity.

Now, I am not suggesting for a moment that anyone is exempt from the personal responsibility for his or her own actions. Any suggestions to the contrary, and without delving into a big philosophical diatribe concerning moral and social responsibility or Old Testament postulates, suffice to say I adhere to the belief, "You reap what you sow." The issue that should be important to the public collectively is the blatant disregard so many individuals exhibit by breaking into a neighbor's home or assaulting a bank fully armed. How are destructive thought patterns altered to provoke a shift toward individual responsibility and empathy? It certainly is not through legislation or excessive incarceration. Perhaps if the women and men leaving our nation's prisons were given an opportunity to appreciate the truth behind their actions, recidivism could be reduced appreciably.

The truth that burglaries are the theft of possessions belonging to honest, hard working people, or that bank robberies terrorize sisters, mothers and grandmothers is not terribly difficult to fathom. Thinking women and men understand these truths as being self-evident.

Education has changed me. It has altered the way I react to situations, it has altered my view of society, and it has most assuredly altered my view of how and where I want to fit into that society. Fortunately or unfortunately, depending upon your perspective, my time of incarceration began when society either embraced the concept of prison education or was simply apathetic to its existence. Today I continue to maim and butcher the occasional constructed sentence, leaving my modifiers dangling and fragments littering the composed landscape like so much unfinished business. However, I can look back upon the years I spent studying and fully recognize how education has impacted the lives of those who took advantage when the opportunities were made available. Without question, the rate of recidivism decreases enormously as individual education increases. So why is the system frightened by the concept of educating the convicted? Keeping segments of society ignorant intentionally is an antiquated concept born out of fear. Every “lifer” or long-term convict I know who has been released after earning a post-secondary education remains free today. Education works.

How much do I miss the structured classroom setting? I stumbled into an English Composition class while serving a sentence at the Federal Penitentiary in Leavenworth, Kansas, to escape the heat my behavior was attracting on the prison yard. I felt perhaps a little inconspicuousness might help distract the hounds that were chomping at my heels. It was in that first prison classroom where I became acquainted with the one person who would impact my adult life more profoundly than even my sentencing judge. Professor Jane Stock proved to be beyond my equal, as well as the influence I and so many thirsted after. She challenged, encouraged, chastised, and eventually ignited a passion for education in a most unlikely collection of students. Whites, Blacks, Mexicans, and Native Americans, men who would normally under the best conditions eye one another across the prison yard with suspicion and loathing, under the worst conditions stomp and stab one another, were now sitting in a classroom sharing a free flow of ideas and creativity. The magic never seemed to wane. A half dozen years later yet another influential professor pondered aloud in mid-sentence, “I

wonder how many prisons across America this evening are playing host to a gathering of minds contemplating Greek thought?"

I fully understand the concept of retribution. The notion of "Payback" is prevalent throughout every station of prison life. However, when an individual or collective group is exacting retribution it might serve their current and future purpose to consider this thought: "Do I want to antagonize my quarry, beat him down, humiliate him, dehumanize him for years on end, all the while knowing he will in all probability return to live amongst us once again?" As that member of society demanding payback, would you feel more satisfied knowing the convicted are spending that incarcerated time engaging in the same behaviors that brought them to prison in the first place, or would you feel more confident and justified knowing the convicted are serving that mandated sentence by spending time in the classroom exploring philosophy, mathematics, or computer science? I know what your primordial instincts lust for, but I also appreciate what your humanity should ultimately concede.

In recent months a sentencing judge was requested by the state to weigh in on a convict's bid for parole following twenty-seven years of continuous incarceration. The judge duly noted the man's impressive accomplishments by pompously acknowledging in part the educational achievements as being quite admirable. He then continued by pontificating on the reasons behind long-term incarceration. Prisons, he asserted, are a place of punishment, not a place to be educated.

With all due respect to this unnamed jurist he is greatly and sadly mistaken. Prisons should be exactly that, a place designed to educate. The system has served no purpose nor delivered to society any sense of justice by simply warehousing the convicted. We are a living testament to this *quid inconcussum* (unshakable certitude). Those who do not learn repeat history. There are those who insist it is easier for me to resort to violent, anti-social behavior by definition than it is for the average citizen simply because I have been there. I argue by that same premise, it is now easier for me to become a productive, contributing member of society than it is for the average convict. I have free will, I can think rationally, and I make my own, informed decisions.

Today I can solve quadratic equations, discover the tensile strength of a substance using the laws of physics, experience nineteenth-century London through the pen of Charles Dickens, and the oppressiveness of twentieth

century South African apartheid through the works of Nelson Mandela. I can appreciate the individual passions of Christians, Jews, and Muslims around the world and the wonderment of a carbon-based universe. But the one great thing of beauty I possess is the gift conveyed to me through caring, unselfish, and dedicated teachers and professors, and that is my ability to think and provoke rational thought within.

America, your prisons are not by any stretch of the imagination the refined country club settings political vote seekers profess. For many they are a nightmare, filled with violence that destroys the human soul. Remember America, "We reap what we sow."

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