

# Attaining Education in Prison Equals Prisoner Power

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## INTRODUCTION

There are those inside and outside prison who still question in their minds and hearts the proposition that most prisoners can learn, and they believe that the cultural deficits of most prisoners are too deeply embedded to be overcome. A negative image of prisoners is most often promoted and conveyed to the public. The perceived failure of the rehabilitative process is used to justify building more prisons and being 'Tough on Crime.' Elliott Currie notes:

To the criminological Right, it [failure] offered further testimony that the only feasible response to criminal offenders was increased efforts at deterrence and incapacitation, and it served in a deeper sense to confirm the view that crime reflected fundamental flaws in human nature over the constitutional rights of the offender. In spite of our best efforts, the research seemed to say, you can't do anything with these people after all, so you shouldn't try. For the left, on the other hand, the apparent failure of rehabilitation frequently supported a very different argument that given the deep social and economic sources of crime in the United States little could be gained ... by tinkering with offenders in the name of individual treatment (1985:237-38).

It is unlikely that much will be said about the many prisoners who, while in prison or after leaving, go on to succeed in higher education. Their achievements often go unheralded, unable to fit into the language of failure. In my view, I think that all incarcerated women and men need to hear something other than the constant negativism that is directed their way. Perhaps we will be able to gain strength and inspiration from each other, and to secure advice and help from those we can trust.

I am an African American, and presently incarcerated. However, I choose not to spend time lamenting the inadequacies of prisons and the lack of meaningful education programs. I would rather focus upon getting the good news out that most prisoners can attain high school diplomas, that some can earn Bachelor of Arts, Master of Arts, Doctorate, and Law degrees, moving onwards towards creative, productive, and positive lives. I want to help provide ways in which prisoners can make a difference in their education and their lives. I want to assist in the building of bridges, not public relations propaganda for the building of more prisons. The history of self-help among African Americans offers models that can be useful for prisoners in the search for innovative approaches to resolving the current crisis in the criminal justice system.

When I look at what is currently happening to the majority of African Americans, Latinos, Native American Indians, and poor white people, and the business of building more prisons, I become angry. But I refuse to yield to feelings of helplessness. I choose instead to transform anger and frustration into bold and direct action. This essay is intended as an initial exploration into a process which may help prisoners to learn to question and transform themselves and, in the long term, the criminal justice system. I willingly share my 'educational experience' as a possible starting point for other prisoners to consider as they move towards attaining dignity, self-esteem, self-direction, self-empowerment, and academic freedom.

### **CLIMBING UP THE PRISONER EDUCATION LADDER**

It is important not only to understand why the vast majority of incarcerated women and men lack basic academic skills, but also to consider seriously ways to correct the problem. It is time to look into the nitty-gritty of prisoner needs and hang-ups. From there we can go on to consider whether it might even be possible for prisoners to accomplish self-determination and self-empowerment.

Most prisoners are politically disenfranchised. Prisoners have no voice in decisions that affect their lives while incarcerated. The prisoner is told what to do, when to do it, how to do it, and where to do it. Add in the schedules for eating, personal hygiene, court time, visits, recreation activities, sleeping and almost every hour of the day has been planned by the prison staff. Overall, no real responsibility is given to the prisoner.

The major program in prison is to program the prisoner. The key focus is to contain and maintain prisoners, not to educate us. In short, this sort of policy actually translates into the continual development of the underdevelopment of prisoners.

Too often mainstream inquiries into prison are framed by politicians/legislators so it appears that these power brokers are aiming to solve the problem of crime. But they will not solve anything because they will not confront the real cause of crime; that is, the conditions of the poor and many African Americans in particular, conditions which are the direct result of our exploitation by capitalism and the political agenda of the 'power elite' in the United States and elsewhere. Today, for example, more African American men are in prison than are in college. In fact, the number of African Americans attending college stands at twenty-six percent, down from thirty-three percent in 1976. College educated black men have an unemployment rate four times greater than their white peers. African Americans and other people of colour are most often victims of crime before they are perpetrators.

It is therefore impossible for us to look upon the crisis of crime in the United States as it affects people of colour and society at large without asking 'Who are the real criminals?' In the face of tremendous odds, physical and mental pain and slavery, despite government and corporate policies aimed at perpetuating our impoverishment, African Americans have survived, remained self-reliant, and proved to be socially adaptable. Prisoners can do the very same thing. Since we as prisoners are often the most directly affected, it is necessary that we develop a keen awareness of the inter-relationship of race, class, and gender oppression, including the institutional white-male-over-black-male oppression which in this patriarchal society underpins everything else.

These issues, which are of deep concern to African Americans, are too extensive and too complex for an adequate treatment in this paper and by any one writer, but we must be reminded of the fact that it is impossible to address the question of prisons and prison education without this context and without hearing the voices of men and women from across the spectrum of the African American community, those both inside and outside of prison. And we must realize that it is up to us, prisoners and ex-prisoners, to forge ties of mutual support and exchange information and skills or we, African-American, Native American Indian, and Latinos, could perish. We need to face the fact of our incarceration. We have to stop kidding ourselves and playing games. We must organize, beginning with organizing ourselves.

In pragmatic terms, we must analyze existing 'prison programs,' meagre though they may be, to assess precisely how they work or do not work, while forming ourselves into political organizations to structure our recommendations. We need to gather and duplicate whatever is valuable and bring in persons to impart and interpret information and share experiences. If our efforts are to succeed, we must be adamant in showing to people in society the importance of mandating prisons to provide all prisoners with a decent education, tangible job opportunities, and hope for the future. The nation's prisons warehouse countless numbers of poor people, among them many of the brightest and brashiest African-Americans, Native Americans and Latinos who refuse to settle for passivity. That is one reason why it is absolutely imperative that people in and out of prison move into a renewed stage of communal activism to assert leadership in effecting change.

If I may speak of my own experience, I decided to participate in my education. In that process I discovered a community of friends and supporters. I turned my cell into a field of action, a base of power. I found out that I could study eagerly and learn prodigiously for the best of possible reasons, my own reasons. For me, the key to opening the windows, unlocking the doors of education and opportunity was when

I decided to take control of my life. During this journey, I have also experienced a profound spiritual awakening that enabled me to cease all previous nefarious activities and habits. Now I strive to pass on information, free of charge, and, I hope, 'inspire' ways in which other prisoners may be able to attain and/or surpass their goals.

It may be possible that a large segment of prisoners, by educating themselves, can bring about constructive change in the penal system. Although prisons in each state and country may have a different set of rules and programs, each prisoner must deal with stress, pressure, hopes, fears, desires, and dreams. We entombed souls may be hindered in our natural movement, and the outwardly oral expression of our esoteric thoughts; however, we possess the power to think. Prisoners intellectual ability is best evidenced by that special ability to navigate around most of the rules set by the prison. Indeed, there exists already a group of talented prisoners who can play a vital role in contributing to the fermentation, formulation, and facilitation of wiser and much better prison policy and education for prisoners.

You can see that I choose to accentuate the positive and promote the success of some prisoners. The so-called stigmas placed upon prisoners, like poor motivation, low self-esteem, discipline problems, and even perceived learning disabilities, can be overcome for the vast number of prisoners. By unmasking and acknowledging the 'continued development of the underdevelopment of prisoners,' we can get down to the business of education reform fully.

Regardless of the prison you may be in, you can 'reach out' (via writing letters to colleges, newspapers, etc.), request and often receive a positive response. This is a good way to build a network of supporters and at the same time receive a lot of mail.

Whether you are interested in music, art, history, psychology, or political sciences, you can locate an accredited college that offers AA, BA and MA programs. More than seventy colleges and universities in the United States offer fully-accredited correspondence courses. Almost all will enroll students (in or out of prison) living anywhere in the world. Thousands of courses are offered for credit in virtually every academic and technical area. Most schools offer courses in popular topics (e.g., business, education, psychology), some specialized courses (e.g., management, cinematography, modern Arabic) are only available at one or two schools. The great majority of courses are at the undergraduate levels, but students in Masters and Doctoral programs may be able to use them to meet degree requirements or to increase personal knowledge.

It is possible to earn an accredited Bachelor degree at either the University of the State of New York or Thomas Edison State College

entirely from a prison cell, through correspondence courses. In most states and prisons, Pell Grants are given to prisoners who attend college. In short, the prisoner must be willing to make the effort to capitalize on the opportunity. Once that decision is made and acted upon, often truly amazing things begin to happen.

For example, one of the most advantageous disciplines for prisoners to learn is law. This subject allows prisoners to infiltrate and perhaps overcome the very system which originally overwhelmed them. Although this might begin as a necessity of sanity geared toward proving innocence or a reduction of sentence, many times it ends with a heightened awareness and increased knowledge of the law. At the root of this is the inherent need for human beings to maintain morale. Learning the law and filing legal papers on one's own behalf gives a prisoner a feeling of control over his/her destiny. Success creates not only feelings of self-respect, but often leads to the lessening of self-destructive strategies.

Some prisoners who read this may have questions and/or doubts regarding 'prisoner education success stories' — whether or not these stories could be meaningful to their lives. Maybe questions about money to pay tuition, academic requirements, the need for books and supplies, and so forth pop up in one's mind. If such thoughts are beginning to form in your mind, it is good because this is the first step in climbing up the education ladder.

It is equally important to know about the accomplishments of others. The following are brief accounts of the many prisoner success stories.

**William Brown**, at the age of eight, found himself in prison, withdrawing cold turkey from a heroin habit. In prison, he taught himself how to read and write. He went on to receive his GED, and an AA degree, and pushed to earn a BA, MA and PhD. Now Dr Brown teaches criminal procedure at West Texas University. He was appointed to a two-year term to represent the Association on the Board of the National College of Criminal Defense.

**Allan Haber** had lived in twelve different foster homes by the time he was thirteen years old. By the time he was twenty-one, he had been in five additional juvenile and adolescent institutions. He had an extensive criminal record (i.e., approximately fifteen misdemeanors and three felony convictions). He was a heroin addict for over eighteen years. Now, Al Haber works as Assistant Chief Law Clerk for the New York Supreme Court. He received his High School Diploma and Associate in Arts Degree while he was incarcerated. Released from prison in 1977, he continued his educational advancements, first earn-

ing a BA from Columbia University in 1980. Then on a Root-Tillmen Scholarship at NYU School of Law, he became an excellent law student. He later became the President of the Fortune Society, a member of the Board of Directors of Project Green Hope, a member of the Board of Advisors of the Bayview Correctional facility and a frequent guest lecturer at Columbia, NYU, and other universities.

**John Irwin** is recognized as one of the top prison experts in the US today. He served time at Soledad prison in the late 1950s. Working towards his PhD in Sociology from the University of California, Berkeley in 1968, Irwin published his dissertation, *The Felon*, that sold well over 100,000 copies. In 1971 he co-authored, *Struggle for Justice: A Report on Crime and Punishment in America*. In 1978, *SCENES* and in 1980, *Prisons in Turmoil* were published. He became a tenured Professor of Sociology at San Francisco State College.

**Ron LeFloore** in 1973 was serving a term of five to fifteen years at the state prison in Jackson, Michigan. Years later he was a star left fielder for the Montreal Expos baseball team. He was appointed by President Jimmy Carter to the National Advisory Committee on Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

**Benjamin Rayburn** was a World War II Veteran. After his release from the service, finding no work available for a person who had not completed high school, he turned to crime. He became the leader to the Benny Denny gang which terrorized the eastern United States. Benny was tried, found guilty, and sentenced to life and thirty years on Federal charges of bank robbery. He did time in Kentucky, Alcatraz, and Atlanta, Georgia. While in prison, he studied law. He became so respected for his legal skills that he was called from his Atlanta prison cell one day to serve as an expert witness. Later his life sentence was terminated because he was 'denied due process hearing.' Later, he filed a *Habeas Corpus* concerning his 30-year federal sentence. The US Supreme Court granted his *Habeas Corpus* and, in 1969, he was released on bail pending review of a post conviction petition.

**Bill Witherspoon** was arrested in Chicago in 1959 for killing a policeman. In 1960 he was sentenced to die in the electric chair in the Cook County Jail. The U.S. Supreme Court agreed to hear his case in 1967 after nine years on death row. The Supreme Court set aside his death penalty sentence and reduced the sentence to 50-100 years in prison. He was transferred to Joliet Prison. The Illinois Department of Corrections approved work release for Bill, working with a drug and alcohol rehabilitation centre. He was sent to Sheridan prison, filed suit for being transferred without due process and was ordered by the court to be placed back on work release. This time he was placed in the Carbondale Illinois Work Release Centre. When his parole hearing came up he was once again taken off work release and placed back into Sheridan. He

filed another law suit. This time the court found the Director and Warden in contempt of court and ordered Bill back into work release. He went to work for the Prison Legal Aid at Southern Illinois University. He helped senior law students prepare, research, file, and argue briefs before different federal and state courts. Bill filed a federal civil rights action against the Illinois parole system and after nine years on death row and twenty years in prison, he was released on parole in 1979. He began working as a counselor for START and was responsible for finding jobs and housing for ex-offenders leaving the Michigan prison system.

**Robert Young** was jailed three times in federal and state prisons in California in the mid-1960s. After his final release, he earned a BA at California State University at San Diego, and then decided to go to law school. He was turned down by eleven law schools, but was finally accepted at McGeorge School of Law in Sacramento. After graduation, Young spent three years in private practice, and three more as an assistant district attorney. In 1977 he was elected to the Justice Court of Auburn, California. Judge Young summarizes his philosophy this way: 'I don't take no for an answer.'

**Tiyo Attallah Salah-EL.** Before being sent to prison, I had graduated from high school, then enlisted in the Army, served in Korea, was wounded and honourably discharged in 1953 with the rank of Sergeant. In 1954 I married, and began a thirty-year experience as a jazz musician and also engaged in many negative activities (e.g., drug sales, abusing women, lying, stealing, assault and battery, and shootings). In 1975 I was sentenced to 'life.'

When I arrived in prison I was filled with anger, frustration, and confusion. It took approximately two to three years for me to 'cool down' and realize the seriousness of my situation. My interests (sports and music) were instrumental in pointing me towards attending a few college courses that were offered here at SCI—Dallas, PA. I also wrote Monty Neill, who at the time was the Director of Prisoner Education Program at Franconia College and requested his help. Monty became, and remains, my friend, brother, and mentor. He guided me towards political awareness, inner peace, a BA in African American history, an MA in Political Science, and appointments as a Program Advisor for Beacon College and Director of the Prisoner Education Program.

During the past fifteen years, I composed and recorded music, became a member of ASCAP, coached and played football, wrote articles for *Radical Teacher* and the *ECN Prisoner Project*, and became a member of the National Lawyers Guild. Two years ago I applied to and was accepted at a law school. Professor Denise-Cardy Bennta, Associate Dean of City University of the New York Law School, reviewed my first year work of law school. Upon her recommendations I was

awarded funding for law school from the Davis-Putter Scholarship Fund. I recently submitted an application to the Temple University requesting admission to the PhD program offered by the Department of African American Studies. I have established and maintained solid academic and social relationships with respected scholars (e.g., Howard Zinn) and other women and men who are involved in helping to bring about positive social change.

My achievements pale compared to the accomplishments of the other people mentioned in this article. There are many others, incarcerated women and men, striving to attain goals. As strange as it may sound, 'life' in prison may in a peculiar way become a positive 'good life' inside a prisoner's mind, heart, and soul. Yes, some prisoners can grasp that inner magic and/or power within themselves that will inspire them towards attaining self-determination and self-empowerment.

## **CONCLUSION**

In my view, power properly understood is the ability to achieve purpose. It is the strength required to bring about social, political, and economic changes. In this sense, power, like prisoner education, is not only desirable but necessary in order to implement the healing and helping process for prisoners. In whatever form power comes to the people, it is most often achieved by organized efforts, essentially through ideological, political, and economic means. Cooperation then, rather than competition, is the essential principle, not just for prisoners, but for all poor folk on this planet. The task is to begin to make ourselves and others aware that 'prisoners have power' and worth. As prisoners, we occupy a position of uncommon and exciting advantage if we will only elevate our gaze high enough to recognize it.

One way to do this is through correspondence courses which are available to prisoners. A complete listing of correspondence courses can be found in a book that costs only \$8.95, is revised annually, and can be bought at most bookstores: *The Independent Study Catalog: The NUCEA Guide to Independent Study Through Correspondence Instruction*. You can order this book from Peterson's Guides, Princeton, NJ, (add \$1.75 for postage and handling).

## **REFERENCES**

Currie, E. 1985. *Confronting Crime: An American Challenge*. New York: Pantheon Books