

RESPONSE

Why the Journal of Prisoners on Prisons? *A Conversation Between Susan Nagelsen and Charles Huckelbury*

The following is a recent conversation between Susan Nagelsen and Charles Huckelbury, Associate Editors of the *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons* (JPP). The occasion was an appearance by Sister Helen Prejean, author and tenacious opponent of the death penalty, on the campus of New England College (NEC) where Susan teaches. Once Susan introduced Sister Helen to the JPP, she became a vocal advocate during her lecture. The conversation below traces Susan's introduction to the Journal, her evolving participation in its publication, and the fundamental role she sees for the JPP in contemporary discussions of crime and punishment.

Charles: How did you first discover the JPP?

Susan: I was teaching a writing course as part of NEC's curriculum at the New Hampshire State Prison in Concord, and one of my students told me about an article he had submitted to the JPP. I asked to see it when the issue came out and was impressed with the quality of writing, the structure and format of the journal in general, and the obvious passion Bob Gaucher and others brought to the subject. I had, and still have, an intense interest in higher education inside prison, so when a subsequent issue was devoted to education, I published an essay on post-secondary curricula behind the walls and was invited to become a member of the editorial board. Later I became an associate editor and issue editor, and the experiences have been enormously rewarding.

Charles: Obviously you found something that interested you.

Susan: Yes. Since I teach writing, the JPP's emphasis on writing as a means for prisoners to communicate with the outside world was important to me. Second, since the JPP is a research journal with an international scope, I was impressed by the potential for use in both undergraduate and graduate classes in disciplines other than writing.

Charles: Such as?

Susan: Oh, there are many. Criminology, sociology, criminal justice, law, to name a few. Generally students in those disciplines get only brief glimpses of the punishment side of the equation, but the JPP provided the opportunity for students to hear from the prisoners themselves, as well as

concerned professionals and academics. The journal also provides my first year students with a much needed opportunity to expand their world, and it is imperative to me that we begin with young people. We can't wait to educate citizens about what is happening in prisons around the world; we should be telling the truth so that these young people can help be a part of the voice that makes the change. That was 10 years ago, and I think the need for that kind of awareness is even more important today.

Charles: Those of us inside would agree, but why do you think that is so?

Susan: Because, given the unprecedented expansion of both incarceration and state sanctioned murder as first-use tools for social control, specifically in the U.S., aided and abetted by a credulous and frightened public whose representatives long ago realized that crime is always an election year winner, a research journal designed to provide a voice for men and women behind the concrete and steel barriers can dispel some of the myths about prisons and prisoners. Plus, the cold, hard truth is that other than prisoners' families and a few academics, few people really know or care what kind of conditions exist inside prisons, or in many cases whether prisoners live or die. That doesn't seem to me how an enlightened society should function. How can citizens make informed decisions if they don't have accurate information, or if the information they do have leads them down a path that results in apathy?

Charles: It seems to me that you're saying that hardly anyone cares about prisoners' welfare, so if that's the case, how can the JPP influence those attitudes and encourage people to take an interest in prisoners' writing?

Susan: First, you have to consider why people don't care. Most people in the outside world are not concerned because they have been conditioned to think that prisoners have nothing to offer. The only information they have about them comes via the print or electronic media or, again, politicians who have no other election issues but crime. Tookie Williams, recently murdered by the State of California, was nominated three times for the Nobel Peace Prize, but how many people, for example, were aware of those nominations before his clemency application made the national news? Prisoners as a rule have no voice, and where individuals have no voice, their fundamental humanity and the thread that connects them with fellow human beings on the outside gradually fades until both are no longer distinguishable by the people who make the laws and support the system. The JPP provides a primary means to fight this intentional isolation and enables prisoners to resist becoming what the criminal justice system says they are: faceless entities whose lives and deaths are essentially meaningless.

Charles: OK, I agree with you, but knowing the men and women inside have something to say is one thing. Convincing a sceptical public is another.

Susan: Of course, and the paradox is that history is replete with great writers who either wrote from prison (St. John of the Cross), wrote about their own prison experiences (Dostoyevsky), or created classic literature built around the prison experience (Alexander Dumas). The educated public still validates these authors by purchasing and reading their works in spite of their incarceration and carceral themes, while concomitantly ignoring the men and women who write behind bars in their own countries. With a broad enough audience, the JPP can function as a tool to increase public awareness of contemporary prisoners' conditions, artistic merit, and fundamental humanity.

Charles: Unfortunately, most of what the public hears concerns our specific crimes, like Tookie Williams. Even with all the children's books he wrote, most of the publicity dealt with the four murders he was convicted of.

Susan: Yes, and there are certainly other literary precedents that tend to stick in the public's mind. Jack Abbott's association with Norman Mailer earned both his freedom and literary fame with the publication of *In the Belly of the Beast* (1968), but Abbott subsequently lived down to the public's expectations by murdering a waiter less than a year after his release. Mailer was subsequently criticized as a naïf for believing in Abbott's redemption, an attitude that persists 25 years later, not because Mailer misjudged Abbott's character, but because he dared to accept *any* prisoner on *any* terms other than those defined by the criminal justice system.

Charles: But Abbott turned out to be more harmful to prison writers because, as you said, he turned out to be exactly what the public thought he was from the beginning.

Susan: Granted, but Abbott told the truth about the repressive nature of prison and spoke eloquently about its destructive effects on human beings. His personal failures don't diminish that criticism, nor do they mean that today's prisoners should stop advocating for change. Without discussion prompted by the men and women inside, those outside the system will be tempted to ignore the elephant in the living room devouring their tax dollars and destroying lives. This is where the JPP plays such a vital role by providing a forum for those otherwise mute voices that, like Jack Abbott's, can possibly reach beyond the walls to provoke questions about a system that has as its primary goal the total subjugation of human beings rather than the rehabilitation of those humans for the greater good.

Charles: It seems like that's an uphill battle. I've been in prison for 32 years, and each year it seems like the attempt to isolate us gets more intense. I've submitted essays and short stories to publications and had them returned unopened because of the label the prison stamps on the envelope. Do you really think it's possible to overcome that kind of prejudice?

Susan: I'm not saying it will be easy, but there are more people working to expose the current system's failures than you might think. Sister Helen Prejean, author of *Dead Man Walking* and *Death of Innocents*, was recently on campus for a discussion of prisons and prisoners. When I told her about the JPP and gave her the latest issue, she immediately embraced the concept. She urged her audience to get involved by reading the copies I had made available and subscribing or donating to help get out the word. The response was wonderful. We raised a lot of money that night for the JPP. She shares with Bob Gaucher, our Editor-in-Chief, a connection with James Allridge, murdered by the State of Texas, so it's clear to me that there are other concerned, intelligent voices out there who recognize the JPP's vital role in educating people about a self-defeating system that many unwittingly support.

Charles: It's always amazed me that people give their tacit consent and tax dollars to a system that abuses men and women who will one day be back in their neighbourhoods. How can the JPP help ease the shock of prisoners coming back to a world that hates them?

Susan: The current system is counterproductive and works against reintegration. Prisoners, after all, retain their connection to society, however slight and transient that connection might be. We are social creatures, and no matter what crimes prisoners might have committed, only the most unregenerate are willing to discard their connection to the world outside the walls. The JPP therefore provides a means by which prisoners can maintain that connection through public discourse and maybe ameliorate the effects of the imposed isolation and brutality they've experienced inside. Since most will return to the world left behind, even without any response other than editorial feedback, contributors will at least have the sense that they are addressing "real" people without the necessity to self-censor to protect against retaliation by prison staff.

Charles: That seems like a lot to expect.

Susan: The criminal justice system certainly erects barriers, such as censorship and isolation, that limit both free expression and the ability to communicate with the

outside world, and unfortunately, men and women getting out of prison too often encounter the same prejudices they have had to deal with inside. Victor Hugo in *Les Miserables* describes this tendency mordantly with Jean Valjean's capture by Javert. In less than two hours, all the good Valjean had done was forgotten once the town learned he was an escaped convict. Prisoners, however, can't afford to be complicit in this type of depersonalization by sitting by and permitting society to define them by their last illegal act.

Charles: That can be pretty difficult, especially if people outside think we've got it too easy because we can watch television and lift weights.

Susan: I hear that from my students all the time. It is something I laugh at. So, you should see their little eyes pop out when I tell them about the rest of it: six by nine foot boxes, steel doors, strip searches, counts, snitches, no visits, no phones, years and years and years. My students' lack of information speaks to the heart of the problem. If Southern plantation owners could propagate the myth that their slaves were happy labouring in the fields, it's an easy matter for prison officials to sell the idea that prisoners have it pretty easy because of televisions, radios, and three meals a day. But most slaves were kept illiterate, making it impossible for them to dispute their owners' versions while they were in chains. Thanks to the JPP, contemporary prisoners have another option.

Charles: As Associate Editor, is there anything you want to add as far as the JPP's future is concerned?

Susan: We're exploring the possibility of making the JPP a quarterly and in that way increasing its attractiveness for course adoptions. We can also accommodate more submissions in that venue. I hope that each prisoner who reads an issue of the JPP takes the opportunity to pass it along to someone else so that we are able to reach more men and women who suffer with no hope. Other than that, I would like to express my gratitude for the opportunity to be a part of the JPP. As we near the twentieth anniversary of the JPP, my colleagues and I would like to remind all men and women in every gulag that, as Bob has phrased it, writing is indeed resistance. We encourage all of you to stay strong, keep focused, and above all, keep writing.

Susan Nagelsen is a full professor and Writing Program Director at New England College in Henniker, New Hampshire, and has taught in the New Hampshire State Prison for men for many years. Susan is a member of the Editorial Board of the JPP and

Issue Editor for Volume 14:2, 2006. Her written contributions include “What Have We Got to Lose” (Volume 13, 2004) and “Time Spent Doing Time” (Volume 14:2, 2006).

Charles Huckelbury has been incarcerated for over 30 years and has hopes for release in 2008. A regular contributor to the JPP since 1997, Charles is an Associate Editor who co-edited Volume 14:2, 2006 with Susan Nagelsen. His essay, “Made in the U.S.A.: A Post-Modern Critique” (JPP, Volume 15:1, 2006) won Second Prize in the Essay Category of the American P.E.N. Awards in 2005. Charles Huckelbury (#19320) can be contacted at the New Hampshire State Prison, P.O. Box 14, Concord, NH 03302, U.S.A.