

## Letter to Joanna

Victor Hassine

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*[Editor's note: Joanna was a student in an undergraduate seminar course focussed upon reading the prison through the accounts of prisoners. Victor has been a regular contributor to this course for a number of years, through his correspondence, writing, audio-tapes, and in the spring of 1999, via a live teleconference session. This piece represents his response to their collective inquiries.]*

Dear Joanna:

I am going to try and answer the questions you asked in your letter, although your questions are much more difficult than you might imagine, ["Why do you do it (write) and what sort of obstacles do you encounter ..."]. In fact, one of the reasons it has taken me so long to respond to your letter is that I have had to become fairly introspective in order to cull "the reasons" for my writing. The reality is that there are tremendous obstacles prison writers overcome to 1) find a voice, and 2) get people to listen.

You see, unlike prisoners of old, who could justifiably claim the status of "political prisoners" because of institutional racism or socioeconomic inequities or because prison conditions were so inhumane that most prisoners were actually less criminal than their jailers, I am regarded as nothing more than a common criminal. A prisoner living under relatively humane conditions considering that I have been convicted of a violent crime. Because common criminals lack the moral high ground, it is difficult for us to have our voices heard.

A society which labels and incarcerates too many of its citizens as common criminals runs the risk of making such criminals future martyrs for a revolutionary subclass of disenfranchised and dysfunctional malcontents, yet the voices of these dissidents may be considered nothing more than noise from an angry mob. Let's face facts, Al Capone, with thousands of members from his crime family, speaking out against intolerable injustices in our criminal justice system would sound trivial and disingenuous, particularly when compared to Nelson Mandela speaking out against those very same injustices. Attempting to agree on why this is true would undoubtedly cause much debate, but this sad reality cannot honestly be denied [Was it not Thoreau who said, "Who you are speaks so loudly, I can't hear what you say"?]. So there you

have it, one of the greatest obstacles faced by today's prison writers is their status as common criminals because it muffles their voice in a thick atmosphere of disbelief.

While a good argument may be made that the drug laws and other social engineering laws wrongly make criminals out of the poor and addicted, solely as a means of maintaining the position of the upper classes, this debate has little value to me as a prison writer. The reality is that the tactic of labelling all of today's prison writings as products of common criminals, seems to be working, for now, and the voices of contemporary prisoners are ill-received by not only their keepers, but also by their peers.

In order that you might better understand what I am trying to say, let me tell you the story of my prison writing experience. When I first came to prison, I was a very educated man, particularly when compared to my fellow prisoners who generally were limited to a sixth-grade education. I was also different in that I did not fear or hate the bureaucrats who lorded over me. As a law school graduate, I had been trained to understand and deal with bureaucracies and bureaucrats so I was able to treat/respect my keepers as bureaucrats doing their job.

Despite my advantages, I was crippled by the shame of my incarceration which prevented me from daring to utter an objecting voice or opinion. Joanna, I cannot begin to describe how shame can cripple you and turn you deaf, dumb and blind. For years after my incarceration, I refused visits from all but my immediate family and lawyers. I wrote no letters home and dreaded receiving mail. I felt great shame when the world outside sneaked into my prison inside, shame for being a common criminal and so I forfeited my voice, lest anyone hear it, recognize my unworthiness and hold me up to further public scrutiny. To me, social separation from society has been much more torturous than the physical conditions imposed by my exile.

So there I was in a prison that afforded me adequate shelter and food, provided me with other amenities, wallowing in shame while fearing for my life. Fear and shame dominated my day-to-day existence for the first few years of incarceration, and I thought and did little else during that time besides trying to survive and remaining anonymous.

My first "urge" to write came after I witnessed a particularly unsettling suicide attempt. One early morning (2:00 a.m.) in 1983, while I was returning to my cell from my late night shift in the prison

infirmery, I saw a finger of blood growing out from between the floor and door of a neighbour's cell. What it turned out to be was a man who had savagely shredded large portions of his own body with a razor blade. Blood oozed from between strips of flesh as chunks of bleeding meat dangled from his body as if they were being peeled off of him.

Help was summoned and the bloody man was placed on a hand truck, which was normally used to haul trash, and rushed to the infirmery. As he lay on garbage, the hopeless man pleaded to be left to die as he yanked off pieces of his own flesh. Once he was removed from sight, the cell block quickly returned to normal and most of the men simply went back to sleep, indifferent to what they had just witnessed. The block guard strolled back to his post. There was not a single display of sympathy or sadness. One enterprising prisoner called the guard over and asked if he could be moved into the cell the next day because that side of the block received better television and radio reception.

I was temporarily moved beyond my fear and shame and I was possessed to write a poem about this ghastly scene of suicide and indifference. My writing was totally involuntary and I never considered what I would do with the poem. It was a bloody poem with a vivid description of what I had witnessed and it dripped with anger at a system that could/would foster such hopelessness and indifference. Surprisingly, there was also a lot of anger aimed at myself for being a silent partner to this brutality.

Months later I showed a prison volunteer my poem – I am not sure why and neither was he - and he suggested I contact the Pen Prison Writing Committee, which is a New York based literary organization which supports and encourages prisoners to write about their experiences. I did, but I was not yet prepared to accept a role as prison writer and I continued to live an invisible life of shame and fear. However, I did begin to read the writings of other prisoners and wished I had their courage and talent.

About a year later, I decided to give my brother a unique birthday present. I had been incarcerated for over three years by then, and in describing my prison experience, I had shared with him the rich “slang-guage” used in my prison home. I was and still am intrigued by the crude honesty prisoners use in their simple speech, as was my brother, and so I wrote a fictional account of a young man's adventures in prison-land.

I titled the story “The Adventures of Slim”. I wrote it using prison jargon to describe actual events and tragedies, and I included a glossary of terms with examples of their usage. It was frightening, brutal, offensive and raunchy-funny, with comedy used to reflect moments of life within the crucible where I existed. In truth I was letting my brother and myself see the reality of my life from an emotional distance which provided us both a safe perch for observation, allowing us to laugh, uneasily, at my tragedy.

The story was a breakthrough for me because it provided a means of bearing my soul without losing any anonymity or shame. After all, my name was Victor, not Slim. The fact that my brother loved the story and constantly asked me to “Tell me what happens to Slim”, encouraged me to pour my heart into my storytelling. Soon “The Adventures of Slim” was a manuscript of 35,000 words. Of course, nobody read it but my brother and I, because neither of us had developed enough courage to let our pain go public.

For many years I satisfied my urges to write by adding chapters to Slim and sharing it with my brother and we both benefited from this secret expression. I am not sure why my brother chose to remain in the shadow of this anonymity, but I remained there because the fear and shame engendered by my prison experiences had left me with little more than brutish survival instincts and a solitary existence (emotional as well as physical) to guide me.

There are many tyrannies at work in a prison; the tyrannies of institutionalization, punishment, fear, indifference, authority, self-hate, loneliness and shame. Under these tyrants, not only was I limited in my ability to express myself, but I remained in a perpetual state of anger. Almost everything I did - good or bad - had the mark of an angry man. Because of this, I recklessly threw myself into the dangerous/deadly waters of jailhouse politics and prison reform with no regard for my personal safety because deep down inside I did not care if I lived or died. Living under tyranny breeds a reckless disregard for one’s own life because the future becomes the primary enemy.

This period lasted at least 10 years, and while I certainly accomplished a great deal (in terms of bringing about positive change within the prison), spiritually and emotionally I was dying because I had surrendered myself to anger which destroyed the value of any victory I might have achieved: mere conquest cannot quell an angry heart and

anger never gives way to contentment or pride. So I sued the prison and won, built a synagogue and half-way house, and saved countless lives and souls, but I could not save myself from my shame and anger. These were dark times for me. Times that I thought, hoped, wanted and lived to be nothing more than a prisoner.

In the fall of 1986, I was transferred to another prison. This transfer took me far away from my friends and family. I felt as if I had been moved to a different country. This increased my anger and made me more bitter, so as soon as I set foot in my new prison home I began planning lawsuits and other challenges to the system. While my goals were noble, my motivation was not, for I first had to rise above my anger in order to bring honour to anything I endeavoured.

A month after I had arrived at my new prison (Western Penitentiary), I found myself in the midst of a prison riot. I had been in several prison riots before, but this one was the most savage and brutal (which mirrored the conditions in Western). I remember initially walking alone around the prison, as rioters destroyed everything in sight, and feeling a sense of satisfaction. As I fiendishly gloated over the prison's burning, I witnessed the most brutal and heartless savagery of my entire life.

It took witnessing this extreme display of cruelty to extinguish my own anger because I saw what this anger would one day do to me. After the riot, I realized I had to rekindle the humanity within me and that there was only one way to accomplish this. I had to love someone. You see, prison had made me a deadly stern and serious man, and I avoided emotional attachments and displays the same way I avoided the thrust of a shank. You see, if I allowed myself to care about other people, I would have to care about myself and then I would ultimately be forced to deal with the demons of my own shame. Also, in prison, displays of the gentler emotions are often interpreted as weakness, which invites physical challenge. I had become more fearful of becoming like the rioters I had watched than I did of becoming a human being.

Soon after the riot I met a prison volunteer with whom I fell in love and it was from the passion of this love that I managed to regain the total range of my emotions. Only then was I able to evolve into a prison writer. Of course, my first writings were love letters and poems but what better way to regain self-expression. My love for Deborah slowly allowed me to overcome my fear and anger. I stopped being a prisoner

and became a man again. That is when I was able to write about the tragedies around me because I could finally recognize them as something more than just “the way things are”. The more I loved Deborah and the more she loved me, the more I wrote about my prison experiences.

It was during this period of time that I stopped hiding the things I wrote. I entered the Pen Prison Writing Competition and won an honourable mention for a poem I wrote. This achievement, made in absence of any anger, was a source of great pride and so I wrote even more. Soon everything I wrote I mailed to anybody I felt would be interested (friends, family members, university professors, prison volunteers and prison administrators).

In 1989, I was transferred to yet another prison, but I was no longer an angry prisoner, I did not become bitter and I simply wrote more.

In 1990, I wrote a play which spoke out against the death penalty because my new prison was the “Place of Execution” for the State of Pennsylvania (See *Circles of Nod*). This play won honourable mention in that year’s Pen Prison Writing Competition, but more importantly, the Superintendent of my prison allowed me to stage the play in the prison. One evening, no less than 100 yards away from where the State had executed hundreds of condemned men, a dozen prisoners acted out a protest against State-sanctioned murder before 500 prisoners and community members. There was no burning, raping or rioting, there was just acting and the presentation of a point of view. It was as the audience rose to applaud the actors and the play that I realized I could never again allow myself to be held hostage by shame and fear. Now I write not because I am angry, but because I need to rejoin society as a productive human being. After all, aren’t we in this thing together?

So the greatest obstacles to prison writers today are their status as common criminals, their shame, the violence and indifference in contemporary prisons, and the lack of support from the literary community (the memory of Jack Abbot has wrongly led the literary community to turn their backs on all common criminals – Pen American Prison Writing Committee needs to be recognized, supported and expanded).

I am not sure if this will help you, but if you have any unanswered questions, I will try to send further clarification.

Sincerely,  
Victor.