

THE ENLIGHTENED PRISON

Drew Leder and the Jessup Correctional Institution Scholars

Abstract

Thirty men from the maximum-security Jessup Correctional Institution (Maryland), and Drew Leder, Professor of Philosophy, through small-group discussion, envision an alternative and authentically constructive institution. Uncomfortable with the notion of a truly “beautiful” prison, the group develops ideas of an “enlightened” prison, designed in counterpoint to the debilitating and destructive features of the existing prison. The enlightened prison would embody five core virtues: hope, growth, recognition of merit, individuality, and community. In the absence of these attitudes — all too often a characteristic of current-day institutions — there persists the “endarkened” prison, marked by despair, stasis, recognition of demerits, classification, and isolation.

Jessup Correctional Institution (JCI) is a maximum-security men’s prison in a rural area midway between Washington and Baltimore. JCI’s clientele range from lifers, some thirty or forty years into their “bits,” to new-timer youth caught up in gang violence. Of the roughly 1700 JCI inmates, most are African-American, many hailing from the tough and drug-ridden streets of East and West Baltimore — but any cursory profile fails to do justice to the complexity and diversity of the men and their backgrounds.

In fall of 2010, my class inside JCI included some of the prison’s “elite,” long-timers who are unusually committed to reflection and self-transformation. We had recently studied together the stoic *Handbook of Epictetus* (1983), and two contemporary works by Eckhart Tolle, *The Power of Now* (2004) and *The New Earth* (2008). The focus, as always, was on the human capacity for understanding, empowerment, and freedom, even when under physical constraints.

The fall semester’s class focused on the theme of the “Beautiful Prison.” Our central text was *The Soul Knows No Bars: Inmates Reflect on Life, Death and Hope* (Leder et al., 2000), a book I co-wrote with inmates. In dizzying meta-fashion we had dialogues about the book’s dialogues, including men who had been involved in the original project commenting on their words from eighteen years earlier. But our focus was also on the future. We were working together on this essay about what prison could and should be. With a limited amount of time (we met every other week through the semester), some 30 voices at play, and multiple pedagogical aims to juggle, our process was at times unsystematic and unpredictable. We engaged in both large-group and small-group discussion, took polls on different paradigms, and I solicited brief written essays.¹ I tried to let go of my own preconceptions and pull together what I was hearing and reading from the men, presenting my summaries back to them for comment. What follows is

¹ Nine Loyola service- and service-learning students accompanied me into the prison, serving as enthusiastic and invaluable co-learners/ co-teachers. To more fully explore their experience and contribution would lead us beyond the boundaries of this essay.

thus not the product of a single author, but of a multifaceted *dia-logue* — the thought, reasoning, speech (*logos*) that emerges across/ between (*dia*). For Socrates that was the model of how human understanding best advances. Plato captured this process in his vivid literary portrayal of Socrates and his interlocutors. Alas, the sheer number of voices involved in our discussion, the brevity of this piece, and the need to avoid ego and competition, led us in an opposite direction — we often speak here as a collective “we” rather than singling out individual contributions.

We decided to move away from the language of the “beautiful prison”; a number of the men suggested discomfort with the term after years spent in harsh and unaesthetic environs. In fact, it provoked some bitter laughter. Prisons, they agreed, could be places for soul-searching and self-transformation ... but not *beautiful*. One man launched into a description of the *enlightened* prison, and it met with general agreement when I proposed that as an alternate title. What if prisons were not like the dark cave described in Plato’s Republic: chained men, cut off from reality, consigned to watching shadows on the wall? What if, instead, prisons were places of, and for, enlightenment?

This could lend itself to utopianism, but our conversations remained rooted in concrete experience. This, not professional training as criminologists, was the source of the men’s expertise. Prison was not something they had studied but had *lived*. They had witnessed the power for soul-destruction or life-enhancement, in a warden, caseworker, family member, a ticket for an infraction, an educational class, a glimpse of the sky, an overcrowded cell, a contemptuous look, an unguarded shower.

The challenge was to speak honestly of such experiences, but also to translate their specificity into general principles. If we could articulate the fundamental attitudes that characterized the enlightened prison, these could be used to suggest, validate, and measure the success of any and all features of an institution: employee-training, the types of programs offered inmates, architectural elements, etc.

The enlightened prison, we concluded, would embody the following five core attitudes: *hope, growth, recognition of merit, individuality, and community*. (On the basis of our discussion I suggested these terms and categories, which were then checked and validated by the men.) In the absence of these attitudes, you have the “endarkened” prison. This type of environment, all too often characteristic of current-day institutions, embodies the opposite attitudes, which we termed, respectively, *despair, stasis, recognition of demerits, class-ification, and isolation*.

I will describe these attitudes as they emerged in discussion, without much of a scholarly apparatus. Neither will I concern myself with whether the reader finds the recommendations naïve, idealized, or, conversely, insufficiently radical because we do not speak of prison abolition or dramatic social reorganization. These men are realists. They know what has really made their lives miserable, or, on occasion, better, and this remains their focus and the source of their authority.

Hope Versus Dispair

“Abandon all hope ye who enter here.” So reads the sign over the gates of hell in Dante’s *Inferno* (2003, Canto 3, 1.9), and it would work well for many a modern penitentiary. Far from assisting a “penitential” process of self-examination and positive change, prisons often foster an experience of *despair* (etymologically, to “lose hope”). The men described how hope can be extinguished at several stages of the criminal justice process. This begins with the seeming contempt and callous mistreatment of the defendant demonstrated during trial proceedings, when attorneys on both sides joke with each other like members of an old-boys club; the shock of a long or life-sentence (with strange extensions such as “double-life plus twenty”); a harsh introduction to the “slammer” that slams you mentally and physically; loss of access to friends, family, resources, and kind words; a gathering sense of regret, bitterness, confusion, and depression, all of which endarken the spirit. This is reinforced by the many indignities of prison life. “Can you imagine,” wrote one man, “having your cell searched and torn apart by a person whom you graduated high school with? ... having money missing from your inmate account and being unable to do anything? ... your release date comes and your case manager hasn’t filed the appropriate paper work? ... your family tells you they’ve sent pictures of the family reunion (but) the mail room lost them? ... etc.” The men speak of imprisonment as a descent to the underworld, a confrontation with death from which some, though not all, return.

The enlightened prison assists resurrection. It would be a citadel not just of punishment and deprivation, but of *hope*: “the feeling that what is wanted can be had or that events will turn out for the best.” Some men said hope in prison is an imperiled, almost irrational feeling, and men sunken so low are in need of encouragement lest they die off. The enlightened prison is one that supports, philosophically and practically, opportunities for positive change. The criminal past need not rule all. The future does not yet lie in ruins. It remains a realm of hope that can stimulate and organize present action. Several men told stories of better prisons they have been incarcerated in, or their own ability to rise above dismal surroundings and pursue education, reach out to family, do legal research and filings on cases, make progress toward parole, or simply grow in meditation, prayer, and wisdom. With hope, they felt, a man can maintain a healthy relation to time even when “serving time” of unimaginably long duration.

Of course, it mattered greatly, several said, to have someone who cares. This could be a mentor: an older prisoner, spiritual teacher, caseworker, or volunteer; a family member who stands by through thick and thin. Positive programs within the prison, recognition of accomplishment, possible paths to release — these also give hope (and will be discussed later in more depth). Hope is both the *product* of positive institutional and personal reforms, but also, in a curious way, their *precondition*. One or two men spoke of how, ideally, everyone — legislators, judges, wardens, correctional officers, parole boards, family, society at large, and inmates themselves — have to hold onto hope or prison is just a gate to hell.

Growth Versus Stasis

Hope is associated with possibilities for change and growth. Yet many prisons, according to these men, are monuments to *stasis*. Stasis is present in the architecture — imposing, constraining, inescapable — and the bureaucracy, unmovable in its exercise of power. The main “job” of the inmate at such institutions is simply to *stay put*. He/ she has been *put away*, in this cell, tier, prison, for a prescribed number of years, or even the entirety of a life. A hugely expansive *time* is thus contained in a severely restricted *space*. The result renders both time and space confining and immobile. This is compounded in a prison where there is little to do (except watch TV, eat, or walk around a bit), and little to see (the patch of sky out a cell-window, the dining hall, the dirt yard).

By contrast, the men described the enlightened prison as a place for *growth*. This is valued, supported, expected. After all, a human being is a living entity, and living entities must grow or die. They described the many forms this had taken in their lives, all of which and more would be available in the “enlightened” prison: GED tutoring for those developing high-school level competencies; higher education programs for those in love with learning, or seeking skill enhancement, employability, and special expertise; 12-step groups to help break addictive patterns; therapeutic groups, and environments like the Quaker-initiated “Alternatives to Violence Program,” which a number of my students participated in with great enthusiasm; a well-stocked library (individuals spoke of single books that had changed their lives); prisoner-run service groups that help others inside prison, or through outreach (to gang members and youth at risk), enhancing one’s own self-esteem and leadership-skills; classes in yoga and meditation; resources for the creative arts; access to computers; job training; work-release programs; the list can go on and on.

Like a university, the enlightened prison would embrace growth and change as central to its mission. As one man writes, even “architectural elements are very necessary for light to shine in. The design would be more like a college campus, plenty of windows, skylights, and flowers”

Realists that they are, many men in my class expressed skepticism about whether the prison system, and society at large, really wants to empower inmate growth. I wondered, do we have not only the vision, but also the money for such things? Given the roughly \$39,000 a year tab for housing a Maryland inmate, such programs and features, which can reduce recidivism, could prove cheap by comparison. A couple of men characterized our prison system — holding over two million Americans, mostly Black or Latino — as a contemporary form of enslavement. The goal is to keep the “slaves” under control, limited in intellect and ability, dead in spirit. More than a note of cynicism filtered into such conversations. The men had witnessed too much to believe that the “American dream” of rewarded self-improvement was operative inside penal institutions. Here, instead, they saw a shadow side of America, infected by racism, classism, and a focus on capitalist profit.

Nevertheless, these men refused to acquiesce to either passivity or bitterness. Many were living proof of the possibilities for multidimensional growth even while incarcerated. They have secured advanced degrees; written books, newspaper articles,

and publically performed plays; developed artistic skills; pursued religious study and meditation-practice; won statewide and even national awards; received fellowships and political support for large-scale community programs, etc. Yet, these men also know themselves to be “exceptions to the rule.” They described a system that tends to favor stasis, and thereby retrograde movement, as many inmates are made worse, not better — less employable, less self-sufficient, less able to negotiate the legitimate world — by their extended prison time.

Many inmates become complicit in this process. My students expressed frustration with some they live with: immature youth, distracted short-timers, or long-timers who have given up on their cases, or are narcotized by TV. One wrote to me of those who “affected by this inhuman and psychologically degrading environment” become “addicted to the dependency of institutionalization, selfishness and lack of responsibility.... They know it’s wrong and no good for them but they lack the psychological and emotional discipline and will to free themselves from its grasp.” The enlightened prison would do what it could to prevent or cure this institutional paralysis.

Recognition of Merit Versus Demerit

When positive changes occur they need to be recognized and rewarded. Several men spoke with great frustration about how this is not currently the case. You may have crafted a new understanding of self and world, or a building desire and ability to help others — but find yourself with no realistic way to act upon them. Or you pursue education, develop skills, achieve credentials, even take on leadership roles, but realize the prison administration, parole board, and governor couldn’t care less. There is *no recognition of merit*.

Such recognition typifies progress in the outside world: you accumulate accomplishments that build your college application, job resume, and the like. However, in the criminal justice system, I was told, assessment is largely reversed. You are defined not by your demonstrated merits, but by *demerits*. The “convict” first became one by virtue of demerits, a conviction for alleged criminal activities. The criminal justice system then continues this focus on demerits. Infractions — having an altercation with a guard, failing to show up for a count-out, being caught with contraband — are meticulously ticketed and punished. Such records can lead to loss of privileges for the men, lockup, administrative segregation, transfer to another institution, or extension of sentence.

But what, conversely, does it mean to “do well”? Primarily, to have a *lack of demerits*. Far from offering positive recognition, “good behavior” is redefined as the negative of a negative — one has *not* done something one is *not* supposed to do. According to the men, while personal accomplishments are noted, they count for relatively little in the mathematized calculation of their record. I thought about this. It’s as if the best a student in my Loyola class could hope for, even at the end of a semester of excellent papers and presentations, was a note in my grade book to the effect that she had not

been observed disrupting class. I can imagine how demoralizing this would be to my Loyola high-achievers.

My prison class likewise included a number of high-achievers. One of them, a lifer, handed me a 60-page, single-spaced resume filled with significant accomplishments (including the publication of well over 100 articles and letters) largely done while in prison. In an enlightened institution such work would not only be supported by the correctional infrastructure, but rewarded through the granting of commendations, privileges, “promotions” through the system, and accelerated release. Another man, one of the organizers of our class, showed me a “Merit-Based Movement” program he and others had helped develop, which involved a detailed calculation of merit-points earned by participation in educational, vocational, and addiction programming, and other noteworthy accomplishments. Not surprisingly, it was never implemented. The enlightened prison, however, would place emphasis on the development and honoring of strengths.

Individuality Versus Classification

The recognition of merit is an aspect of a broader issue, the struggle in prison to realize yourself as an *individual*. “Who am I, really, and who do I want to become?” seemed a central life-issue for the men (as perhaps for all of us). I heard people searching to articulate their unique identity, value, and destiny. A number of them talked about how their criminal behavior was rooted in not being true to themselves. “I was trying to fit in.” “I lost myself for a while.” “I was just a stupid kid.” Without a sense of positive identity you can end up submerging yourself in gang-affiliations, or acting out in powerful but pathological ways.

How to find yourself in a healthy fashion? The men talked about the importance — and in today’s overcrowded and noisy prisons, the rarity — of solitude and privacy. “I find my peace,” one writes, “early in the morning, when mostly everyone is asleep. There is no loud noise, the quietness in the air is so beautiful, calming and peaceful.” Time to think, remember, dream, return to your authentic self. Yet we also discover who we are by what others reflect back. The enlightened prison would be a place that affirms the positive individuality of those it houses.

In the prison today, the individual is viewed primarily as a member of an unsavory class. You arrived at prison by being convicted of an act classified as a criminal offense, which then comes to constitute your identity. You have not just been found guilty of a crime; you are a *drug-dealer, murderer, thief, or rapist* — a representative of a class of people (or, some would think, of sub-human predators). All the unique and positive aspects of your history and character are submerged in this *class*-ification.

Prison is a place that ceaselessly reinforces a class identity. Your right to dress as an individual is taken away: in Maryland you are issued a uniform that both labels you as different from those in the outer world, and makes you the same, *uniform*, with other convicts. Your name is replaced with a number.

In class, the men also brought up a different and, for them, especially hurtful and counterproductive form of classification: the punishment of entire groups for the infraction of a single person. One inmate stabs another and the whole prison is placed on lockdown. Someone violates a work-release program and commits a widely publicized crime — end of the program. A large number of men who were making good use of work-release in Maryland, laboring hard at their jobs and integrating well with the outside world, were all suddenly remanded to prison. Even the *possibility* of a single, high-profile crime plagues politicians worried about re-election. They decide that no lifers will be paroled on their watch, no matter what the individual's accomplishments, or the positive recommendation of the parole board. This is the position taken since the early 1990s by a number of Maryland governors, one of the very few states in the country where the governor has had to personally approve every such parole. One of these, ex-Governor Glendening, has now admitted that his actions “made the parole process much more political than it should be and that he would ‘not have a problem’ with a change in state law to remove the governor from that process” (Rodricks, 2011). Again, such one-size-fits-all policies treat the individual simply as a member of a class. He/ she can be punished after the fact, or in advance, for the actions of any other class-member.

The enlightened prison treats each person as an individual. S/ he is not simply categorized according to crime, sentence, addiction, race, or socioeconomic status. This notion became obvious as I got to know the individuals taking my course: this one a painter, that one a student of contemporary physics, another an avid meditator, or a Washington Redskins fan. I heard some of their complex family histories, involving a mother who had held the family together in tough times or the traumatic death of a brother in the young man's arms. One person had previously been a criminal lawyer, another a physician, a third had run a business selling jet skis. The enlightened prison is an institution that illuminates, even celebrates, the complex humanity and individuality of its residents.

Often the men spoke of the key role of personal relationships in preserving a sense of self. One wrote of a case manager who was clear and respectful in her communications: “I made sure that I was able to see and converse with Ms. Mowan weekly, and the more I spoke with her, the less burdensome my sentence became.” Another recommended having correctional officers assigned to a single tier, rather than constantly transferred from one to another; now they never get to know the inmates as people, and don't treat them as such. The value of personal identification was clearly expressed by a man writing of his graduation from a college extension program (in the days before Pell Grant tuition funding was withdrawn from inmates):

It was not a great moment because I graduated with honors. It was not a great moment because I gave a speech. It was a great moment because my son, Rashaun, was there. He was 11 years old, and it was his first opportunity to see me in a positive way. It was the first time that I didn't feel like a prisoner who only had a few minutes left on his visit to talk to his son, or the drug dealer convicted of murder. I was his father the valedictorian who was preparing to give a speech. I could see in his eyes that he was proud of me. And that was a great feeling that I will never forget.

Over years of teaching inside this prison I have witnessed men honoring one another's individuality through appreciative comments, gestures of friendship, mutual applause and fist-bumps at the graduation ceremony with which we end each semester. A prison must have hierarchy and security, but in an enlightened prison this recognition of the individual would also pervade the organizational structure, and be demonstrated by the warden, administrative chiefs, correctional officers, case managers, volunteers, parole board, and the family and friends whom the prison would make welcome. The emphasis in such an institution is not only on taking away — your freedom, possessions, clothes, name — but on helping to give back a sense of positive identity.

For some this is the recovery of an earlier, lost self to the throes, for example, of addiction. For others, it may be an entirely new experience. "I hate the term 'rehabilitation'," said one of the men. "It implies I'm recovering something I used to have. But I never had it to begin with." The sense of healthy individuality is a developmental challenge. Not everyone is ready for it: the men in my class were quick to acknowledge that many in JCI were mired in violence or ignorance and uninterested in change. But the enlightened prison would invite a developmental process, with the individual held responsible for follow-through.

Community Versus Isolation

As the above discussion suggests, healthy individuals are formed and recognized within healthy *community*. Obviously, such is often lacking, or actively discouraged, in prisons. Convicts are removed from family, friends, and the community in which they reside, which they have "offended." They are thrown together, often in overcrowded and insecure conditions, with hundreds of other men who themselves have committed anti-social acts. Prison administrators discourage close ties between guards and inmates, for such ties can compromise command and security. So, too, close ties among inmates may be deterred. They can lead, in the eyes of authorities, to the forming of power blocs and conspiracies. Men have told me that a prisoner with too many friends or too much power may simply be transferred to another penitentiary. "Diesel therapy," one prisoner called it. Then, too, the whole spirit of penal institutions and their members can undermine attempts at community. Anger, fear, aggression, distrust are a pervasive element among inmates and staff given their personal histories, current experiences, and the institutional mission. Several men voiced contempt for the correctional officers for treating them with contempt. Thus the circle turns.

"Hell is other people," says a character in Jean-Paul Sartre's *No Exit* (1989, p. 45). To spend long years in an overstuffed prison, with two men crammed into a cell barely adequate for one, constant noise echoing down the tier, no hope of escape, without friends to lighten the burden, this would be hell indeed. Paradoxically, this overcrowding can also lead to a spirit of *isolation*. Forgotten by the larger world, looked down on by prison authorities, and having to fight for survival with other inmates, each person stands alone. "The jungle's creed reads; the strong must feed off any prey at

hand,” one man wrote. “Prison is a jungle. It’s a matter of do or die.” As mentioned above, this stark aloneness is not to be confused with restorative “solitude.” Quite the converse: When you can never get away from others, never feel safe and quiet, you seek simple isolation.

What encouraged me, though, was the extent of positive community among the men despite all these impediments. This wasn’t the false community of clinging to a violent gang, or a powerful exploiter/ protector for security. This was a community of mutual respect and affection: men in the class had known each other in some cases for decades, struggled and worked side-by-side in harsh conditions, and had bonded through the experience.

The enlightened prison seeks to support such community. Opportunities for solitude would be complemented by activities with and for others. Again, we return to the importance of providing classes, groups, and programs. There are also curricula that directly enhance community-building and defuse threats to its existence. One of my inmate class-members writes of the Alternatives to Violence Program used in JCI, and nation-wide:

Some inmates here are like a time bomb, which can explode at any time and without any warning, resulting in a violent or deadly situation in a fraction of a second. A good, alert, open minded and wise inmate who utilizes the AVP tools is like an experienced member of a bomb squad who dismantles a bomb before it explodes, preventing death and destruction. I believe we must be visionaries, open-minded and proactive.

He contends that, due in part to such programs, violence in JCI has declined. The enlightened prison need not compromise security: it can and should be a *safer* prison for inmates and correctional officers alike.

This is especially true insofar as the latter are included in the sense of community. This may seem naïve, or even dangerous — the guards are there to *guard*, not to fraternize and thereby “let down their guard.” But they too have to live within this tightly wound world. They, too, need to feel and be more than just “the enemy.” One inmate spoke of an enlightened warden who created an annual charity-run in which correctional officers and inmates had to participate together. This began to break down the barriers of hostility that had pervaded the institution.

However high the walls and razor wire, several men also spoke of the crucial nature of contact with those outside. A friend or family member who kept in touch, sent a package, came to visit, held a place in their heart, could make all the difference. So, too, volunteers who enter to share their skills; or having access to the Internet so you can learn what’s happening in the world and ready yourself to participate in it; work-release programs that allow you to enter it directly, reclaiming a public identity — the enlightened prison supports such visits and ventures. It is not solely about creating barriers — locked cells, segregated tiers, towering walls — but about assisting people to surmount the barriers that keep them in isolation. To me, and I think *us*, that is what our class, and this essay are all about: speaking with and to others across all of the walls.

Conclusion

The *Conference of the Birds* is a 12th century Sufi allegorical poem by the Persian author Farid ud-Din Attar. The plot is nicely summarized by the Argentinian writer, Jorge Luis-Borges:

The faraway king of the birds, the Simurg, drops an exquisite feather in the middle of China; weary of their ancient anarchy, the birds determine to find it. They know that their king's name means "Thirty Birds." They know that his royal palace stands on the Kaf, the circular mountain, which surrounds the earth. They undertake the almost infinite adventure. They fly over seven valleys, over seven seas; the next-to-the-last one is called Vertigo; the last, Annihilation. Many of the pilgrims desert; others perish. Thirty of them, purified by their labors, set foot upon the mountain of the Simurg. At last they contemplate it: they perceive that *they* are the Simurg, and that the Simurg is each one of them and all of them. (1994, p. 43)

The "enlightened prison" is like the Simurg — an ideal that is sought for, but seems far away, almost impossible to reach. Why even discuss and write about it in our class? Many inmates have "deserted," others "perished," caught in the "vertigo" and "annihilation" of inner-city streets and nihilistic prisons; yet there are those who labor on in their quest. "They undertake the almost infinite adventure" of life still available even to a lifer. Seeking the enlightened prison, they catch a glimmer of it as a reality, here-and-now.

In our class discussion, I experienced among the men the very things of which they spoke: *hope* for a future still alive and beckoning; a dedication to *growth* in mind and spirit; the *recognition of merit* — their own and that of others as we listened respectfully, argued, laughed, and on the last day of class, shared cake and applause, celebrating both our *individuality* and *community*.

We were 30 in our class, looking for the Simurg, the "thirty birds." We discovered that for now we *are* the Simurg. Wherever people search within, and with others, for the "enlightened prison," right there and then it begins to manifest.

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