À fleur de peau: An In-depth Look at Two Strategies of Handling Emotion in French Prisons

Y.E., Hannah Davis Taieb and H.W.

INTRODUCTION

> Everything can be taken from a person but the last of the human freedoms, the freedom to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances – to choose one's own way.
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> – Viktor Frankl, 1959, p. 66

> [T]he fight against Prisonisation is subtle and complex: "It is a silent battle, not with a recognizable enemy, but with our minds… If we lose our minds, we lose ourselves and the battle. It is a battle I will not lose".
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> – Personal correspondence cited in Anita Wilson, 2000, p. 64

This article is based on a conversation among three people: H.W. and Y.E., French people looking back at their experience of incarceration, and Hannah Davis Taieb, a teacher at the American University of Paris who facilitates classes at La Santé prison inspired by the Walls to Bridges model. All three of us are active in the non-profit Dialogue & Transformation, which proposes workshops led and co-led by system-impacted people.

Looking back, H.W. and Y.E. recalled not only the emotions felt during incarceration, but the internal work they each did to suppress, hide, dissimulate or transform those emotions, and the interpersonal work of handling complex emotional challenges with others. While relating what could be considered to be successful strategies of managing emotion, they each brought-up counter-examples of people they had observed around them, who were presented as demonstrating the dangers and problems emerging when emotion is not handled well. Thus, our conversation both paints two detailed pictures of the emotions evoked by incarceration, while also bringing to light the question of strategies for handling or managing emotion (Laws, 2016). By looking in depth at two people's strategies, and by choosing to transmit here the conversation in full (translated from French), we seek to contribute to recent scholarship that brings out the agency of each social actor in navigating the emotions occurring during incarceration, as well as deepen our understanding of the transformative process of "emotion work" (Hochschild, 1973, 1983).

The choices faced in prison may seem unbearably limited, the emotion work inside like "walking on a tightrope" (Fayter and Kilty, 2024). This balancing act may involve the contradictory demands of conflicting emotion culture(s), necessitating a careful equilibrium between expressivity and restraint (Fayter & Kilty, 2024, p. 407) or may correspond to the "impression management" of striking a perfect midpoint between "excessive passivity and needless aggressivity" (Crewe et al., 2014, p. 63).

Here, Y.E. and H.W. describe similarly complex balancing acts. There is the difficult and subtle process of masking emotions while functioning in an environment in which emotions are heightened. Y.E. describes herself while in prison as being "*à fleur de peau*" – a French phrase, literally "on the flower of the skin", which refers to a hypersensitivity as delicate as the involuntary shiver one experiences at a very light touch. H.W. describes a different kind of emotional heightening, for he sees the containment and boredom of prison as a multiplier, with anger passing from person to person like a ball that grows as it is passed on. Both of them, in very different ways, find ways to balance the contradictions of the situation, using their own personal resources and their differing abilities to find and use the resources around them.

Our in-depth conversational approach also opens-up the possibility of sharing the evocative personal metaphors, the individuated vocabulary of Y.E. and H.W. as they describe emotional processes. H.W. developed the metaphor of the "bubble within a bubble within a bubble" – the creation of an inner space of refuge, where anger could be transcended through meditation. Y.E. emphasized her learning of a new way of interacting with others, affirmative and yet not aggressive, a hyper-alertness that kept her vital and changed her. Through including these detailed and telling evocations, we highlight and value the particular ways that each individual negotiates and formulates their subjective experience of prison. As Jewkes and Laws (2021, p. 365) put it, this allows for an extension of "the focus on scholarly attention from themes relevant to [prisoners] status as emotional – yet emotionally limited – subjects, to agents with a full repertoire of emotions that are pertinent to the dynamics of incarceration".

During the conversation, Hannah Davis Taieb, hereafter referred to as H.D.T., played the role of moderator and interviewer. Based on the idea that full respect for each person's experience necessitates full presence of all participants, H.D.T. asked questions but also shared reactions and maintained reflexive involvement. We have included some thematic headings. We repeat the initials of the speaker where this might cause confusion.

SURVIVAL MODE

H.D.T.: What were the main issues in terms of emotion when you were incarcerated?

Y.E.: At first, the main thing was fear of the unknown… Then once I came inside I felt, "that's it". I was already in a world apart. You're going to turn your brain off, turn your emotions off, you're going to try not to think too much about your family, not to cry too much… "I've got no one to count on, okay, I won't show my weaknesses, I'll be stoic, don't let anything show"... You do that right away to begin to understand a bit about the surroundings, to understand where one is. That's the survival mode that comes into play at the beginning.

And then you go through all kinds of emotions. The day is too repetitive, you get up at the same time, you shower at the same time, there's nothing new, you see the same faces, the same people... It becomes tiring and then comes depression.

Some people cloister themselves, don't go out much, don't get in touch with others. As for me, I love human beings in any case and so I needed to talk, even if it was to people who weren't from the same milieu as I am. I went out of my cell all the time, I tried to integrate into the group, to exchange, to connect.

H.D.T.: Some people cloistered themselves?

Y.E.: I had one cellmate… She was also from Paris. I was in prison far away – I was in Guadeloupe. This girl was also from Paris, they thought we'd get along, they put her with me. That girl, she didn't go out. She was a bit sad.

Sores appeared on her body. It was her body demonstrating that things weren't okay. She had itching, like psoriasis. She didn't have that before, it appeared just like that. We thought it was maybe because she was in a different and stressful environment.

She went for medical help, but they didn't give her antibiotics or anything, they gave her something for itching and told her to wait and it would go away. We did have medical care, but it was minimal. It has to be really serious to get real care. Otherwise, they give you basic things. She managed with that.

H.D.T.: You thought it was due to her emotional state?

Y.E.: Yes, because she never went out. I could never do that. I put myself in danger, but I went out. Going out, seeing people – well, there'll be certain people who'll take advantage of that to bully you, you're a godsend to them. But I couldn't stay inside, never see the day. It helps even to move around a little! To walk!

H.D.T.: I have the impression you're saying that for you, connection with others is worth risking certain dangers, is that right?

Y.E.: It was and will always be worth the risk.

CELLMATES

H.W.: I've had lots of cellmates. I had 19 cellmates in 27 months. Your story made me think about one of them.

Once I was coming back from solitary and when I came back down I had changed cells. Actually, whenever you go to solitary, almost as a rule they change your cell, so you come back to a new cellmate.

When you arrive in a cell, there's always one who comes before the other. The one who's there first, it's his place. He sets-up his rules, he'll say "you have to clean so many times per day", and so on. When you receive someone or you go to someone else's, there's an observation period. A few days. If you don't get along you can change cells.

When you go to solitary you lose your place. I came back to someone else's. The guard opened the door and it was totally dark. Like a cave. I smelled an odour... it stunk. The guy on the bed, he was under the covers. It was daytime, it was super nice out.

I sit down. He doesn't move. I start to speak to him. I tell myself he's in a depression. I try to figure out how to improve his condition. Because your cellmate, he's the person with whom you share your days. He becomes your friend, your confidant. 23 hours out of 24 you're going to be with this person. If you don't get along with him, you better change cells right away. Otherwise, this person will have aggressive thoughts towards you, you'll have aggressive thoughts towards him, you're going to feel that all the time, you're not going to be well.

In general, prison is an environment where you feel assaulted from all sides, there's an enormous amount of anger. If on top of that there's anger in the place you're going to spend 23 out of 24 hours of your day, if you add that on top of everything, frankly it's intolerable.

To go back to my cellmate. I went into the shower. There was no light there either. The lightbulb was broken. Everything was filthy. The next week I had the lightbulb changed and the shower repainted. I stayed with this guy for two months. The guy was 20-years-old. I was 32. He was a child.

NO OUTLET

H.W.: In prison, people are bored, so everything is multiplied. Outside, we can be angry with each other, then I'll go home, you'll go home, go to the movies… the anger will go away. When you're locked-up, you have no outlet and then things blow-up.

Because they're bored, people talk a lot. There are lots of rumours, false stories… like playing telephone, but all the time. It's difficult in that context to handle your emotions.

It's like you're not in charge of your emotions. Your emotions are in charge of you. A guard will be angry at his wife, he'll take it out on you – he'll say you can't go to the visiting room. He'll multiply it by 10 and you'll feel it by 100, and who'll be next? It's like a ball of anger that's passed from one person to the next… Or maybe it starts with me, I have a bad conversation with someone in the visitor's room. I'm on edge. I run into another prisoner, he had the same thing, maybe a bad conversation with his girlfriend. I say to him, "why are you looking at me like?" He speaks badly to a guard. The guard goes into a cell and yells at a prisoner. The prisoner takes it out on his cellmate. Passes the ball of anger onto him. And on and on, getting bigger all the time. I've never seen anything like it.

In prison, there's very little information. I'm someone who asks a lot of questions. I gave the guards a headache. How does this work, what am I allowed to do, what am I not allowed to do, how does that work, when does this happen? In the end I knew more than they did. I talked to lots of people. It's as if nobody knows how it really works.

There are a lot of undocumented migrants in prison. Some guys didn't speak French, they couldn't read or write, they just knew a few words in French. When they get there, they don't understand anything that's happening to them. For a French person, you don't understand everything

– it takes time, but for them, they're scared... When you don't speak a word of French, it's the worst.

Some guys go crazy. They're under stress. They lose it. They can't handle the pressure. One guy – he was an Algerian – he broke his arm to get to the hospital. He wanted to get out of the prison. But the guards said, "you're not going to the hospital". He didn't speak French and he didn't know his rights. He couldn't speak, he couldn't assert his rights. So he plugged-up the cell sink with paper. Then he let the water run. He flooded the whole floor, our bags were floating, there was water everywhere, all our stuff was ruined. This guy would cry at night, I could hear him screaming.

I'm not sure if it's the same person or another – one guy just started running down the hall, there's lots and lots of doors, of gates, and he ran… bells were ringing, they locked down everything, lots of guards came and caught him… it was like, the guy, it was as if he didn't even understand that he couldn't get out. There are doors! I would never try something that's impossible for me. I can't go through the bars. Some people, under the pressure, do things that are completely illogical. It's not insanity per se, it's intense distress. It comes up inside them, the person has a need for freedom, people aren't made to be locked-up, and they lose it all of the sudden.

THE SHOT

Y.E.: What he's describing about people who exteriorize their emotions… it reminds me of something that I had forgotten.

When I came into my cell the first time, the first thing I felt was the walls coming towards me. It was like claustrophobia. I had a very powerful anxiety attack. I started tapping the chair on the ground and screaming. And my pretext was that I needed a phone call, to call my parents, to tell them where I was, and that I was okay. But I think that was just an excuse, I just needed to vent.

After a while, the guards heard me and they came in. In circumstances like that the only way to calm someone, for them, is to medicate them. My cell door opened and I saw someone in a white coat with a syringe. I was surrounded by six colossi. Beefy, big strong men and women… and they said, "keep that up and it's the shot". So, I calmed down. I stopped. I took it upon myself.

We don't have a way to handle our emotions, and they [the staff] don't know how to handle them either. So, they come with the shot and the colossi.

H.D.T.: "I took it upon myself" – this to me is the survival mode, the stoicism… there's no outlet, so "*on prend sur soi*", you suck it up, you take it upon yourself.

Y.E.: You have to, you can't exteriorize. You stop yourself because what will come next will not be pretty.

H.W.: You have to avoid those shots. What they give you is very powerful. I don't want that in my body. I saw a guy, a big Black guy, bigger than me. I saw him arrive, when he came he was normal. He talked, he went around… Then I heard that there had been a problem with a guard, he had hit a guard and they gave him a shot. The guy, I saw him again, he wasn't the same.

I've never understood if it was the shot or some kind of psychological problem, but he had started talking to himself. He walked along and talked to the air. Then he started to come down with shaving cream on his face, all white, talking to himself.

Once he was walking next to me and he had on several layers of clothes, two pairs of jeans… I'm thinking, "what's going on?" Then I saw him hide in a corner, and when we all went up, he didn't come back up. I could see down into the courtyard from my cell. He had tied a knot in his jeans and thrown them up over the fence. He went right up over the arms of the guard. Everyone started to yell, "Go ahead, go go!"

But it was out of despair. Even if he got over the wall, there's another wall, and then another wall… He was crazy… there's no outlet, so things blow-up.

After that, he went on a special promenade for prisoners who are protected, they're called the "*vulnerables*" – the pedophiles, all the LGBTQ, people who get bullied…

On the main promenade, where I was, we were 100 or 200 – that's a lot of people. There are fights every day or every other day. The fights go far. People can die.

So, this guy, the one who went crazy, he didn't go on the promenade with us anymore, he was with the "*vulnerables*". I saw this guy, he had started taking his clothes off. He was completely naked. Everybody started to yell at him, "what are you doing?" And this is a guy who was normal at the beginning and he became someone who walks around completely naked. That guy, he'll finish his sentence, then he'll spend five years in a psychiatric hospital. He was normal when he arrived.

It was the shot that did that. I talked to a lot of people about it. Everyone is scared of the shot. You can spend 10 years in prison, you can get out, it's part of your life experience, you'll have your traumas, you'll deal with them as best you can. But if you get those shots, there's no coming back from it. If you get those shots, you can't get over it. The stuff in those shots, they mess-up your brain. It's worse than crack, forget it. The people who get the shots, it's notorious, everyone knows it. You lose your mind so to speak. So, among the [prisoners], there's this fear. And we don't go past certain limits because we know that's there behind. It's very scary.

THE SOCIAL MASK

H.W.: I observed so many things in prison. It was really interesting sociologically and in terms of human behaviour.

In life, in general, we all have a social mask. With certain people, we'll start to open-up to tell the story of our lives, what we like, what we don't like. It depends on the individual, but most people will open-up at one time or another. Then you'll come in, you'll come into the person.

In prison, the mask is very strong. Everybody wears a mask, and people will tell very little about their lives. They'll talk about what they did, their delinquent or criminal career, they'll try to develop a certain status, but they'll talk very little about personal things. Relationships stay on the surface. Even your cellmates, there'll be a limit. It may be conscious or unconscious, but we don't open-up entirely.

My last cellmate, he never created this shell. He was there for failure to insure his car and driving without a permit. This had been 10 years previously. He had moved and never got the summons. They gave him one year without possibility of parole. He should never have been in there. He was in shock. He never got over it. He was very anxious, anguished. He didn't know the [prisoner] codes.

I explained everything to him. Your cellmate is your partner. If he's not doing well, it'll reach you too. If he's depressed, you have no one to talk to. This guy never got to the point of creating the mask. I watched him, I saw how he was being seen. Everyone saw him as prey. They came up to him and they wanted to take his running shoes. Leave him barefoot. I came up, I said, "He's my cellmate, so no". He kept his shoes.

You have to create this shell. It's a survival mechanism. You can't give the person across from you the ammunition to attack you. Outside, if you

tell your partner something, they might bring it up later in an argument. Inside, if you give yourself away, the person across from you might use that information to do you wrong. They may tell your story to others. Stories are very often twisted and deformed as I mentioned before. There might be people who are jealous. There are people who are bad, who want to hurt others. Outside, those people, you'll distance yourself from them. Inside, you're with them.

CONNECTION AND RISK

H.D.T.: Y.E., you mentioned that for you it was important to create connection with others. How do you respond to what H.W. is saying?

Y.E.: I've always had the tendency to create connections, but I've also always had the tendency to surround myself with bad people, just in order to have that connection. In prison it's not necessarily the best connections you can find.

In prison I was connected with people who wanted to hurt me. I faced racism because I was in another context [i.e. Guadeloupe] – I was in a minority, I was the only Arab. I was placed in danger by those people with whom I had created connections or people I had forgiven, and then recreated connection afterwards.

Prison makes you hypersensitive, on edge. And the group effect is very strong. All it takes is one big shot in the prison who wants to hurt someone and almost everyone else in the prison will go along with her opinion so as not to be in danger themselves – the group effect or even just for fun. Bad things constantly happen. It's a place where the only things that can happen are bad.

H.D.T.: You started out saying that you didn't stay in your cell, you went towards people… you found people, created connection… now the story sounds a bit different.

Y.E.: I had some beautiful relationships, like with my cellmate from Paris, with whom I created a very strong connection, and we still see each other sometimes.

But the other girls, at one time or another they wanted to hurt me, to hit me, to steal from me. Not just to me, to all the other girls as well. There are fewer

demonstrations of solidarity and affection, it's more about imposing yourself, who has the power… we're surrounded by people who are dangerous, who have nothing to lose, who are going to get out when they are 50-years-old or people who grew-up and lived in violence, who had very difficult lives and childhoods, and who are brought together. We're all brought together with our baggage, our pasts, so it explodes. It's no picnic. [laughing]

H.D.T.: Yet you laugh.

Y.E.: Yes, I can laugh, because it's over. And I'm a believer, I tell myself I have a lucky star. But I went through things I never thought I would go through – never thought I could be the central actor in things like that. It's violence condensed. The violence can come from the prisoners or from the guards.

There was one racist guard who called me a "dirty Arab" because I wasn't going fast enough for her in the shower. We had different groups who went in one by one in the shower and you have to go fast. So, she insulted me. I responded in kind. She wrote-up a whole report on me saying that I was bad, that I answered back. I was very close to going before the commission to go to solitary. Solitary – it's the worst of the worst. You have no light, you're really put there to be bored.

The spirit needs to work at something, to have projects, to reflect on something. The day you have nothing to give to your mind to do, your mind eats you. It hurts you. What happened, what you've done, you're ugly. Prison was already complicated enough, but solitary is where you can't even read a book – you have no light, you have to follow the light of the sun. They're places that are very dirty, there's a constant nauseating odour. There are people there who shouldn't be in prison, they should be in psychiatric hospitals. They don't live well and they often go to solitary. Luckily, I never went there. I managed to avoid it.

I have a lucky star. I was often threatened, but I have a lucky star. For example, once I was alone in my cell, because there weren't that many women in the prison. Then they brought me a new arrival. She was addicted to crack. I woke-up in the middle of the night and she was standing over me. I tried to go back to sleep, but I slept with one eye open. In prison you have to stay alert. Aggression can come from anywhere, even your cellmate. Maybe she doesn't feel well, she thinks you're her enemy, she's in withdrawal. We went through several days like that.

Now, I understand English. There were many people there from the Dominican Republic who spoke in English, rather than in Creole. In prison, you can understand what'll happen tomorrow by listening to the blah blah. When there's a problem coming, you can hear about it.

One girl says to the new girl, "Beat-up the white girl tonight and I'll give you some weed". I was the only white girl. The new girl looks at me. I look at her. I say, "If you're going to do something, do it now. If you're going to hit me, hit me now, not during the night".

I was very scared because I wasn't ready, I was only 18 when I went to prison and back. But I have a lucky star, she looked at me and she said, "No, I won't do anything". I don't know if it's because I had welcomed her, when she arrived I had given her some cigarettes and some food… I said, "if you need it, it's here…" I don't know if that's why, but she didn't listen to them.

H.D.T.: I'm also struck that you were very present. You said, "if you're going to hit me, hit me now".

Y.E.: I was in survival mode. I don't know if I was like that basically. I was in survival mode, you don't show your weaknesses, you don't show your tears. You show you're strong, even if you don't know how to fight, if you must fight, you fight… these are details that give you reputation.

One girl took my lighter. We all had lighters and we all wrote our initials on them. We were on promenade and I put down my lighter, and a girl took it. I said, "Give me back my lighter, you took it". She said, "no, it's mine".

There, I had two choices. Either I insist and I go into a conflict, and it might turn out that I lose or, I don't insist and tomorrow it might turn out that someone comes into my cell and steals my things.

So, I insisted, though I was scared of the woman and everything. I said, "No, it's my lighter, it has Y on it, give me back my lighter". She looked at me for a long time and then she gave it to me.

H.D.T.: You kept things in balance. You stood up for yourself without being aggressive, if I understand you correctly. In both cases.

Y.E.: Right. It depends on the person. Some people grew-up in violence and are more violent. In prison you have to be on edge, reactive. Every detail is important.

À FLEUR DE PEAU

H.D.T.: What seems like a hard thing to experience is the contradiction between on the one hand being stoic, having to harden oneself, which means not to feel, and at the same time, being on edge, reactive, hyper-sensitive, feeling everything.

Y.E.: In prison one is "à fleur de peau" [We have chosen to leave this phrase in French. Literally it means, "on the flower of the skin". It refers to a state of extreme sensitivity, as if the slightest touch made one react]. You can be very touchy, very sad as well, your emotions are felt more strongly, heightened. In real life you have other things to do, you feel things less, you have more room for rationality. In prison there's no rationality. Instead, each person responds according to their feelings, their pasts. You have to deal with it. There are no social rules.

H.D.T.: It reminds me of what H.W. said. Outside, someone might make a comment you don't like, but as the day goes on you talk to your co-worker, you go for a walk, you forget your irritation because you do other things. Inside, the same little thing, it gets bigger. On the one hand there's no outlet, so everything swells-up. But at the same time, you can't show anything. It's both at the same time: you get more stoic and tougher, and also more and more fragile.

Y.E.: It's a ball of violence, like H.W. said. You understand it from the beginning. Even if you don't want to be in survival mode, after a few days you might watch a fight, wake-up in the morning, and find out that someone died in the night… and you understand that you're not in a place where you are protected.

I became friends with a girl there that wasn't liked. The other girls got together and came to me and said, "if you keep hanging out with her, we're going to beat you up". Same as before, I had the two choices, whether to give in or to stand-up to them and gain respect. So, I was afraid and I went to the head guard. The head guard said, "Don't worry, they bark but they don't bite". This was a way of saying, "I can't do anything for you. If they hurt you, I won't be there. You're on your own".

Because they don't just bark. I've seen some traumatizing scenes. Once I was in the shower, we're all almost completely naked, we're very vulnerable. And a girl comes in wearing her jogging suit, which is weird because the morning shower we come down to it in our pyjamas. She comes in and she has a piece of bread, and in the bread she has her fork. Hidden. She pulls out the fork and starts to stab another girl. In front of me. And I'm there taking my shower. The guard came but didn't endanger herself. She didn't intervene, she preferred to wait for reinforcements. That's why we're alone. If someone attacks me, the guard will not intervene, she'll wait for reinforcements. And a lot can happen to me while she's waiting.

H.D.T.: So, what happened when these girls told you not to hang out with that girl?

Y.E.: I decided to stand-up to them. It worked in the sense that they didn't attack me. They had threatened to cut me with a knife. In the end, they all got together and they attacked her, the poor thing.

H.D.T.: I have the impression you developed a way of being – maybe you're not like that outside, I don't know – but you found a kind of solution, a way of being that was standing-up to them, but without being aggressive.

Y.E.: Yes, by nature I'm not aggressive, but I decided to impose myself because I saw that the weak were hurt first.

H.D.T.: Did it work as a strategy?

Y.E.: Yes, in the sense that I was never stolen from. If someone comes into my cell and looks at everything I have, if she's staring at my sugar, my cookies, I say "out". I won't let her go shopping with her eyes. I had no one to watch over me.

H.D.T.: Did that change your character?

Y.E.: Yes. There's always a before and after. H.W. too. You lose your innocence. You see the worst of life. You see people in distress. You see people with very different life experiences. People let you know why they're there, "I opened-up someone's stomach fourteen centimetres…"

You imagine these scenes, it takes away your naïveté, the world is beautiful, the world is pretty… There are people who do evil and you talk to those people sometimes. In real life as well. You talk to people without knowing what they do.
When you get out, you're less naïve. I'm less talkative. I observe more. I used to love to laugh and I was very sociable. Getting out of prison, now, when I'm in a group, I speak the least and observe the most.

H.D.T.: Are you happy about this change?

Y.E.: No, it was better before. Now, I'm always paying attention. "Who's this guy? What is he?"

H.D.T.: At the same time, I would've said, you developed a strength. When you describe these situations, where you asked yourself, should I give in or stand-up, and you stood-up for yourself, I admire you for that when I listen to you. For example, when you said "out" to the person staring at your things. It made me think, I should develop that. You had very little, but you protected it.

Y.E.: Yes, but you have much less faith in society. You develop your feelings against the system. I felt mistreated. Not necessarily in prison, but even before. When I was four days in detention. We're not allowed to shower. And the police are into psychology and their only goal is to bring in the most people possible into this story. "You will get 20 years in prison if you don't give us the names". They brought me in front of the shower and someone said, "You'll get the right to a shower, if you talk. You'll get a burger from McDonald's, if you talk. You'll get a cigarette, if you talk".

I didn't feel supported. I felt like a piece of meat. They brought me before the judge, and they put me in prison. It was because I was a danger for their investigation. They're not doing social work. They're focusing on their investigation.

H.D.T.: So, there was a certain dehumanization, when you say, "they treated me like a piece of meat"?

Y.E.: I wasn't a human being. When I got out of the courtroom and I knew I would go to prison, I was sad. I was crying. I was thinking, "okay, this

is it. I'm going". A cop came and said, "When you get back to [mainland] France, if you have problems paying your rent, don't worry, come to the police station, and inform. We'll pay your rent".

H.D.T.: He said that to you while you were crying?

Y.E.: Yes. It wasn't the moment, first of all. And second of all, who's going to protect me? Policemen are protected, but a random girl like me, you throw me out into pasture, for your interests, to find the bad guys, for your numbers…

When you get out, you're more closed in. More paranoid… More in real life.

THE BUBBLE WITHIN THE BUBBLE WITHIN THE BUBBLE

H.D.T.: What about you, H.W.? Did you have a before and after?

H.W.: I had a before and after inside. In terms of emotions, when you're outside, you have the choice. You have the choice of who you talk to. And when emotions come-up, you have the choice – you can externalize them, you can internalize them, you can transform them into something positive… Inside you are subjugated, you have no choice. So, it all depends on the capacity of the individual to transcend his emotions.

H.D.T.: What do you mean by "transcend your emotions"?

H.W.: Transcendence. When I went to solitary, it wasn't like for Y.E. For me, it was like a bubble of liberty. Because I found myself in silence. I wasn't happy because I'd lost my cell and all that. But I took advantage of it to meditate, to reflect, I took books with me.

Y.E.: Books, okay, but did you have light? We didn't have light in solitary.

H.W.: Even within [mainland] France, prisons are very different. There are prisons that are decrepit, other prisons that have just been renovated…

Y.E.: Was there a smell in solitary?

H.W.: No. Where I was, it used to be like you're describing, there was no light, there was vomit and piss everywhere… since then, it's been renovated.

H.D.T.: Could you continue about the question of what you mean by transcendence?

H.W.: At one point I had a very great anger. And I felt it was going to eat me up. Anger was taking me over. I managed to transcend my anger. I managed to free myself from my emotions. To control them. To no longer be subjugated to prison. From that time on, even if people were angry near me or were going to be violent with me, I could centre myself inside of myself. I could feel it as exterior to me. I don't have to let it penetrate me. I can keep it at a distance. I created a bubble inside the bubble inside the bubble.

H.D.T.: Can you explain the three bubbles?

H.W.: The first bubble is the prison, the micro-society. There's a certain kind of solidarity. You have to understand the rules, understand your rights.

The second bubble is the mask you have to create – the shell you have to create around yourself. You have to separate from yourself and create a character, a false personality, in order to survive.

The third bubble is the internal world – a refuge. You go there to reinforce yourself. Only you can get in. You can think about your family, friends, your real self. But you can't tell anyone about it.

I had a before and after inside. When I transcended my anger. From that moment on, I'd go out on promenade, I"d be in a meditative state as if I were alone.

Y.E.: You escaped from what was around you?

H.W.: I recentered myself. I had been in the energy of anger since I was little. And it just grew and grew and grew. After that day, it went away.

What happened that day was this. I found out I was betrayed by my best friend. I felt more angry than I've ever felt in my life. I was there in my cell thinking, "when I get out, I'll kill him". But then I thought to myself, "if I do that, he'll have won". In the end, even if he's gone and I'm locked away for life, he's still driving my behaviour.

And I had seen guys in the prison who had killed people. They were like errant souls, phantoms. They had lost something, a kind of sensitivity. I didn't want to end-up like that.

So, I had to figure out how to deal with my anger. I had a book on meditation that my mother gave me, *The Power of Now* by Eckhart Tolle (1997). Emotion isn't you. You can get attached to it or you can just let it go through you. And I thought, I might as well try it, I have nothing to lose. So, I did it.

I was lying down. I started by looking at the anger, visualizing it and feeling it inside me, inside my body. Then I saw it coming out. It was as if my anger was floating above my body. I looked at it, it was outside me. Then I let it go. Some people say you can blow on it and blow it away. After that I started a whole program of meditation.

Anger is magnetic. If you have anger inside yourself, that hasn't been treated, you'll attract all the people around you who have anger inside them. And in prison, that's all there is. Sometimes there'll be confusing fights starting and you're afraid it'll come towards you. You weren't in that story, but you're afraid it'll come towards you because you have that same energy inside you, you're afraid you'll attract that energy towards you.

But after that, after I started meditating, it slipped right off me. I could go out on promenade, go past two guys who were fighting, I'd broken my connection with that energy. From that day on, my experience was very different.

And I realized that outside, I never would have done all that. Outside, you always think "I'll start later, when I'm ready…" but there I had no choice. I thought, "I don't want to go crazy, I don't want to become a psychopath". And so, I did it.

And that's transcendence. I broke my connection from that energy. It's how you're going to take an emotion and turn it into something positive.

H.D.T.: What's your reaction, Y.E.? How do you react to what H.W. has said, how he created a third bubble inside himself, how he transcended his emotion? You started out saying your movement was towards others and finding a way to be respected. Does what he said resonate with you or was it very different?

Y.E.: In contrast to H.W., I went towards people. I knew what could be positive and what could be negative. I knew I had to stay super alert, know what was going on in the prison, who's yelling, who's fighting with who, how does the wind blow… I had to be informed, to not be in danger, and to be able to continue going out, getting a breath of fresh air, talking, exchanging

ideas with people. So, I lived through it more in hyper-alertness. As each day went on, I put an X on it. I wasn't sure when I'd get out, but I just said to myself, onward, onward.

And the smallest thing could seem marvelous to me. Like a plant growing under my window. It was crazy, I looked at it every day, go for it, grow, grow… When the guy came to mow the lawn I felt like crying, it was crazy… that's the hyper-sensitive side, à fleur de peau. The plant made me see that life goes on.

When you get out, the most wonderful thing I found, is freedom. To be able to do what you yourself want to do. In prison, they put you where they want to put you. You're subjugated. *Sous main de justice*, under the hands of justice, under judicial control. When you get out, you get back your hope, you think, *I have the right to do what I want*. The price of freedom. This was a beautiful lesson for me and this was also the challenge.

H.D.T.: One final thought. I found listening to you both that my intention focused on the notion of solutions to handling emotion inside, successful strategies that worked. I kept looking for answers – reaching out to others – solidarity; meditation… But the two of you seemed to be coming at this from a different point of view. I'm the one who kept bringing-up "what works".

Y.E.: It's survival instinct. You don't think about anything, you're in the moment, totally in the present moment, in action, so as to preserve yourself as much as possible.

H.D.T.: And yet – you *did* each have strategies to survive. And you *did* survive.

Y.E.: To this very day, I don't know how.

CONCLUSIONS

As we explained in the introduction, our intention here was to allow our conversation to flow, to explore in an open way the subjective experiences of prison, and to bring to the reader the particular ways in which each speaker formulates and transmits their experience. We see emerging two pictures of the emotional experience of prison and two distinct individual strategies

for managing emotion inside. The details related deepen and extend our understanding of the process of this particular kind of emotion work.

The Recognition of the Need to Control Emotion

Y.E. and H.W. describe the recognition of the intensity of emotional response that could emerge, and the importance of mobilizing to mask and manage it. This is seen partly through counter-examples. The dangers of uncontrolled emotion emerge clearly in stories like that of H.W.'s fellow prisoner who could be heard crying and screaming, who "lost it", or another who was "normal at the beginning" and ended-up in a state that H.W. judged to suggest permanent psychic damage. Even more telling is Y.E.'s story of her own moment of "venting". When she was told "keep that up and it's the shot", she went through a rapid process of self-regulation: "I calmed down. I stopped. I took it upon myself". This suggests the nature of the moment of choice and the beginning of a new relationship with the emotions.

Isolation, Solidarity and Contact with Others

Y.E. and H.W. distinguish themselves from each, focusing on Y.E.'s extroversion and desire to make contact, and H.W.'s interest in seclusion, reflection, and meditation. One might see this as related to gender norms and practices. For instance, citing research in other contexts, Fayter and Kilty (2024: 26) have suggested there is declining mutual aid and solidarity in men's prisons, contrasting with an "ethic of care" for women. However, H.W. and Y.E. linked their approaches not to gender, but to the ways of being they had developed in life prior to prison. Y.E. describes herself as "always having a tendency to create connections", adding that this does not necessarily always work to her benefit. H.W. describes himself as someone with a natural tendency to need little social contact. Comparing himself to Y.E., he notes that he needs fewer "strokes per day", referring to Eric Berne's (1964) use of the word "stroke" as "units of social action" demonstrating recognition from others.

Furthermore, there are more similarities in H.W's and Y.E.'s approaches than at first appear. H.W. and Y.E. were in agreement that complete isolation from others was to be avoided, distinguishing themselves from others who suffered from their seclusion. Y.E.'s cellmate "cloistered" herself – the difficulty coming from this approach manifested itself in her body's somatic response (also see Laws, 2018). H.W. described another isolated person, a cellmate who lived in darkness, without emerging from under the covers.

Y.E. focused on connection with others, not only with an "ethic of care", but also with assertiveness and resistance to potential danger. By contrast, H.W. can be seen as demonstrating his own "ethic of care". Despite "needing fewer strokes" in social life in general, he nonetheless had a conscious strategy of care for his cellmates. This could be seen in context of Crewe and colleagues' (2014, p. 67) research in a medium-security men's prison in the U.K. where prisoners "publicly denied they had close prison friendships", but engaged in daily practices like "waking each other up with cups of tea, knocking on cell walls to communicate goodnight wishes". Similarly, H.W. cleaned the cell for his cellmate who was depressed, and defended a cellmate in danger of being bullied, all in an explicit attempt to make the cell "where you're going to spend 23 out of 24 hours of your day" into a place of some respite – the cell being known as "*la grotte*", the cave.

Emotion Work and Transformation

With these detailed stories presented here, we hope to contribute to the deepening of our understanding of the nature of "emotion work". Crewe and colleagues (2014, p. 64) bring out the useful distinction made by Hochschild (1979, p. 561) between 'fronting', which can be defined as evoking a desired feeling which is absent, and 'masking', defined as suppressing an undesired feeling that is present. Our reflection here evokes these two kinds of "emotion work" and shows how these processes can be transformative on a deeper level.

H.W. describes in detail how he reshaped his relationship to emotion through meditation, sensing and then "transcending" the way he experienced anger as inside (and then moving outside) of his body. Y.E. describes mobilizing aspects of her previous way of being – her extroversion, wanting to be with others – and developing a new kind of tougher, more self-protective extroversion. She was aware of her fear and did not display it (the mask), creating an outer self (front) that was able to bluff and win ("if you're going to beat me up, I prefer you do it during the day").

These transformations are described by them as arriving at key moments of shock and desperation. H.W. describes a kind of moment of truth, the coming to a crossroads that led him to do the deeper emotional work that led to his changing his relationship to anger. Y.E. describes several such moments of truth when she found herself able to mobilize herself in new ways to survive. These moments of desperation led each to find new ways.

These new capacities had lasting effects on their lives. Y.E. relates that she is now less talkative, more observant, "always paying attention". H.W. says there was a "before and after" in terms of his relationship to anger. These changes, emerging at moments of truth, are transformative in ways that are suggestive for our understanding of "deep" emotion work.

Survival Instinct or Choice?

Y.E. describes herself as having no choice – having acted by "survival instinct". Throughout our conversation, we experienced a tension between the questions and reactions of H.D.T. – emphasizing that choices were being made, strategies carried-out – and the formulations of Y.E. and H.W., who often focused on survival, desperation, absence of choice leading to action. We are choosing to leave this tension visible in the end result. We find it suggestive for further reflection on agency and strategy.

À fleur de peau

We have also chosen to highlight here the evocative ways H.W. and Y.E. described the emotional world around them during incarceration. We leave you with their metaphors and turns of phrase: H.W.'s "ball of anger" gathering and growing as it passes from one person to another; and Y.E.'s image of living in hyper-alertness, hiding much of one's emotional response and feigning others, all the while living "*à fleur de peau*".

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Y.E. was incarcerated for four months in Bae-Mahault prison in Guadeloupe. This part of her life has made her understand that there is a lot that can be done for prisoners. She has been working in human resources and thanks to her experience of incarceration, she sees things in a new way – when recruiting candidates she does not judge them on their past and she seeks to help with reintegration.

Hannah Davis Taieb leads workshops bringing together people detained at La Santé prison in Paris and students from the American University of Paris, with an approach inspired by Walls to Bridges. She is the president of the non-profit Dialogue & Transformation. Hannah is connected to questions of prison through her memories of her own father's incarceration during the McCarthy period in the USA. She has a PhD in anthropology and is a Gestalt practitioner.

H.W. was incarcerated for 27 months in the Fleury-Mérogis prison. This experience deeply marked him, and he is determined to counter the myth of prison and all the clichés that are attached to it. Prison is not an obligatory passage for young people from the neighbourhoods and does not make them stronger. He would like to break this vicious cycle by inventing tools and liberating methodologies for youth. He is an active member of the non-profit Dialogue & Transformation where he leads workshops and training activities for students and youth.