

Mercy, Hope, Freedom, Power: The Green Haven Story

I believe love will prevail and peace will rule the earth
only when we can bring ourselves to be fully, openly present
to the pain that violence causes...

-Elizabeth Tarbox

Green Haven Correctional Facility is in rural Dutchess County in upstate New York. The prison complex is set up on a little rise surrounded by grassy fields. It looks like a giant concrete bunker or a primitive castle under siege: all you can see from the road is a huge brown stucco wall with guard towers at intervals along the face, no windows. Nobody could get out of there, you think.

It's farming country. The prison is surrounded by corn fields, meadows knee-deep in fragrant grass, birdsong, flocks of turkeys, herds of white-tail deer. This year a fat black and white skunk was a regular visitor around the place. A couple of us volunteers first spotted it shambling along the perimeter on the outside of the forty-foot-high wall that surrounds the place, and then later I saw the skunk a couple of times on the inside of the wall, so it must have dug a hole

to get in. Maybe it lives on the grounds someplace, I don't know.

The class I was teaching began a little after six o'clock in the evening and ended at 8:30, which is dusk in midsummer, so I emerged from the prison after class just as the light was leaving. Sometime I saw the moon rising over the hills. In the lawn that slopes down to the road in front of the parking lots, hundreds of fireflies pulsed and flickered.

Coming out, the contrast is disorienting. Inside all is institutional drab and intentional ugliness, harsh fluorescent lights, long lines of men in green uniforms returning to their cells for the night; chaos contained, the tension of enforced silence, sadness, rage, despair. Outside it is quiet, peaceful and calm; the sunset lingers across the wide sky, the night air blooms with soft sounds, soft lights.

Twice a week for six weeks last summer I went into the Green Haven prison, through the twelve check points with the barred gates that slide away to let you pass and then close behind you. I walked with the officer who was escorting me through long concrete corridors to the far end of the

prison for my class in Building 12, and two hours later when the class was over, my escort and I walked back through all the bars that open and close, open and close, to the gate house where I turned in my volunteer's badge and said good night to the officer on the gate.

I never ran, but once I left the classroom all I wanted to do was walk out the last door and down the stairs to my car and head for home. What I felt coming out of the gate house every time was relief, relief and gratitude. Unlike the men in my class and the other two thousand inmates at the Green Haven prison, I am a free person. I get to go home after my class. And by the end of the night, I couldn't wait to get out of there.

An estimated 2,393,232 people are incarcerated today in prisons and jails in the United States of America (Prisonsucks.com). According to the Pew Center on the States, in a 2008 study, more than one in every hundred adults in the US is in jail or in prison. Their care costs state governments \$50 billion a year along with another \$5 billion from the federal government. Five of our states spend more

on prisons than they do on education. The US leads the world both in actual numbers and in the percent of total residents incarcerated, so we have more of our people behind bars than China, Iraq, Iran, North Korea, you name it (*Washington Post*, Feb. 29, 2008, page A01).

And “incarceration is not an equal opportunity punishment.”

In 2006, white males were incarcerated at the rate of 736 per 100,000, Latino males at the rate of 1,862 per 100,000, and Blacks at the rate of 4,789 per 100,000. Among young men ages 25 to 29 the disparities are even greater: 1,685 for whites; 3,912 for Latinos, and 11,695 for Blacks. More than eleven percent of all the young Black men in this country are in jail or prison (Prisonsucks.com).

In the four years I have been teaching at Green Haven, in classes of about 20 students, I have had three white guys. Almost all my students, almost all the inmates at Green Haven, are people of color, mostly Black. Almost all the guards are white.

I volunteer at Green Haven for a program called Rising Hope, which offers one year of college-level education to men in prison. Rising Hope was founded in 1995, the same year that New York State eliminated its support for college education in prison, following the lead of Congress, which had withdrawn federal funding the year before. Check out the Rising Hope website—it's risinghopeinc.org. Why do we care about educating prisoners?

We care because the lack of quality education is one of the major causes of criminal activity. When neighborhoods are falling apart, schools are under-funded, and there is little hope of making a living, many young people make horrendous mistakes with their lives and end up behind bars. If we don't educate them while they are incarcerated, the chances are very great that they will make similar mistakes and revert to criminal activity after release. But if we can give them the educational and spiritual tools they need to make better life choices and find meaningful work, they will be able to build a law-abiding career for themselves and a better life for their families and communities (risinghopeinc.org).

“An estimated forty percent of state prison inmates cannot read...The more education offenders receive, the lower their rates of recidivism are” (ibid).

According to an Open Society Institute 1997 study, “prison-based education is the single most effective tool for lowering recidivism.” Inmates who receive some post-secondary education had recidivism rates 40% lower than a control group with no post-secondary education; the inmates who earned a Bachelor’s degree had a 13% recidivism rate; those who achieved a Master’s degree had a 1% rate. “The overall nationwide recidivism rate after three years is 67%!” (Drew Carberry, May 21, 2008, Prevention Works http://ncpc.typepad.com/prevention_works_blog/2008/05/prison-based-ed.html).

I am impressed by these studies, and I believe them because I have seen the transformation that education can bring with my own eyes. But this is not the only reason I teach at the Green Haven prison.

Working at Green Haven has been an education for me. I will never be able to look at a prison anywhere in the same

way again. I have learned to treasure my freedom. I have learned that there is a direct line between chattel slavery and the prison industrial complex.

I have learned that hope and power can be created in a learning community where students grow from trusting no one including themselves to trusting and listening to and arguing with and accepting each other. I have seen the power of love manifest in these men.

I have come to understand that none of us is free until all of us are free. We are, as Dr. King said, “caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere” (*SLT #584*). “If I am not safe to walk down the street,” Eldridge Cleaver said, “then you are not safe to walk down the street.”

I have learned that mercy, like acceptance and trust, is a two-way street. The men in my classes had mercy on me, a well-meaning but ignorant white woman of privilege, and allowed me to come into their midst and teach them what I know and helped me to understand what I don't know, which

is what it is like to be in their situation and to suffer their reality. We talked about authority and how you get it, about authenticity and why you have it. I have the authority to teach the five-paragraph essay. They have the authority to write about being in prison.

We spent several classes this summer talking about Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and how it was that Professor Gates was arrested in his own home in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and what I learned was how enraging such a situation is, and how impossible it can be to see the other perspectives in that story. My class took mercy on me and told me how it was for them.

And so my education is deepened and enriched. But this is not the only reason I teach at Green Haven either.

Why have I spent the last four summers writing lesson plans and grading papers and driving to Green Haven and teaching my class in English Composition? Because I believe it is possible for people to change. I believe it is possible for me to change. I believe it is possible for you to change. We

Unitarian Universalists are in the transformation business, that is what we do.

And I have been changed.

And it has been a privilege and a blessing. So I want you to have an experience like this. I believe that wherever we can encounter the poor, the hungry, the sick, the needy, the widow, the orphan, the prisoner—these human beings offer us the potential for transformation. I want you to become a pen pal for a prisoner through the prison ministry of the Church of the Larger Fellowship. I want you to go to Jan Peek, the homeless shelter in Peekskill, and dish out the food and talk to the people. I want you to go on the Midnight Run. There are hundreds of opportunities right here in our own neighborhoods for this kind of transformation.

It's good and important for us to give money to help those who have less than we do and to talk about the important social-justice issues of the day, but I have to tell you there is nothing as effective for transformation as a first-hand encounter on the ground with some people who need your help.

Not do goodism. Do goodism is a token gesture designed to make you feel better about yourself (thanks to the Rev. Mark Morrison-Reid, who made this point at the General Assembly address he gave in Salt Lake City this summer). It does not make any real impact on the people you say you are trying to help, and it does not make any real impact on you. It is safe, and because it is safe, it is not transformative.

And please, please, don't say, "Well, it's all very well for Rev. Dawn Sangrey to do this kind of good work. After all, she's the minister." I say to you that we are all ministers and that healing the broken world is our ministry. Not the whole world, but the part we can. And I say that it is as much your ministry as it is mine. We are need to be transformed.

You can give money to Rising Hope, Inc. to support their prison ministry, and I hope you will, but I doubt that writing the check will transform you.

Abraham Joshua Herschel said, "Some of us are guilty but all of us are responsible." How can we be responsible in this world? With all the pain and suffering and need in this

world, what can an individual person, an individual congregation, an individual community of faith do? We can set our sights on transformation.

And that's the test. If the good you do changes you, educates you, deepens your understanding of yourself and the reality of the world around you, if it makes the kind of difference in your life where you sometimes can't sleep because you're thinking about it, then it probably has the potential for transformation.

The popular culture says: put yourself first; grab everything you can because your deepest happiness comes from things. The political culture says criminals are evil and have to be punished for a long time. Unitarian Universalism teaches us that our deepest happiness comes from helping other people. It teaches us that all people are worthy and that we are all connected. Our faith says that everything is tied to everything else. We are all in this together

Mr. LaBoy said it well, "When I starve someone, I starve myself. When I deny someone—of knowledge, of hope, of mercy—I deny myself. I cannot sever myself from you with

impunity! We are all connected...I need your help...You need my help (Hector LaBoy, Valedictory Speech, Rising Hope graduation ceremony, June 16, 2009).

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