Response

What Have We Learned? Hopefully to Fight the Good Fight

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I have thought long and hard about what this "response" should say. What have we learned that speaks to professors and students, activists and prisoners, and former prisoners endeavoring to understand and explain education in prison? What has been the value of producing this edition of the only prisoner-focused academic journal on the North American continent?

Perhaps Patrick Rafferty says it best when he shares with us the mission of *Out of Bounds* as being the "hope to dispel some of the misconceptions that surround prisons and prisoners." This is a noble, never-ending task made all the more important by the need to "clear the shadows on the walls" as Tiyo Attallah Salah-El so passionately expresses it when he employs Socrates' allegory of the cave (so apropos to understanding the stereotypes of prison) to give us a new way of thinking about prison abolition. Abolition is a long-term goal that must be organized nationally and internationally—strategies determined, tactics affected—because it is fundamentally about changing a mindset.

I do not wholly agree with the concept of complete abolition. There are people in here with me who need to be locked away for society's protection, as well as for their own safety. Sometimes jail is the only option. Observing my fellow convicts dispassionately, though, I see few who need to be banished behind walls and wire. Even the wardens of America's prisons, a conservative yet arguably well-informed group of professionals, reason half of their charges could be released without threat to the public safety (Simon, 1994).

So, what have we learned? We have learned about the general dismal state of education in prisons. As Steve Ainsworth tells us, "the system has been designed to thwart our efforts to expand our minds," and education programs, such as they are, anemically struggle with a myriad of institutionally induced problems. Daniel Harris illuminates the well-known fact that the most prevalent problem facing prisoners is illiteracy itself. This fact has been known since the inception of the Pennsylvania system nearly two centuries ago. What has changed? Today we have computer-assisted learning, the re-institution of tutoring programs, and GED studies; however, just as they have in the past,

these programs exist without enough support to make a significant impact on the overall critical need. The more the song changes, the more the tune has remained the same for most of the men and women incarcerated on this continent.

What have we learned? David Deutsch points out that "students" are essentially no different on the inside than on the outside. Prisoner college students effectively function as role models for other prisoners. Volunteers are highly respected by the prison population for their selfless giving and caring. Daniel Graves notes that education programs exist more out of administrators' acquiescence than their full support. Ironically, Charles Terry's collegiate journey commences in the penal apparatus as a "transformative journey" and Steve Richards observes, "prisons are an ideal place to begin college study."

What we have learned, been reminded of, is that the human spirit is indomitable. My soul ached as I reviewed these essays detailing the same problems, the same failures of support, and the same philosophical mendacity of the system's needless repression. My spirit likewise soared at the courage expressed by the authors' experiences, and their determination to continue. Not just to rise each day and face another in the seemingly endless grayness of doing time, but to stand and demonstrably rail against the destructive stupidity and ignorance of the criminal justice system, and to fight the good fight even with the knowledge that one is "blowing spit words at battleships," as my mentor Ross Van Ness piquantly describes many of my similar efforts. What we learn again is about the hope born and nurtured in the womb of an ever-expanding exploration of classical, liberal education.

I, too, have been transformed by the ameliorative effect of education within these misanthropic keeps. I know the power of grace that comes with theorem well taught, expostulations well declared, and a historical arch outlined well with all its antecedent relationships and consequences to this day and time. I know the power these things have on freeing the mind from the confines of the immediate drudgery of existence and the insidiously caustic hate of prolonged imprisonment. The classroom has become for me, as it has for many others, my sanctuary. Charles Huckelbury describes how the classroom "expanded my constricted worldview" and "I looked forward to the dialogue with the professors, real people who treated me like, well, a real student." Educators have become my real-life heroes. I want to be like these individuals. They are my personal giants in the pantheon of socially honorable and caring people.

What this edition teaches us again and again is that if the education is there, if prisoners are motivated, if their efforts are supported, prisoners will take advantage of these opportunities. Prisoners will change, even in spite of our pasts or immediate perceptions. We can learn to become more humane, socially conscious citizens that strive to complement and cooperate with the larger community, rather than to continue to prey upon it and ultimately upon ourselves.

"J'accuse!"

Just under the surface of the positions expressed in these essays is another message. They teach us that passivity in the defense of a righteous cause achieves nothing in the political arena. It is in the coliseum of representative government where our failures to participate are exploited. This klaxon was sounded at the 57th International Correctional Education Association Conference when David L. Werner, Director of Educational Programs in Corrections at La Verne University, delivered a shot across the bow of this sinking ship of political passivity (Werner, 2002).

Werner accused the Association of running away from the "largest increase in incarceration and in the rates of incarceration that the United States and Europe have ever seen." Educators have run "from a vituperative and vengeful public attitude about crime and criminals fueled by politicians who have found that public anger against crime can lead to electoral victory." Moreover, their retreat to the supposed safety of the shadows has "not done us any good." Education budgets are ravished, wholesale correctional education programs are closed, college opportunities for prisoners in the U.S. have been reduced overall by three-quarters because of the demagoguery eliminating prisoners' Pell Grant eligibility. Canadian prisoners lost post-secondary programs at the stroke of an administrator's pen. All the while, the Correctional Education Association has been "sitting on its hands, afraid to offend anyone and psychotically afraid of drawing attention to itself."

Having been a minor participant in the battles against the slash and burn politics and tactics of the conservative era, I can understand the reasoning behind the Association's strategy of anonymity, fearing the potentially lethal consequences of being targeted as the soft underbelly in the ignoble War on Crime. More than once I have seen media hatchet jobs ("Dateline"), poorly informed advocates ("Burden of Proof") or positive portrayals ("60 Minutes")

spun into negative diatribes against education in prison. In some instances, quiet, behind-the-scenes lobbying postponed the banishment of educational programs or achieved partial programming restoration. Examples of this are the fact that it took a decade-long campaign to exclude prisoners from qualifying for Pell Grants and the partial restoration of post-secondary education for prisoners between eighteen and twenty-five years of age under the Youthful Offender Post-Secondary program. These, however, were holding actions, a defensive strategy in the larger struggle for effective educational opportunities. Good, hard-working people who stridently believe in the social value of correctional education and the human worth of prisoners themselves, made these strategic, low-key choices when faced by the tsunami of the Reagan-Bush-Gingrich punitive agendas.

Perhaps these were the best choices and any strategy would have failed when marshaled against the vitriolic negativism and Machiavellian scapegoatism of the past two decades. By letting others set the agenda, though, we have had no choice but to react, trying to protect what little we hold so dearly. By anyone's measure, those strategies have failed, leaving the state of prison education in as dire of circumstances as the days of Attica.

If we are going to go down, let us do so kicking, fighting and screaming for what is right for all of society. I doubt that the condition of education in prison would have been worse if a vociferous defense had been waged. Now with a conservative majority controlling all facets of the American government, the initiative must be ours to seize, or we will be forced further back into the corner of ever more darkened cells. When other prisoners ask me why I write and struggle, making no apparent difference, I respond that sometimes making a record of the wrongs, of bearing witness to the stupidities is all one can do. Fight the good fight is an honorable choice and offers a better chance of success than quiet solitude in the meek hope of not being hurt for not being heard.

After the 2002 elections, pundits prognosticated that we are in for a period of retrenchment. My reaction is that in the sphere of criminal justice it has been that way for over two decades, regardless of which administration and party is in power, with the only present difference being that it is clearer what we face. Fine. I would rather have my opponent openly before me than feeding me pabulum as nothing changes or as things actually get worse.

Patricia J. Williams, in her column for *The Nation*, "Diary of A Mad Law Professor," recognizes the struggle and proposes a strategy of engagement

rather than apathy (Williams, 2002 December 2). First, she suggests, we need to know what we are up against. That is easy: more time, more prisons, less education, fewer paroles, and greater social trauma for all. Second, we need to pull our heads out of the sand, stop fretting, and get on with the struggle. Quit wringing our hands and lamenting among ourselves; advance a line in the proverbial sand and protest for it. Third, we need to find allies to advance our causes. When thoroughly briefed, colleges, universities, adult educators, and a myriad of related associations should be willing to support expanding educational opportunities. Since minorities disproportionately compose the prison populations, their representative groups (e.g., La Raza, NAACP, Urban League) can be educated to support our goals as part of their overall antiracism strategies. Fourth, we cannot underestimate the impact of the media to get our message out. We can learn to play the game better than the opposition. We need to prepare our talking points, facts, and rebuttals. For instance, Rady Cypser of CURE-NY (Cypser, 2002) takes this approach: instead of saying the knee-jerk responsive phrase of "college classes for inmates," he accurately, yet obliquely, refers to them as "post-GED education opportunities." Fifth, make noise. There is nothing more useless than a silent minority. Effective minorities do not have much of a voice by definition, but there is no need for us to bite our own tongues for fear of being impolite. Our best arguments will be met with retorts like: "Who are you to question your betters, to dare to judge, to be so 'censoring'?" I do not think we should expect to be granted the dignity of being considered a threat; rather it is more likely that we will be brushed off as "mediocre" or as "having no agenda." We should not make the mistake of spending more time watching our words than theirs.

Returning to the purpose of this response, what have we learned? What we can learn is that positive struggles continue to be made by many individuals both inside and out. What needs to be done is to coordinate our wide-ranging abolitionist and reform objectives. Most of all, what we have learned is to advance without trepidation. We are meant to lose anyway; it is expected of us to fail. With nowhere to go but forward, and underestimated by our foes of repression, we might as well strive valiantly for our beliefs. What we have learned is that it is worth engaging in the Good Fight.

"When you've been locked out," as Patricia Williams observes, "there is no thinking but 'outside the box.' Go be brave. Get mad. Speak up. And dig in for the long haul."

References

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