Our life is shaped by our mind; we become what we think The Dhammapada

The United States' relationship with higher education has always been a L stormy love affair. On the one hand, most people recognize and even extol the value of education, primarily because of its practical application as a means to better paying jobs. On the other hand, people in this country tend to be suspicious of highly-educated individuals, especially academics, often disparaging them as naively inexperienced and philosophically removed from the real world; thus leading to resistance of theoretical work in general, whether in the physical or the social sciences. Post-secondary education in the United States is, in fact, not of primary interest to most of the population; only twentysix percent of the population has a minimum of a bachelor's degree. It will therefore come as no surprise that those same attitudes of the population at large extend to the men and women in this country's prisons and to the individuals charged with keeping them there. Unfortunately for everyone involved, including the free electorate, the advantages of higher education as both a management tool and a prophylactic device to preclude further criminal behavior are often ignored for more pernicious reasons than casual ignorance.

When I first entered Florida's prison system in 1974, an extensive junior college (two year) program was in place, established and maintained by Lake City Community College. Prisoners could take as many as four classes each semester on the way to either of two associate's degrees, paying for our education with veteran's benefits or federal assistance, which contrary to later claims, did not deprive free citizens of educational opportunities.¹ At the same time, the prison staff received reduced tuition rates at the same college for classes at the campus in Lake City, and were also encouraged to attend the University of Florida in nearby Gainesville, where they could take up to six credits per semester at state expense. The men inside prison stood in line to

The Basic Education Opportunity Grant later became the Pell Grant and paid for both tuition and books. In 1994, prisoners were excluded from qualifying for the Pell Grant (Taylor, 1998).

register for classes each time they came around, but the classes available to prison staff remained unfilled. I was one of the lucky ones who attended class as long as the program lasted, and it was there that my personal education began in ways that continue to astonish me.

I was not new to college. Before coming to prison, I had made it through two years of an athletic scholarship; that is, playing football and drinking beer. Along with other semi-thinkers I encountered, I had never placed education at the top of my to-do list. I was content to function at a basic level, thinking only when I was forced to do so. But prison makes us hungry, if for no other reason than to counter the mind-numbing routine of doing time. So I found myself in class again after an eight-year sabbatical, and I could not get enough.

I loved the books and lectures, but more than that, I looked forward to the dialogue with the professors; real people who treated me like, well, like a real student. The experience not only provided a focus for my intellectual curiosity, but also served to remind me that my peers and guards, many of whom would harm me at a moment's notice with only the slightest provocation, did not exemplify the external world. Even if I doubted that—and I admit that I did at times during my Nietzsche phase!—the education I was receiving inside the classroom expanded my constricted world view and introduced me to men and women whose work I could admire and try to emulate. This enabled me to understand why prison was an aberration in every conceivable way and not even remotely comparable to the real world outside. This discovery came with another sort of lesson, one that I shared with more people than I would have imagined.

William Golding never did time, but early in his life he also underwent a philosophical and intellectual epiphany in an educational environment. In an essay written seven years after publication of *Lord of the Flies*, Golding describes three grades of thinkers, relating them to his own experiences.² His scale begins with Grade-3 thinkers, people who limit their cognitive exercises to only those matters that help them get through the day: getting up, eating, going to work, coming home, shopping; all the mundane things that people do automatically, similar to my own status during college. Grade-2 thinkers are a step above, capable of recognizing contradictions when faced with them.

² From "Thinking As a Hobby" which first appeared in *Holiday Magazine*, in 1961.

Grade-1 thinkers comprise the 2.5 percent on the high end of the distribution curve; they think all the time. These are the men and women disparaged and often reviled by those existing on the lower tiers.

Golding's discovery came while he was in the office of his school's headmaster for some disciplinary infraction, allegedly involving his refusal to think. In this office, the headmaster kept three statuettes, arranged in specific order, symbolizing his personal pantheon. The first in line was a small figure of the *Venus de Milo*, representing, of course, beauty. This was followed closely by a leopard posed on a rock, exemplifying nature. The third piece of sculpture was Rodin's *Thinker*, connoting pure thought. During the scene described in Golding's essay, the headmaster reaches for the Rodin piece, places it in front of the young Golding, and demands that the young student stop wasting his time and the school's and learn to think. The lesson clearly took, and the young man began to understand the benefit of serious thought: it was both liberating and empowering. The same sort of revelation occurs inside prisons, a development that administrators and guards tend to view as dangerous.

Francis Bacon was right, of course, when he stated that knowledge is indeed power, and it therefore becomes something that must be denied to those one wishes to keep powerless. Thus the logical strategy for prison administrators is to keep prisoners ignorant to prevent the acquisition of any high-minded ideas, lest we begin to question our subjugation and treatment. And that continues to be the case with a few notable exceptions.

Resistance to higher education in prison in my early years came from every direction: a cash-strapped legislature, vindictive citizens, and envious guards. For a variety of reasons, all of which related to the prisoners' status, voices spoke against educating us past the most rudimentary levels.³ Only later, when I began to read Frederick Douglass, for example, did I understand the more deeply held reasons for denying us the opportunity for growth. Douglass described for me the results when he began to read and consequently to think:

[Education] had given me a view of my wretched condition, without the remedy. It opened my eyes to the horrible pit, but to no ladder upon which to get out. ... The more I read, the more I was led to

³ Prison education usually stops at basic literacy programs and GED preparation.

abhor my enslavers. I loathed them as being the meanest as well as the most wicked of men. (Douglass, 2000: 226)

Clearly such revolutionary attitudes were irreconcilable with controlling recalcitrant slaves or maintaining a secure prison. If we began to question our roles as prisoners and the moral authority of our keepers, the potential threat to order would grow exponentially. My status as a prisoner must therefore militate against any extension of rights and privileges, including higher education available to free citizens, or else the differences between us would shrink. As Douglass points out, "[E]ducation and slavery were incompatible with each other" (p. 225). Prisons, therefore, dare not equip their prisoners with intellectual tools and thereby risk developing Grade-1 thinkers, a status that would violate the prisons' preconceptions of what we should be. In other words, we prisoners are to be treated like mushrooms, kept in the dark and piled high with manure.

But my newly-pursued education brought me insights, and my thirst for knowledge and explanation led me further into the field of literature and philosophy. I began to question and to understand, not only what I had done but also what was being done to me. I discovered Maya Angelou's tragic description of her eighth-grade graduation from the Lafayette Country Training School in Stamps, Arkansas, in 1940. The seniors graduating in the same ceremony listened to white commencement speakers describe for them their futures, not in four-year colleges but in the traditionally black agriculture and mechanical institutions, thus placing them in the box that majority society had selected for them. Her response, with the hatred such a bleak future generated, is still resonant:

We were maids and farmers, handymen and washerwomen, and anything higher we aspired to was farcical and presumptuous. Then I wished that Gabriel Prosser and Nat Turner⁴ had killed all whitefolks in their beds ... and Christopher Columbus had drowned in the *Santa Maria*. ⁵

⁴ Black slaves who led bloody revolts against their masters.

⁵ See Chapter 23 of Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. New York: Random House, 1970.

The precise attitude encountered by Angelou's graduating class was alive and well in Florida's prisons during the early seventies, which guaranteed the eventual demise of any program devoted to higher education. After all, we were merely convicts; why educate us beyond our station?

The reaction to college classes in prisons was systemic, fueled by the new conservatism and the harsher attitudes of society in general. Florida's prisons are usually situated in rural areas, traditionally the poorest counties and the ones that welcome the prison as the primary employer. The security apparatus reflects those same rural attitudes, generally expressed as utter disdain for higher education in general. Part of the response, however, can be traced to the resentment of the guards during encounters with prisoners who were more highly educated than they were. This usually took the form of ridiculing whatever degrees we might have earned at the time and disparaging the academic work as somehow less than what we would encounter in the real world. Then, too, there was the perpetual question: "What are you going to do with those degrees?"

Higher education also posed a problem for the classification system, designed to sort quickly through incoming prisoners and assign each of us to a particular job based on a standard profile. In Florida, the rule was to place all new prisoners either in the laundry or the kitchen—punishment positions—just to get our heads right "Went to college out there, boy? Don't make no difference in here. You ain't in college now, and we got no use for them silly ideas anyway." No matter what the result of the classification process, educated prisoners were and still are a puzzle to classification teams in every prison because we do not fit the mold; we are more than the number stamped on our chests, and we will not be consigned to a pigeon hole. And believe me, that creates serious philosophical dilemmas for prison staff—and existential dilemmas for those of us doing the time.

To illustrate: I recently underwent a psychological evaluation as part of my parole application after twenty-seven consecutive years of a life sentence. The parole board requested the evaluation and indicated that they would look favorably on my request if the results rang no alarms. An interview was scheduled, one that lasted maybe fifteen minutes with no diagnostics administered. At the end of the interview, the psychologist recommended three books that I should read for stress relief. She then went back to her office and composed a half-page summary of the interview, in which she described me as polite and cooperative, oriented to time and space, alert, and manifesting no alarming behaviors. She stated that I was not suffering from any mental illness and had no history of addiction, domestic violence, or sexual offenses. So far, so good. Ah, but she could not resist. At the very end, she said that is was her "impression" that I suffered from a personality disorder with antisocial characteristics.

The outcome should be obvious. The parole board seized on that single sentence, the last segment of the evaluation, and denied me parole for a minimum of five more years. When I next saw the psychologist, I advised her of what had happened and explained the basis for the parole board's action. With respect to the antisocial personality disorder, she said, "Well, what do they expect after all the years you've been in prison?" In other words, I did nothing to confirm such a diagnosis. She simply looked at my twenty-seven years in prison and assumed that I was antisocial, arriving at that conclusion by the convoluted reasoning that since I did not *act* crazy, I must therefore *be* crazy. She could not accept that I was normal, going to work each day, teaching college classes at night, and doing what I could to make the time pass. Using my status as a long-term prisoner, she assigned me a role that she expected me to play and casually destroyed my hopes and dreams.

This sort of preconception is hardly new, having followed me for nearly three decades behind bars. It was the driving force behind the retrenchment in educational funding, culminating with the death of the Pell Grant for prisoners in 1994. The standard rationale, and the boldest lie, was that prisoners were taking grant money away from free citizens; therefore, education's limited funds would be better spent on assistance for low-income people who obeyed the law. This conflation of fiscal prudence and philosophical opposition to prisoners' education paved the way for the organized destruction of higher education behind the walls, even producing a knee-jerk reaction in Canada's prisons (Murphy, 1998). The prevailing attitude hardened, permitting our keepers to profess that their primary job was protecting the public, and candidly admitting that they did not care about any of the prisoners under their care (Robert, 2000).

Those prison staff who feel compelled to phrase things a little more discreetly now claim that they can, more competently and persuasively than strangers to the system, better address the traditional prisoner-related issues of cognitive difficulties, deficient social skills, and ethical and moral development. In this theoretical construct, the benefits of higher education are lost in the selfaggrandizing and self-perpetuating environment of prison "schools"— institutions that remain infamous for emulating society's worst educational failures by graduating students who cannot conjugate a verb in the present tense, solve the equation $3 \times ? = 6$, identify this country's northern neighbor, or place the American Civil War in the proper century. Moreover, prison teachers tend to be security personnel first and educators second. By constantly disciplining their students and reminding them of their inferior status, the teachers reinforce stereotypes and destroy self-esteem, locking the men and women in their classes into certain failure.

For example, a teacher at New Hampshire State Prison, on the first day of class, held up a sheet of paper with the word "fuck" printed on it. He told the students that he did not permit the f-word to be used in his class. He warned them that if he heard it, the student would suffer the prison equivalent of expulsion without recourse. Granted, profanity generally has no place in civilized discourse, but think of the difference between the restrictive nature of the prison class and the freedom in college classes to discuss, for example, the objectification of women by a patriarchal society, including the use of the verb "fuck" to indicate something being *done to* someone. In prison schools, as in prison in general, there is no flexibility; the rule is the rule is the rule. Educational opportunities are therefore little more than another means to control behavior, a management tool by which prison staff achieves results by threatening to remove the only redeeming program available.

This is Bentham's *Panopticon*, the perfect prison in which prisoners' behavior is manipulated by any available means to produce conformity and obedience, that which higher education discourages in favor of an independent intellect. It is the precise oppression, and the most pernicious one, as described by Condorcet, "in which one's oppressor knows one's name and one's weakness, and where one lives" (Rothchild, 2001: 116).

Attempting to modify such a bureaucratic monolith presents enormous difficulties, especially considering the widespread suspicion of higher education by the public at large. Prison teachers, for example, consistently refuse to admit misconceptions whose rectification might place their jobs in jeopardy. They tend to see the introduction of higher education as both an infringement and a threat that diminishes their own roles. They are largely incapable of seeing post-secondary education in prison as a natural extension of their own efforts at the secondary level, even in the face of ineluctable proof of the benefits.

First, higher education costs the prison nothing. At the New Hampshire State Prison, students have the option of taking classes provided by a twoyear technical college (New Hampshire Community Technical College) or those brought in by a four-year institution (New England College). Federal grants are available for youthful offenders, but in general, students pay for both tuition and books from their own funds. Moreover, classes usually run in the evenings, so competition with the prison's school for classroom space does not occur. For those who would object to the youthful-offenders grant, J. Michael Quinlin, the former Director of the Federal Bureau of Prisons, notes: "Society should recognize that the cost of college [in prison] is really very insignificant when you compare the cost of damage done by crime" (Marks, 1977). In stark terms, would you prefer to have the government pay a very small amount to educate a prisoner or have that same prisoner return to your neighborhood, as most of us will do, break into your house, steal your property, and drive up your insurance rates while completely destroying the sense of security and comfort that people should enjoy inside their homes? It is really a no-brainer.

What about the guarantees? There are none, of course. Life in general is not that simple, but supporting data exist. In any given year, fifty-nine percent of the men and women in prisons and jails in this country are either illiterate or functionally illiterate. This compares with twenty-five percent (still an embarrassingly high percentage) of free citizens (Haiger et al., 1994: 124). Realistically, what else can illiterate ex-felons do but steal or sell drugs? That is the insanity of returning people to the street in the same (if not worse) condition in which they were found.

Now look at the difference higher education makes. In George W. Bush's Texas, of all places, research into the benefits of college programs and their effects on recidivism rates for 1990–1991 demonstrated the inverse relationship between higher education and recidivism. Ex-felons with no university degrees returned to prison at the disheartening rate of sixty percent. Only 5.6 percent of those with bachelor's degrees returned, and those with a master's degree had a recidivism rate of zero percent (Tracy and Johnson, 1994: 6–7). This is not rocket science; yet politicians and their constituents persist in ignoring or denying both the practical and therapeutic benefits of educating the men and women they incarcerate.

Higher education in prison, however, goes far beyond the utilitarian implications for reducing crime; it develops the individual to the extent that criminal behavior is simply no longer an option. To accomplish this, college programs in prison subscribe to John Henry Cardinal Newman's description of the purpose of a university and the importance to the student of advanced learning:

[Education] shows him how to accommodate himself to others, how to throw himself into their state of mind, how to bring before them his own, how to influence them, how to come to an understanding with them, how to bear with them. (Newman, 1964: 258)

Cardinal Newman was hardly the first to make the observation that men and women are expanded, broadened, made complete, and nourished by higher education. In the famous Parable of the Cave in *The Republic*, Plato discusses with Glaucon the benefits of systematic learning. "The instrument of knowledge can only by the movement of the whole be turned from the world of becoming into that of being." Higher education thus frees the individual from the solipsistic trap of thinking only in terms of self and immediate gratification. It educates and enlightens at the hands of college instructors who bring into the prison knowledge that is more valuable and realistic than the busy-work programs students generally encounter in prison-mandated programs. These professors deliver to students an awareness of both their potential and their naive selfassessment, because, as May Sarton reminds us, education requires humility.⁶

And students in prison classes need a healthy dose of humility because, in those secondary classes or GED preparation programs inside prison, they are often fed a diet of intellectual pabulum and passed along from grade to grade to pad the numbers and qualify for federal grants. The students emerge convinced that they are doing well in complex tasks when their skills are rudimentary at best. This accounts for the identical phenomenon outside, where forty percent of students in primary and secondary school consider themselves among the best in the world while performing among the worst in international competition (Stevenson, 1992). In college classes, prisoners learn how much they do not know, a concept that is vital to self-improvement.

Up to this point, I have written about the philosophical chasm that separates secondary from post-secondary education inside prisons, and I have presented

⁶ From Mary Sarton's *The Small Room: A Novel*. New York, Norton, 1961.

the statistics and what the professionals have to say about the subject. And yet, what gives me the right to climb on my soapbox to talk about transformations? How do I know that education does what its proponents claim? The answer is easy: it happened to me.

Once I understood the value of education, I went after it with a singlemindedness that permitted no interference. Life became, with the unwavering support and encouragement of my long-suffering parents, the pursuit and acquisition of knowledge. I thought of my mind as a sponge, soaking up everything that I put into it. I studied all the science and mathematics I could find in texts and journals purchased by my family, determined to explore the world at its most fundamental level. Years went by as I satisfied my curiosity about how things worked. I moved to philosophy and religion, remaining largely untouched by the latter but satisfied that I had developed a basic understanding of the various belief systems that both unite and divide segments of the world. From there I finally addressed literature and began a search for all the great works I had seen referenced in my other studies. For the better part of twenty years, I followed Jefferson's example and read twelve to fifteen hours a day. I developed an enormous (by prison standards) personal library, but still something was missing. I possessed a lot of information, but I began to sense that life was more than simply knowing things. That is when my life changed radically; that is when I met the professors from New England College.

Higher education was a force to be reckoned with when I arrived at the New Hampshire State Prison. New England College brought out an average of four courses each semester, beginning with an associate's degree program and evolving into work towards a bachelor of science degree in human services. Participation was so great that there were waiting lists for all classes, since each classroom could accommodate only twelve students. We studied writing—both fiction and essay—literature, history, sciences, mathematics, psychology, in short, everything that traditional undergraduates would study outside. The professors treated us to inspiring lectures, challenged our intellects, and transformed those of us who were willing to take the risk of becoming better people, not necessarily from a vocational perspective (although that was indeed a part of our education) but more as an enriching process that demonstrated how we shared common cause with other human beings on the planet. In alchemical terms, they transmuted base metal into something that might not have been gold but was definitely more valuable.

Learning was not new for me at this point, but I thought learning was restricted to what was in the lectures or text. I could regurgitate information with the best of them, so exams were no problem. In other words, I made the same arrogant, compensatory mistake so many of us in prison make. I thought I knew most of what I needed to know about everything. I was a Renaissance man with no soul, but I was also fortunate to become quickly disabused of that specious superiority when I walked into a writing and critical thinking class in early 1993.

As we explored various authors and discussed writing as a reflection of the individual and his or her environment, my professor mentioned the preconceptions that people bring to any discussion of epistemology. Time ran out before I could respond adequately, so I asked if she would remain for a few minutes after class. She did, and during the ensuing fifty minutes, I discovered, among other things, that because I am white and male, the world assures an identity that reflects a white-male bias and operates according to white-male principles. I resisted this assertion vigorously! "No, no," I objected. "The world operates according to universal principles, governed by microscopic and macroscopic laws that define each of us as individuals. Although descriptive bias is a possibility," I admitted, "prescriptive bias cannot exist because the statistics and science in which the laws are grounded are completely neutral. If white males, for example, score better on standardized tests, then the simple explanation is that we are better qualified." That was the beginning, and the process is a continuing one. I, in other words, am a work in progress, as are we all.

So began a more contemplative life than the one I had led, shepherded along by the men and women from New England College. I learned to bring a historical perspective to contemporary politics, especially when examining retributive justice, capital punishment, the so-called war on drugs, and the extremely long sentences imposed in the United States. I began to entertain the possibility that many, if not most, of the hostile attitudes regarding criminal justice issues in this country were more a product of ignorance than malice. I became more tolerant, discovering that Cardinal Newman was correct about higher education's ability to teach us how "to bear with" others sharing the planet with us. The professors who taught me brought me the tools I desperately needed to live in the world—I had already mastered living in prison, and that was the problem. The men and women I met were thinkers and teachers, people who thought and wrote as their life work. The exposure to their lectures and classes, and the experience of being educated by them, were inspirational; that influence is what I still turn to when life in here presses closely at three in the morning. As Hemingway has Lady Brett explain in *The Sun Also Rises*, it is sort of what I have instead of God.

Because of higher education, I took another giant step on the road to becoming a better person, I began to teach. When the local community college agreed to install a satellite campus behind the walls, the director here searched for men with a minimum bachelor's degree to serve as adjunct faculty. I eagerly, if a bit apprehensively, accepted a post in the English Department. For three years I have taught writing and a variety of literature courses to minds that had been starved. I have watched awareness dawn in vacant eyes, awareness of what the students had missed, which created an insatiable thirst for more. Once, a student was having difficulty understanding a poem by William Blake, not an unusual response. After an explication, he shook his head and said mournfully, "I am so superficial." It takes this kind of candor, the kind produced in college classrooms, to induce personal growth; it is remarkable to watch, even more so to play a small role in the event.

Do I make mistakes? Of course I do, but the wonderful part about being a member of such a community is the ability to call on those same professors for help. In another class, I was having problems getting *Macbeth* across. My lectures met blank stares, even as I rhapsodized about Hazlitt's comments concerning Lady Macbeth. That same night, the professor who turned my head around about my intrinsic bias reminded me that to teach a class I had to become part of the class and develop an approach that will establish a rapport with the students, instead of simply lecturing them and having them look at me as just another authority figure defining my worldview at the cost of theirs. I returned the next day to discuss Macbeth's murder of Duncan, only this time I described the killing in street terms. Suddenly, my class was rapt! I discovered the priceless lesson that teaching is concomitantly a tremendous learning experience.

It is constant work, but I am finally beginning to understand why people teach. When it works, the results are astonishing because they are, quite literally, world altering. Higher education is transformative for both teacher and student, even for those of us behind the walls who are amateurs at both. It acts, as a Proust beautifully puts it, "Like a rope let down from heaven to draw me up out of the abyss of not-being, from which I could never have escaped by myself" (Proust, 2001: 3).

Higher education also alerted me to the consequences of being a Grade-1 thinker, as well as to the perils of being a Grade-3 thinker. I wish I could say that prisons in the United States have left the obscurantist dogma behind and are now pushing post-secondary education as the primary tool for reform, but that is not the case. I have been one of the lucky ones, being in a prison that recognizes the value of education and makes the courses available for those who want them. It is therefore appropriate for this essay devoted to education that I thank the men and women who have played such conspicuous roles in my life, and especially to recognize that one special professor who has played the most important role of all in my own transformation.

Susan Nagelsen was one of those dedicated faculty from New England College who made the arduous trek to the prison after putting in a full day on campus, and she continues to direct the writing program there at NEC. Yes, she is the professor who first identified and described my intrinsic bias for me and then dragged me kicking and screaming into the twentieth century. But far more than that, she showed me, with an intellectual and philosophical brilliance, that true knowledge was not the mere mastery of information; what counts is what you do with it. She nurtured my curiosity and rudimentary literacy skills, and I would not be writing today if it were not for her encouragement and guidance. Thanks a ton, Susan, for showing me what it means to be a living, breathing human being instead of a computer.

As a result of these experiences, I no longer pursue knowledge exclusively for its own sake. I have stopped viewing the acquisition of information as my life's goal. I have learned in the college classrooms, both as student and novice teacher, that obtaining knowledge is not enough. The most important thing we can do as men and women is to preserve that knowledge and then transmit it to those coming behind us. Nothing is more important from an educational perspective, as well as from a human one, because the essentials thus shared enable us to understand each other and to come to terms with our differences, to accept ourselves and others as worthy, even those who disagree with us. That is why teaching is such a noble profession and why I am proud to play even a marginal role in the process.

I mentioned William Golding's work at the beginning of this essay, and I want to close much the same way he did. During his later years, he would often think about those three pieces of sculpture and the way he would arrange them differently to reflect the world as he had experienced it.

I would dust Venus and put her aside for I have come to love her and know her for the fair thing she is. But I would put the Thinker, sunk in his desperate thought, where there were shadows before him, and at his back I would put the leopard, crouched and ready to spring.⁷

The world continues to be, as Golding's arrangement symbolizes, one fraught with dangers for serious thinkers, especially thinkers behind the walls, and the men and women who venture into the abyss to teach us. But recognizing the dangers helps us all prepare to face them.

So, to those of you who teach us, and to my brothers and sisters in cages, keep thinking, keep learning and growing, keep the fire burning for those following. And never forget to watch your back.

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⁷ See Endnote 2, p. 32.

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