

## **Getting Liberated at Green Haven Prison**

The task is not to feel better. The task is ownership.  
The goal is truth for its own redemptive sake...The task is not about comfort, it  
is about truth, about wholeness and holiness. Restoration.  
- Victoria Safford

Last summer I worked as a volunteer professor of English at the Green Haven Correctional Facility, a maximum- security prison located a little north and east of Fishkill in a town called Stormville. I taught freshman English Composition to a class of 21 incarcerated men for eight weeks.

A couple of friends from my yoga class help run the program, which serves several area prisons and provides a year of college- level courses that can be transferred when the men are released. They had asked me to teach before, so when this class opened up late in the spring, I said yes.

It looked like a piece of cake. I have been either a student or a teacher of English and writing for almost half of my life. I was teaching freshmen composition at Westchester Community College when I was called to ministry ten years ago, and I miss teaching. Compared to working with a congregation, college teaching has an elegant simplicity and clarity. Everybody knows what to do; the lines of authority are clear; the classes have a beginning, a middle, and an end. So I thought teaching this writing course in the prison would be a nice change of pace.

Let me tell you what it's like to go into the Green Haven Correctional Facility. From the road it looks like a giant concrete bunker, several stories high, with guard towers at intervals along the face of the wall. When you go inside the gate house, you leave your purse and everything except what you need to teach in the trunk of your car so they won't have to search all your stuff. You wear a sports bra so your

underwear doesn't set off the metal detector because if it does then you will have to submit to a wand sweep to locate the source of the metal. You take off your shoes. You open your briefcase and answer questions about its contents.

If you pass the inspection at the gate, your hand is stamped and you are permitted to enter the facility itself. You stand in front of a solid metal door and the officer who is controlling the door opens it, allowing you to enter a small room with another gate made of bars on the far side. The first door closes. You put your hand under the light to show the officer that you have a stamp. Then he opens the second door, the one with the bars, and you can go into a small courtyard and up the steps to the foyer where visitors are received.

Usually at this point you wait because it's evening and no one is working at the reception desk. Sooner or later, an officer will come to sign you in and give you a visitor's pass to wear. Then another officer will come, usually after another wait, to escort you to the classroom. It's a long walk, maybe ten minutes at a brisk pace, down a series of long concrete hallways, through a total of eight more checkpoints where the heavy metal gates made of bars open in front of you, close behind you, then open in front of you.

Sometimes groups of prisoners walking to their assignments will pass you in the halls. They stay on the other side of the yellow line that runs up the middle of the walk. The prisoners wear dark green pants and shirts. They are usually quiet, subdued. Almost all the prisoners are people of color, mostly African Americans. Almost all of the guards are white.

If your class is at 6:30, you will need to be at the gatehouse at 5:30 to get to class on time. When you finally get there, some of your students may be missing because the officer in charge would not let them leave their cells to come to class.

Are you scared yet?

People ask if I was ever afraid in the prison, and the answer is yes. I was afraid from the time I went into the gate house until I got to the classroom. No one ever threatened me in any way, but the place is designed to be intimidating and to impress on you that you are powerless. I felt powerless and fearful in the prison, from the time I came in until I reached the classroom. Then I felt safe.

Inside the classroom, sitting in those beige chairs with a small writing desk on one arm, were my students, men ranging in age from twenty- five to fifty. They are all people of color, African American and Latino. They are all convicted felons. The first night of class, I asked them to fill out an index card with some basic information and then to turn the card over and answer this question: Why are you here? There was a pause, and one of the men raised his hand and asked me to clarify. Did I want to know why they were incarcerated or was I asking about the course?

“I don’t care what got you into this prison,” I said. “I just want to know why you’re here in this room.”

[Read some of their answers]

The thing about teaching writing that I have always loved is that people discover things about themselves when they write, and they become willing and able to share some of these things with the professor. I believe that the best writing comes when students are writing about things they care about deeply. So my students wrote about learning to read and about their school experiences. All of them had a high school or GED diploma, and some of them had not been in a classroom in thirty years. They wrote about their first encounters with white people and about racism. They wrote about identity and language. They wrote about freedom. They wrote about risk- taking and living dangerously.

And none of it was a piece of cake. I had seriously miscalculated my summer. For one thing, I had completely forgotten how long it takes me to correct a student paper. Somewhere between 15 and 20 minutes a

piece. So you do the math. At one point when they were doing revisions of multiple assignments, I brought home 73 papers. My husband was not happy. He had expected to have some time to play with me over the summer. I had promised him I would get to some projects in the house that were long overdue. None of that happened.

For about half the summer I kept thinking I was going to get caught up, that it was somehow going to go faster, and by then I was getting to know the men and falling in love with the work, and at some point, I just accepted the fact that I was going to spend my summer at the Green Haven prison, and I surrendered.

[Read from “Give Yourself Up” sermon by the Rev. Kim K. Crawford Harvie, minister at the Arlington Street UU Church in Boston – true story about a police action in Oakland, CA, with an armed suspect besieged in his home. Police use tear gas, they and the crowd chant, “Please come out and give yourself up.” Gas clears, and they discover the suspect standing outside in the crowd chanting, “Please come out and give yourself up.”]

What I learned in prison: convicted felons are just like everybody else; prisons are dehumanizing, disempowering, unjust institutions; prisons are racist; I can’t understand another person’s situation until I can walk in his shoes; prisons are terrible places where the incarcerated and the guards act out and act on the racism that still runs this country; there is a direct line from chattel slavery to the prison industrial complex; freedom comes from forgiveness.

So long as we turn our faces from the poor and the underprivileged and the people of color in this country we will never have peace not will we have justice. Eldridge Cleaver once said, “If I am not safe to walk down the street, then you are not safe to walk down the street.”

Freedom is a great gift. Taking away a person’s freedom is a terrible punishment.

Most important thing I learned: you can't really understand something unless you have a first-hand experience with it. So I understood that prisons are racist institutions and our justice is unevenly administered—as a good liberal, I knew these things in my head for a long time—it's a totally different thing to experience this inside a prison. To see the long rows of black men, to see a black man chained, and to see the white guards with their guns and their clubs, to hear a young, anxious white man yelling at a group of black men twice his age to be quiet, to stop making noise.

Another thing I learned: it's better to do something than to do nothing. I hate prisons. What can I do? I can go back to Green Haven next summer and teach 21 more incarcerated men how to express themselves better on paper. I can accept my piece of the responsibility that Abraham Joshua Heschel was talking about when he said, "Some are guilty but all are responsible."

We who believe in freedom cannot rest. We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes. On this Yom Kippur, in these High Holy Days, I want to come before my students in the Green Haven prison and say I am sorry you are the victim of a racist society and a government that traffics in fear. I want to be free, and I want you to be free, and we can't get there without each other. Because you represent the consequences of a racism from which I have benefited my whole life.

Please come out and give yourself up.

Copyright 2006

By the Rev. Dawn Sangrey

Preached in Mohegan Lake, NY

For the 4<sup>th</sup> Unitarian Society

October 1, 2006