Lessons Learned about Working with Men: A Prison Memoir

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From the very beginning of my career as a social worker, I have believed that the fullest and most effective use of self requires an integration of personal, professional, and spiritual–political values and beliefs into a framework that respects their dialectical tensions while striving for wholeness. In this very personal memoir, I tell of such a period in my life. The setting is a maximum-security prison. I learned about mutuality, transparence, risk taking, openness, and vulnerability from men in the prison: inmates, the warden, and other prison staff. The lessons I learned have served as ground and guide for my subsequent psychotherapy practice with men, my own relational growth, and my commitment to the struggle for gender equality and social justice.

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The last few chords of Dylan's *The Times They Are A'Changing* were still vibrating in the air. I hit the stop button on the cassette player, and some 30 bemused, confused and a few angry correctional officers, social workers, administrators, cooks, and clerks at Foothills Correctional Institution got ready to end another training session with the professor from the university—me. It was early in the 1970s, and a reform-oriented correctional administration had appointed the first black warden in the history of the state. I had also been taken on as consultant and staff trainer as part of the effort to restructure and humanize this maximum-security institution. Later, as we deepened our relationship, Superintendent (his official title) Henry broadened my role to include administration–inmate liaison and trouble shooter.

The whole situation was a bit bizarre—I felt the ghosts of generations of tough (mostly white) security-minded officers wailing in the walls as Superintendent Ed Henry, a few years older than myself, and I walked down the main corridor together on my first visit to the prison. The fact that I was decked out in my finest hippie splendor added to the effect: beads, leather vest, laceless low-cut sneakers, long hair, and a red bandanna. My arrogance was matched only by my ignorance, and both were balanced by my innocence. I had done prison work previously in Wisconsin, but always within a traditional social work service structure and never with the kind of administrative entry and backing for system change as at Foothills.

I could say much about the social function of prisons—that is, in defining and justifying the

"otherness" on which cultural and socioeconomic hierarchy is based. Men with low socioeconomic status who fill our prisons, these days overwhelmingly black and Latino, are necessary for the maintenance of white male entitlement. The racial and socioeconomic disparity in apprehension, adjudication, and sentencing helps to justify hierarchy and privilege for the rest of us. And, these days, in a time of conservatism and economic plenty, to justify the wholesale neglect of housing, job, and public health programs for either the inner-city or the hardscrabble impoverished rural areas. I also could speak of the vital role prisons play in small-town economic life, how they are a part of a multimillion-dollar correctional industry, of theories of rehabilitation and other related matters. As I rewrite this article, in 2000, prisons are again very much in the headlines. We note that more black young men are incarcerated than are in college. We also observe how prison construction and management have become a growth industry, attracting capital from seemingly unrelated sources (for example, American Express) and becoming privatized—for profit undertakings.

In this article, however, I want to focus on what I learned about men together with other men, under conditions so oppressive and brutal, you would expect to find the worst kinds of male aggression, dominance, and exploitation. There was that, in abundance. What is more important is how much I learned of the positive and affirming ways so many men found to be with each other even under such conditions. I learned lessons about manhood that shook and shaped me then and provided the ground for much of my subsequent life work and personal development.

The Institution—Foothills

Foothills, pre-Henry, exemplified an approach to prison management that was medieval, brutal, and totalitarian. In the words of a former administrator: "Discipline is peremptory, privileges are a matter of grace." An inmate brought up for a disciplinary infraction might be ordered to stand with his back to the panel of officers hearing his case with his face pressed to the wall. If he moved his head to either side, he might be cuffed on the side of his head. Visitors were not allowed any physical contact with inmates; they sat across from each other with a wire mesh grill in between. Racism was rampant everywhere and affected both inmates and staff. There was a sizeable contingent of very competent black officers. Some of the officers had served for 20 years. None of them had ever achieved a rank higher than sergeant in a hierarchy that included positions such as lieutenant, captain, major, and so forth. Black Muslims had been actively organizing their religious observances themselves in U.S. prisons for a decade or more, in Foothills as elsewhere. They were refused the right of religious observance, and it was only after several court cases that they finally were recognized as a legitimate religious group.

If the prison system was unsparing for inmates, it was no more forgiving for staff. There was one innocuous white guard in his mid-50s, nicknamed "Strawberry Sam," who had served for 30 years. Indeed his name was Sam, but the "Strawberry" part came from one of the first days on the job when he was told to take canteen orders on the cell block. A bunch of inmates ordered ice cream, which this poor fellow procured for them. Only then was he told that his wages would be docked because such an order was against the rules. The other guards on duty as well as the inmates knew this at the time but let him fall into the trap. This poor guy had labored under that nickname all these years; he still winced and cast his eyes down when called by that name. What a humiliating and shaming way for a man to have to spend his working life! Most of the white officers were, like Sam, simple country guys from an impoverished rural background, trying to make a living at a steady civil service job. Yes, many were racist, and some were brutal; all of them were trying to survive.

Reform and Change

Ed Henry had vision, courage, and intelligence. He set right to work to change many of the policies and practices described. He also had a presence that quickly won regard and respect from even the old-timers at the prison.

One event that reverberated through the prison and earned Henry the greatest credits

occurred when a prisoner, in the main hall, in the hearing of other prisoners and various staff, called him a "m——r f——r." The deputy warden, Tom, a huge and very tough guy who had been there for decades, gave a signal and moved with several officers to administer a beating to the man. Henry put a gentle hand on Tom's arm and said words to the effect, "I don't want any man ever beaten on my account—besides, maybe he really does believe that's what I am, and I don't think it's right to punish a man for his beliefs." The deputy warden, the inmate, and everyone within hearing were left speechless as Ed continued on his jaunty way with his warm and slightly ironic smile intact.

As Warden Henry's changes took hold, there was a renaissance of creativity and cooperation in the prison. Inmates, officers, and other staff as well, who had labored quietly for years in behalf of constructive programs and decent relationships, were identified, supported, and rewarded. Inmates Fred Pissano and Antoine Samuels formed their inmate-run paralegal law clinic, which came to be recognized for its excellence in legal circles beyond the prison. Inmate Victor Jones developed more openly a number of consciousness-raising groups geared to helping young, angry black prisoners substitute dialogue for fratricidal violence. Aaron, a black officer in his late forties who could alone command a mess hall of 300 men by virtue of the kind of respect and integrity he conveyed, was promoted and given a staff-training role. Other officers who had labored under a Jim Crow system for years also emerged in creative leadership roles. And many white officers as well gave support.

It is important to record the fact that many of the officers, black and white, were decent, humane, and generous human beings doing their best at a difficult job. One of my mentors was Jim Sergeant, a white officer in his 40s who also held the rank of sergeant. Everyone, including him, had fun with this. He was well regarded by the inmates. He played it straight, was fair, wise, and incorruptible. He also was funny as hell. Staff or other inmates would direct a new inmate with a question to ask the "Sergeant." When so addressed, Ed would put on a scowl and say, "Watch it, don't get personal with me, call me by my rank!" The befuddled inmate would then say, "Well, uh, OK, Sergeant." Ed would then smile and say: "That's better!" That initiation had more fun than bite in it. Actually, if he thought the inmate could handle it, he might say, "You know, I have a name as well as a rank." The inmate by then would usually figure it out and say, with a laugh, "OK, Sergeant Sergeant." Jim used humor to establish mutuality and defuse the authority intrinsic in his position and to secure the willing cooperation of the inmates. I think one reason he was so well liked was the absence of self-serving ego or malice in his humor.

Previously, requests from prisoners for alleviation of even a modest kind were ignored with contempt. In our second year we developed the first graduate social work intern program in any of the state's correctional facilities, consisting of four student interns whom I supervised. One intern became aware of how resentful men in one dining area were that coffee was always served with milk mixed in. As we all know, it is the little things that can get to you! This had gone on for years, but now this intern was able to take a petition to the warden who was receptive. From then on coffee was served with milk on the side.

This was more than an indicator of Ed Henry's openness. It also spoke to a basic principle—that of redress of grievances and the participation by the governed in their own affairs. Warden Henry did not simply issue an edict. He went into the dining hall and interviewed several prisoners himself on the subject. He also took care to meet with the dining room stewards, who, like Aaron, had the responsibility for organizing mealtime, to make sure they felt acknowledged and included.

The petition event caused considerable controversy on higher levels in the state correctional bureaucracy, including several meetings and memoranda. I remember the dean at the School of Social Work nervously asking me if I was making trouble. Given the hierarchical structure of the school, I could see where the idea of participatory democracy would be troublesome to her. Warden Ed Henry stood by that principle and also with the student and me, as his supervisor.

He also planted several trees in a fenced-in compound, easily visible to all the men on the yard. He relaxed visiting rules. Sometimes the visiting room did get a bit steamy, but the consensus was that no harm was done as lovers and married folks embraced and kissed during visiting hours. He also developed a community relations program, which brought interested people into the prison. He also arranged for weekend furloughs, which provided inmates with opportunities to taste a bit of freedom outside the walls.

In the second year he and I were able to organize a graduate social work course, which met on alternate weeks at the prison and at the university with a number of prisoners and officers as noncredit students. The sessions at the School of Social Work were wonderful social events. Prisoner's families would join the class sessions, often bringing picnics to share with all. It reminded me of a Joan Baez song that had the refrain "We'll tear down the prison walls."

He was an unafraid man, able to look truth in its face. Several inmates had complained that a particularly "effeminate" flamboyant gay inmate on their cell block was teasing and enticing them. Rather than dismissing their complaint, Ed went on to the block and observed the situation. I asked him what happened. Ed laughed and said he thought the gay prisoner was actually "kinda cute" and told the men he thought so. He arranged to have the two complainers housed elsewhere, which seemed to take care of the situation.

This action may have sounded routine, maybe trivial, but it was not. Tom, the deputy warden, told me of a time not that long ago when two inmates had thrown an officer off a catwalk to the cement floor 20 feet below, injuring him severely, in their attempt to rape another prisoner.

The spirit of cooperation released by Warden Henry received its most profound test early in his first year. It was during this time that the Attica uprising was quelled with the loss of many lives, both inmates and guards. Attica was a maximum-security prison in the New York State system. There was a prisoner rebellion. Guards were taken as hostages. After several days of impasse in the negotiations, the governor, Nelson Rockefeller, ordered an armed response from the state police. State troopers killed more than 30 prisoners and correctional officer hostages in the hail of gunfire as they took control of the prison from the inmates.

The tension in the prison was tangible as the news spread. Warden Henry was urged to lock the men in their cells and curtail all special programs, classes, therapy, and so forth. While he studied the situation, I received word that one of the inmates I had gotten close to, Antoine Samuels, wanted to see me. When I got to his cell, he gave me a note for the warden. In it he recommended that the warden announce over the prison speaker system that a fund was being established for the families of the Attica victims, both guards and inmates. Antoine had been busy talking up this idea and was sure it would get widespread support. Warden Henry did just that. The prison community rallied together, contributions came from staff and inmates alike, and the tension dissipated. Restrictions were not imposed, the liberalization continued.

I was an enthusiastic and, I hope, effective participant in this change process.

However, from the beginning I found that my contribution would be enhanced by my willingness to be a student as well as a teacher, a trainee as well as a trainer.

Lesson One: Vulnerability, Mutuality, Willingness to Learn from Clients

My deepest initiation and first lessons came early on the prison yard. Consider for a moment, a vast expanse of hard packed earth, not a flower, a tree, or a blade of grass anywhere. Although the prison was located in the country, the walls had been built so high that they blotted out anything but the sky. There were bleachers on one side by an athletic field and some weightlifting equipment, but mostly just space, with men moving or standing around in twosomes or small groups. When I checked with the warden to get permission, I did not know I was the first "civilian" to go out on the yard. The specialized staff (teachers, counselors, medical personnel, and so forth) stayed put, and the inmates came to them. When Warden Henry told me to go ahead, I wondered a little about his smile. He knew I was in for a little education.

As I strolled the yard saying hello to some of the men I knew, I noticed a group of about 30 black inmates giving off an energy that drew me. I gave no consideration to whether I was welcome. After all, I was the expert, committed to racial equality, working for their welfare. What possible problem could there be? I walked over, joined the group, and stood bewildered while the conversation flowed around me. I did not understand a thing that was said. I became inwardly defensive and paranoid, and my discomfort was obvious. One of the men, Marvin, asked me why I looked so unhappy. I told him I was missing most of the dialogue and couldn't figure out what was going on. To which he replied, "And you're the man whose gonna teach the guards to understand US!"

A brief comment on this exchange. In an environment as routinized and predictable as the prison, anything or anybody new drew considerable attention. I found that anywhere I went in the prison news of my arrival and my function always preceded me. Inmates, and sometimes staff, often made themselves and their concerns known without my asking.

There I stood, feeling naked and exposed. Being unable to control the situation with words, I suddenly felt weak and powerless. I have to admit I was relieved to notice one of the larger correctional officers amble over to monitor the situation as I received the ragging I deserved. It took some work with myself for me to return to the yard the next week. The same group was assembled, and I joined them. Marvin, who had delivered the pithy rejoinder the week before, asked me why I was back. I told him, "For me." He and the others laughed, and he said how could I justify coming back for what I would get when I was being paid good money to learn useful things to teach the guards? I was quiet for a while and then I said, "Look, you gave me a lot of yourself last time, and I'm back because I need that for my own growth as a man."

Rereading this I have a number of complex responses, not all of them particularly positive. There was a sense in which I, as a white man, was feeding off the energy of black men, and without invitation or sanction. Rather like young white boys digging "gangsta rap." At the same time I think I was working from a basic commitment to openness and mutuality—perhaps that came through and mitigated my racism.

What I took away from this encounter, as contradictory and multilayered as it might be, was to reaffirm my belief that what I have to offer others has little value unless it is embedded in mutuality. There was also a corollary piece of learning—that an admission of my vulnerability and human need more often than not closes the gap and permits the relationship to proceed with greater trust. And this, of course, cannot happen unless I am able to acknowledge my ignorance and openness to being tutored and educated by my clients.

Lesson 2: Let the People Speak for Themselves

On a practical level, all future staff training I led always included both staff and inmates together in the same group. I had learned enough from Marvin to know that I had best let others speak for themselves. This principle worked well both in the prison community and in prison–community and prison–university contacts that I later helped initiate and nourish.

It also works in workshops and conferences today as I often ask some of the men in the groups I lead, client and colleague, to bear witness to their lives by becoming coparticipants with me in professional presentations.

Lesson 3: Respecting Limits

Marvin became a friend and confidant, and as with so many men that I became close to—inmates then, therapy clients now—I had to learn about boundaries and limits. A year or so after our first meeting, Marvin approached me in the corridor and asked me to carry a letter out to his son because he was concerned that mail was not getting through. Now this was against prison regulations, and he knew it and I knew it. I tried to explain, but he said, "It's OK, man," and went down the corridor.

We both understood that the tightly regulated prison society functioned through an informal system of rule bending, bribery, manipulation, "special" arrangements, and understanding. Although that code of conduct may have succeeded for some people in the

prison environment, my participation in this behavior would have been fatal to my role. The men had to know I could not be manipulated through our relationships. Analogously, the prison staff knew that I would not report minor rule infractions or irregularities that came to my attention in the course of moving around the prison. I could be neither a purveyor of favors nor a snitch.

I experienced considerable guilt at refusing Marvin. I had to struggle within myself to approach him when we saw each other again. I did check to find out if there was a problem with mail delivery. Apparently there was not. At the same time, as a father separated from several of my children, I could really understand the powerlessness and frustration Marvin felt, locked away, having to depend on the efficiency and goodwill of the impersonal prison administration. Marvin did remain open to me.

Lesson 4: Start Where the Other Man Is Right Now

Antoine Samuels was one of the men who reminded me of yet another lesson that has proved useful since that time—that is, the importance of accepting men where they are in the present moment, rather than focusing first on the past. And Antoine in the present was a courageous, highly conscious, and giving black man, who wrote writs and petitions as a service for other inmates. Only later did he tell me that he was in for homicide, the results of a bar fight a dozen years before. I was reminded of a doctrine, which lies at the heart of social work practice: "of starting where the client is." I have found, over the years, that if I can open myself to how a man presents himself, he will sooner or later bring me his past as well. Especially when the past may include shameful behaviors.

Lesson 5: Taking the First Step by Revealing Myself

Another event from my early days in the prison reinforced what I had learned on the prison yard with Marvin and his buddies. This new event also generated another powerful realization—that I must risk revealing something of my inner thoughts and beliefs as a way of facilitating open and honest interaction. This lesson began a week or so after the incident with Marvin on the prison yard.

"Tough" Freddy Pissano, the most powerful and highly respected prison inmate, white or black, approached me. (Freddy was white.) His nickname came from a highly publicized series of criminal acts committed years before, culminating in the murder of one of the victims. By the time I met him, "Tough" Freddy was a soft spoken scholarly man who had spent all those years in an isolation building used for discipline and for prisoners, like Freddy, under the death sentence. Most of the time he was in solitary confinement. During those years he had taught others in that building to read and write, had become a legal expert, and had climbed to the top of inmate leadership.

He and another inmate, Antoine Samuels, had organized an informal legal group, which served other prisoners, without charge. He had only recently, when Ed Henry became warden, been allowed into the general population.

Freddy asked me, because I was offering group process consultation to staff, if I would also be willing to offer the same to his group of prisoners. I agreed and, with the warden's permission, soon found myself in one of the treatment-wing therapy rooms with a dozen or so inmate leaders. These men had gathered together to try to organize prisoner support for the new warden, who they believed was their first and best chance for some constructive change in the prison situation. He had already, in a series of bold and courageous actions, established his credentials, especially the hallway interaction with the inmate who had called him an "MF"

I was nervous about being in the same room with some of these men, for instance, Bernie, who was known to have killed one guard and at least two other inmates over the years, with a homemade knife. Appearances are deceiving—Bernie was about 5' 6", slightly built with a little paunch, wore thick glasses, spoke softly, and was almost bald. He looked more like a convenience store clerk or lower-level civil servant than a dangerous convict.

During our third meeting I was puzzled by the absence of dynamic interaction in the group. Although the men said they wanted my

consultation, they were not forthcoming with anything of their own. I pointed that out, and one of the men, maybe Kareem, a Black Muslim leader, said, "Jack, you can walk out of here tonight, but we have to live with each other, so you have to make the first move."

Although I did not figure out the full significance of that statement until later, I could intuitively grant the absolute rightness of his words. I had not appreciated how much these men might risk by exposing themselves, given their history of antagonism and violence, and with their status in the prison community at stake.

So I swallowed, took my courage in my hand and tried to respond as best I could. What I did was to offer my deepest beliefs, without ornamentation or apology. I raised the question of whether these men could achieve their goals without a fundamental shift toward nonviolence within the inmate community. And, furthermore, might they have to consider a comparable shift in the ways in which they related to the correctional officers? One may imagine how foolish and exposed I felt, a white middle-class guy trying to tell this collection of extraordinary men how to relate and work with each other in an environment so often organized around other principles. I felt separate from them, vulnerable, and afraid of appearing foolish, with nothing of relevance to offer.

To my surprise my words were received thoughtfully, I wasn't razzed or dismissed, and the group got down to business. After all, they said they had come together to figure out a way to give the new warden support in his reform efforts, and what I told them seemed to make sense. As it turned out, my words fell on very fertile ground.

Several weeks later the warden was taken hostage by a group of inmates on one of the cell blocks when he was hearing their grievances. The situation was nasty; there were some out-of-control men threatening to do him physical harm. Two of the men from "my" group, Freddy, and Peters, a black inmate with considerable status, persuaded the rebellious group to accept them as hostages in return for the warden's release—pledging that if the warden didn't come through they could do anything they wanted to them. They risked their lives and their reputations in the process, but it all worked out well. No one was hurt, there were no reprisals, and the process of reform went forward. My facilitative role in all this was made known by Freddy and Peters, and it was after this point that the warden asked me to take on expanded duties to act as an "honest broker" and roving communicator in the prison.

The lesson I learned remains at the heart of my practice. I must often take the risk first. No matter who I am working with, he has a lot more to lose than I do. If I expect him to reveal himself, then I must first find a way to let him experience me as fully human and as transparent as the situation permits. He may not be in as desperate a situation as the Foothills inmates, but he certainly is operating within a much more constricted psychological space than that which I occupy in my life. Although there have been times in my therapy practice that men could not hear me, I am convinced that my willingness to take that first step has been a vital, energizing factor between us and perhaps freed them to become more self-revealing in their lives.

Lesson 6: Physical Affection between Men Is Alright

During the months our group met, Freddy sat next to Bo, a solidly built, warm and friendly black inmate. They had been in the solitary building together. Freddy had taught Bo, along with other illiterate inmates, to read and write over several years by copying passages from Shakespeare and passing them down the corridor. He also had filed a legal writ that was soon to bring Bo his freedom. During these group meetings Bo and Freddy sat thigh to thigh, most of the time with their inside hands on each other's knees or inner thigh. The current of love between them was palpable.

On another occasion a year or so later, Freddy was one of a number of prisoners who were in the combined prisoner, graduate social work student seminar I mentioned earlier, which met on alternate weeks at the prison and the university. It was Freddy's first time out of the "joint" in 16 years. When we entered the seminar room and sat down, he turned to me

and said, "Jack man, hold my hand, I'm so nervous I don't know what to do." I obliged him, not without discomfort.

I doubt very much that Freddy was gay. At the same time I imagine he had sex, at times, with other prisoners. That and a myriad of other adaptations were part of doing time in this kind of setting. I remember very clearly, especially in the early days, coming across many twosomes of lovers, some of them very purposefully, through posture and eye contact, making sure I saw and understood their relationship—part of educating this professor man about the joint. At times, especially in the first year, I was discomfited and felt awkward under their gaze. I was fascinated and drawn to their connection, and my homophobia surfaced simultaneously.

There was a wide range of sexual adaptations, including celibacy, loving partnership, sexual predation, rape, and exchange of favors in the prison. For instance, Peters, who so courageously stood with Freddy in the warden's behalf was a notorious "wolf." That is, he preyed on other men and used them sexually. Freddy was inclusive when he put together the inmate group that met with me. With Peters he included Gerry, a white, principled, gay man who refused to sexually "service"other men. His survival in such a violent environment was in large part due to Freddy and Victor protecting him.

I do not think Freddy and Bo were sexual lovers. At the same time the current of love between them was unmistakable, and they were not afraid to show it. Since then I am always delighted in my men's groups, when after some time together, the men almost always develop a goodbye ritual of hand holding or a group hug. It feels right. Being with Freddy and Bo helped me, over the years, to relax a bit about close physical contact with other men.

Lesson 7: Hubris Deflated, I Am Not Invulnerable or Special

The regulation and management of violence was a shared concern of both officers and prisoners. Although the intervention by Freddy and Peters was dramatic and public, it was only one of many occasions when prisoners intervened to contain the violence and make the prison bearable. Most often guards and prisoners worked together toward that end. After all, the prison simply could not function without the participation of inmates. They not only did the work that maintained the infrastructure, they also gave assent to many of the practices by which they were governed. After all, the correctional officers carried no weapons, not even nightsticks or batons. The staffing was minimal; four correctional officers would be in charge of a cell block of 400 prisoners. Clearly, without the cooperation and consent of the inmates, the correctional officers could not have maintained even a semblance of control.

The prisoners also often worked with the guards to prevent greater evils from occurring. The system of inmate–officer relationships was full of delicately balanced protocols and understandings. It was simply a matter of the most psychologically intact individuals agreeing on rules of mutual conduct to prevent a descent into barbarism even well beyond what already characterized the prison.

An example of one such informal agreement was conveyed to me in a conversation with Tom, the deputy superintendent for control, who told me of dressing down an officer who had, in the past, brought Freddy Pissano into the main building improperly shackled. That is, he had chained Freddy's hands behind his back, and Tom told me of his concern about that infraction. After all, a man should be chained with his wrists together, chest high so that if attacked by another inmate with a knife, for example, he could use the chains to fight him off and defend himself. When I asked Tom what would prevent Freddy from using the chains aggressively, Tom simply said that Freddy "knew the rules." (This was before Ed Henry's time. One of his first acts was to order that no man ever again be chained like an animal.)

I soon had the opportunity, in the two events that follow, to experience firsthand the capacity for violence, from both an inmate and a correctional officer. Part of what I did was roam the prison, sometimes at night, to try to pick up what was going on and act as a vehicle for information exchange between the warden and the inmates. Many times I was out of view of guards in highly exposed situations. This never

bothered me; I thought my good intentions provided magical protection. I also tended to romanticize my role and to idealize the inmates. However, one evening I got a clearer picture of what was going on.

I found myself standing in the doorway of Chuck's cell, a very hard guy, a career armed robber, a man about my age, and a member of my inmate consultation group. He was talking funny, and I realized he was high on something. His "punk," a younger, smallish man who provided Chuck with sex (maybe there was affection also?) in exchange for physical protection, was visiting in the cell with him. Chuck started ragging on me, and I turned to leave. He stepped up close, his hands were in his pants, I think he was playing with himself, and he demanded I give him a beautiful set of beads my kids had made for me. I was terrified at his sexual aggression. I gave him the beads, got off the block, and told no one. The next visit Freddy handed me the beads and said he and a few other men had told Chuck to behave himself. After that I continued my cell block activities, but with no illusion that there was anything special about me personally. I was useful, I was part of several networks of prisoners, I had connections with the warden, and I certainly was not invulnerable. This too was an important lesson. From that time on, I also made doubly sure the officers on duty knew more or less where I was when I roamed around.

At that time the word "punk" seemed natural, part of prison argot. Now I want to distance myself from it—from all that it carries of male cruelty and domination. I use it deliberately as a way of contextualizing the event and to convey to the reader my realization of how easily I could have been the "punk." Why Chuck did what he did I don't know, but I surely was on his turf, without invitation, and maybe he picked up intuitively my "attitude" toward his young lover. Maybe he was simply showing off that he could overcome a self-important man like me in a head-on encounter.

Lesson 8: Goodbye Lone Ranger—Ask for Help—Use Your Networks

The truth was you hardly ever saw a man by himself in the prison except perhaps in transit, let's say, from cell block to infirmary. In all other continuously occupied spaces every man had at least one "homey," who might be different in each area—someone on the block, someone in the work area, and so forth. You see, if you're alone you are vulnerable, easy prey. But two men can stand together and protect each other. It was a very sobering piece of understanding, a lesson in interdependence and the phoniness of the hero myth and rugged individualism.

For instance, one part of staff training for new officers concerned rape prevention. Some of these new guards might be inclined to doubt the masculinity or courage of an inmate who "allowed" himself to be raped. At that point two of the trainers, both medium-sized men, would pounce on him, put him down on the floor on his stomach, spread his legs, and tell him. "Baby, you've just been raped."

Violent tendencies were not restricted to inmates. There were correctional officers whose willingness to use any terrorist devices against inmates was barely contained. These officers could turn that wrath against fellow staff just as easily.

I remember one time after I was let through a locked gate by one of the officers hearing him say something I couldn't catch. When I checked it out with several inmates whom I had walked back to the block, I was told that he had said, "Guys like this Sternbach make you realize Hitler did a lot of things the right way." I later had occasion to verify the accuracy of the story. Later he was in a combined officer–inmate training group I was leading. He not only verified the "Hitler" story but told me, openly and clearly, in the group, that anytime I wanted to take it further he would meet me outside the prison gate with "45s" (handguns, that is) to settle the matter. Afterward two of the officers told me not to take him seriously; everyone knew him for what he was, and no one ever let him handle a situation alone. Looking back on it, at the stage of awareness I was at then, I felt shamed by his aggression and would have fantasies of calling him out and facing him down.

Word of his threat got around, and both officers and inmates asked me about it. Warden Henry even queried me. In all instances I

shrugged nonchalantly and minimized it. Looking back on it, I think I should have seriously considered filing a complaint. Perhaps this would have permitted some kind of intervention and corrective action with an officer known to be out of control and a threat to everyone around him. Such was my individualism I had lost sight of the need to stay within some system of support, both for my sake and for my clients as well. I think I deprived Warden Henry of information he could have used to intervene effectively with this guard, who was a very dangerous man. Since then, even as an independent practitioner, I try to remember to make use of collegial and community resources—I really can not do the job alone.

Democracy and Its Discontents

Ed Henry lasted four years; I lasted three. Ironically, the guards had unionized, the most reactionary of them had taken control, and they did their best to block further reform. One of the first union demands was that no personnel be required to attend "Sternbach's training groups"!

Several years later, after Ed Henry's tenure ended, I read that an inmate had beaten Wassily Losko, a grandfatherly captain of the guards, to death. He did not deserve such an ending. It reminded me of what could happen when hope was dimmed and aspects of rigid authoritarianism again became ascendant. It is important to record that while Ed Henry was warden the incidence of violence and assault within the prison, on all levels, was reduced considerably.

Conclusion

I have written of knowledge gained and false consciousness exposed. I have tried to convey some sense of a number of extraordinary men who were my teachers. The prison was in a sense a compressed world, but in essence not much different from the one we all live our lives in every day. Certainly many men were living out the imperatives of the male role in extremis.

I have never again had the illusion that I can afford rest time from a conscious living of life, that somehow the absence of prison walls allows me "down time" in how I live. That illusion was unmasked for me because I know that we are all prone to the same consequences of becoming self-destructive, mad, or exploiters of others.

What was remarkable about so many of these men is how they learned to make use of the very lack of freedom they were experiencing as a vehicle for personal transcendence. Victor Jones told me of a time early in his incarceration when he realized the environment had overwhelmed him. He asked for and was granted time in solitary confinement. He was there for six months, during which he was able to focus and center himself to work with his circumstances in a creative way over the next 10 years, becoming a leader, organizer, spokesman, and model for other energetic, younger black prisoners interested in collective consciousness and self-regard.

I learned, at Foothills, that it is only by a focused act of consciousness, shared and shaped in a loving way with others, that we can locate our freedom and our humanity.

I have tried to make clear the life lessons I was privileged to learn in this crucible of suffering and transcendence. This experience came at a pivotal point in my life: I had turned 40, moved from the Midwest, completed my doctorate, and my marriage had ended. My political beliefs had been revitalized by the antiwar movement at the University of Wisconsin, and I was trying, in the words of one of the younger men in that movement who served as a mentor, "to make my life and my work one." Shortly after Foothills, I left the cocoon of academia in behalf of greater engagement as a practitioner. I choose to work primarily with men—to struggle against sexism, to bring forth men's capacity for more loving connection, and to sustain my own growth as a man.

Much of what I do derives from what I learned at Foothills prison. Much of the person I have become likewise derives from the same place. Although I have become more conventional in attire and personal grooming (no more long hair and laceless sneakers), I hope that the capacity for connection and caring is deeper. I have found since then that when I have the courage to be transparent, honest, and open to a mutual relationship my work and my life are deepened and made more meaningful.

When I can remember to stay connected to others and to ask for the support I need, my work and my life are enhanced.

I thank those amazing men for how much of themselves they gave me and hope I have continued to earn their trust. Perhaps the best summary is in the words of Warden Ed Henry, said to me during one of our many conversations: "You grow or you die." ■

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