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## What Lies Between US

During the spring of 2003, I made three trips to the New Jersey State Prison to observe and participate in the prison literacy program run by the grassroots humanities group “People and Stories.” In the course of these visits, I bore witness to the power of short stories in bringing forth the emotions and personal responses of what is likely New Jersey’s most emotionally repressed population. Gradually, the stereotypes and fears I held about prisoners began to dissolve as the time spent with these men revealed their deep humanity.

When I first got wind in my Princeton University Writing Seminar of the opportunity to join Pat Andres, the Executive Director of the non-profit grassroots humanities program “People and Stories”<sup>1</sup> for a series of workshops at the New Jersey State Prison, I immediately jumped at the chance. My work in a class at Princeton University from the previous semester, “The Sociology of Crime and Punishment,” taught by Professor Bruce Western and criminology graduate student Jake Rosenfeld, had taught me that men who inhabited the prisons and jails of America were not as malicious—nor necessarily as *culpable*—as I had come to believe. Working with “People and Stories” would be an exceptional opportunity.

Nevertheless, I dreaded making the trip to Trenton that evening. I was nervous about driving through unfamiliar territory alone at night; I was the only student who had signed up to attend the program that particular evening, and, since this was the first session that anyone in our writing seminar had attended, I had no idea what to expect. No idea, that is, other than the amalgamation of images I had collected from myriad episodes of *Law and Order* and *Oz*, and movies like *The Shawshank Redemption* and *Dead Man Walking*. I imagined bright orange jumpsuits, men with cruel looks in their eyes, cold gray cement floors with metal bars to match. I felt evil all around me as I drove the thirty minutes to the prison, not realizing that the smell of burnt rubber and my inability to accelerate above 45 mph on the highway were a direct result of my failure to remove the parking brake on the car I had borrowed through Princeton’s Community-Based Learning Initiative.

After a series of wrong turns, I eventually found my way to the prison one

minute before the obligatory 7:15 PM arrival time. Getting lost did afford me the opportunity to view Trenton, the capital city that houses the prison and street after street populated by men and women carrying all their possessions in a single shopping cart, seedy bars on every corner...generally not the kind of place you would want to raise your children. And yet exactly where many people do in fact raise their children.

So, I thought to myself, this was the inner city we'd focused on last semester during our discussion of the inextricable link between class and crime. This idea, as put forth by Michael Tonry in *Malign Neglect*, burned a hole through the page: "Criminogenic forces are strongest in inner-city areas of concentrated poverty, where incomes are low and families unstable, and unemployment and welfare dependence high" (128). The undeniable link between impoverished backgrounds and tendency toward criminality seems intuitive, and it is indeed supported by statistics. Today, black minors are more than seven times more likely to have a parent in prison at any given time than their white counterparts. More than two thirds — 67.9% — of black single parent families live below the federal poverty level. And while blacks comprise 14% of the total US population, they make up 48% of the penal population.

The lobby of the prison was not unlike that in the Department of Motor Vehicles—rows of seats for visitors, very plain and sterile. Those of us associated with "People and Stories" waited for one of the prison workers to open the window where we could get the badges and passes required to move around the prison. We then walked through a metal detector and had all of our belongings checked before moving on to a labyrinth of locked doors; one of the women invoked Wally Lamb's depiction of the "Orwellian experience" of entering a maximum-security prison in *Couldn't Keep it to Myself: Testimonies From Our Imprisoned Sisters* by commenting on the eeriness of not seeing those who opened each of the doors. Eventually we came upon a wall of awe-inspiring murals; I was surprised to learn that these incredible works were "in-house jobs," as Pat explained, including one created by an inmate named Walker that spanned across an entire wall and gave all the indications of being a Monet.

I had been warned by one of the women accompanying us that the "scariest" part of the prison experience is often the prison guards. This prediction was confirmed by my first glance at the row of waiting guards, metal clubs in hand and masks resembling those worn by welders on their foreheads, giving them a sort of inhuman dimension.

When several individuals in neatly pressed and pleated khaki pants, work boots, and clean white t-shirts passed by, I assumed them to be just more prison workers; surely the prisoners themselves would wear the orange jumpsuits I had seen in various media portrayals. These men looked exactly like someone you might encounter on the street—except better dressed. My heart pounded as I

took it all in. I had been told that almost every man was in here “for a body,” and 80% of the murders were crimes of passion. I was in a room full of murderers.

Choruses of “You’re late!” echoed from around the room, spoken by prisoners and guards alike. Although we had arrived at the prison on time, the window where we received our badges had opened so late that everyone assumed that we were not coming. As a result, many of the guards had taken the inmates back to their cells. “We thought People and Stories was cancelled! They said it was cancelled!” one man told us. Pat asked if the men who were taken back to their cells would be allowed to return. One of the prisoners shook his head: “No way. The guards, they don’t want to get up. You can tell them, but they won’t get up and bring them back.”

We were standing in a narrow hallway from which tiny classrooms extended. One classroom resembled a kindergarten room, painted bright blue with colorful posters of African-American heroes and the week’s assignments plastered on the walls. Adjacent to this room was the headquarters of LIFE (Learning is for Everyone), a program that trains and engages inmates with stronger educational preparation to serve as volunteer tutors for the less experienced readers. At the end of the hall was a modest law library, which, I was told, was mandatory in prisons so that inmates could work on their own cases.

As Pat introduced me to the men, many of whom she knew from previous classes, I noticed something peculiar. Prisoners passing by would smile and say, “Excuse me, ma’am.” Invariably, like clockwork. Exactly like someone you might meet on the street...except how many strangers do you know who pass you on the street with a smile and a kind word?

I was introduced to many men, all of whom greeted me with a handshake and a smile. Although with each encounter, I could not stop myself from thinking, “I am shaking hands with a murderer! A murderer! A man who has killed!” one encounter in particular stood out to me. When Pat introduced me to a younger man sitting outside the classroom and identified me as a Princeton student, the man commented, “I almost went to Princeton. Ended up at Drew instead. Should’ve gone to Princeton. We might not be having this conversation right now if I had....” An awkward silence followed. I don’t think either of us knew quite what to say.

We squeezed into the tiny room, four of us from “People and Stories” along with eleven men. Pat took charge of the class, as she distributed and read aloud the short story “The Man who Found You in the Woods” by Catherine Ryan Hyde. It told the story of a middle-aged hunter named Nathan who came across an abandoned baby in the woods. He took the boy in and raised him as his own son. The story was touching, and I glanced up at a few key points to gauge the reaction of the prisoners. They were completely engrossed.

After the reading, Pat started the conversation by asking some specific ques-

tions about the story, such as the meaning of the key word “ambivalence.” One man in the room who responded first to almost every question said, “It seems to have the root word of ambition. Maybe it’s the will to do something good for someone else.” “Nonchalance,” another man said. Before explaining the actual definition of the term, Pat made sure to make all these answers correct, emphasizing the insight expressed in each answer. I really admired her skill in creating an atmosphere of comfort and openness in the classroom.

Her next question was, “How would you feel if you had been left to die in the woods by your mother?” Answers included: “Neglected,” “Unloved,” “Abandoned,” “Unworthy.” Had these men experienced these emotions in their lifetime? Had they been “left for dead”—in the metaphorical sense—by those who were supposed to care for them? They spoke wistfully of Nathan’s unconditional love for the young boy, Nat; as one man said in reference to Nathan’s consistent and unfailing visits to Nat in a juvenile detention center, “That’s when you know someone cares—when they visit you in prison. It’s not like on the streets, because they’re ain’t no fronting. If someone comes to visit you in prison, it’s *real*.” The men spoke of incarceration objectively and seemingly without emotion, saying that being in prison “forces you to become responsible.” I wondered how many comments reflected their feelings about their own incarceration.

One of Pat Andres’s questions probed into the personal lives of the men, although, of course, no one was ever obliged to answer: “Have you ever felt that something is meant to be, like a relationship?” One man responded, “Yeah, 5 or 6 times!” to a laughing crowd. Then, without a prompting question, one man offered an insightful comment: “Nathan and Nat balance each other’s lives out. Nat finds every excuse to go wrong, but Nathan doesn’t let him feel badly for himself.” To this, another man added, “It always starts from within. Your life can be messed up by someone else, but you can’t keep going on blaming other people—it’s you.” I was struck by this comment; it reminded me of a scene in *The Shawshank Redemption* when one of the newest prisoners is asked what he’s “in” for. He responds that he is not guilty; the original questioner says, “Yeah. No one in here is guilty,” challenging the speaker to hold himself accountable for his crime.

The touching portion of the story the class read lies in Nathan’s unwillingness to “wash his hands” of Nat, despite the boy’s repeated demonstrations of recklessness and mischief. As Nathan says in the story, “‘All you’ve probably needed all this time was someone who cared enough to insist you behave.’ *And perhaps willing to die to make that happen*, he thought.”

Where did it go wrong for these handsome, articulate, gentle men, I wondered. Had someone left them behind? Did they have someone who cared so much about them that they were, in fact, willing to die? Did they have some-

one come visit them ever, at all? My mind was filled with questions, but the guards had begun to break up our meeting. As the session was ending, I asked, "What will it take for Nat to realize that Nathan is not going to leave him? How much more does Nathan have to do to gain Nat's trust?" Although I posed this question through the lens of the story, it was a question burning inside of me. What does it take for someone to trust again, to live again, to love again? Could these men ever be forgiven—could they ever forgive themselves?

One man in the back of the room started to respond to my question, but was abruptly cut off by a guard who hustled him through the doorways and down the long hall back to the cells. I, too, would walk down these halls, but I would turn left instead of right. I would walk outside to my car with my possessions and drive away, back to a place where the only "bars" are ones where my friends go out to have a good time, where people would be waiting for me not with a checklist and roll call, but with open arms.

And I wonder, was someone ever waiting for them?

*Will* someone be waiting for them if they are ever released? The only thing certain to be awaiting these men is a world of harsh economic and social realities; even for those who can find employers willing to hire former prisoners, there is an estimated earnings gap of between 10 and 30% between ex-convicts and the general population. Moreover, time spent in prison naturally leads to difficulties adjusting to the outside world, finding a partner, and reestablishing families. It should come as no surprise, then, that over one-half of prisoners released in 1994 have been rearrested.

I returned to the prison on two more occasions, each time finding myself surprised to see how my excitement at these visits was replacing my anxieties. The first time I had come to the prison, two or three of the men dominated the conversation following the reading of our story. The second time, the conversation was more equally distributed among the participants. At the concluding session of the program, every single man came forward with his own poignant thoughts. The men spoke of their feelings not because they happened to be the most "sensitive" and effusive of individuals. You cannot simply place a dozen or so men—let alone incarcerated men—in a room and expect them to have a candid discussion of their feelings. Rather, they must do so in the context of their responses to a work of art or text, and they must first see that such expression is not only acceptable, but even encouraged. "After this, we go back to normal. We can't 'reflect' and be sensitive—you'll get viewed as weak, and you'll get preyed upon if you do," reflected one inmate in the final session. Repressing the emotion that defines our humanity becomes crucial to survival in prison.

One man in our group, Raymond, seemed to have mastered the art of enjoying poetry and literature and yet avoiding anyone's detection of this enjoyment by talking tough and being a "gentleman's gentleman," befriending everyone

and knowing who was married, who had kids, and who liked extra potatoes with their dinner. I connected with Raymond almost immediately: he held out his hand to me from Day One and sat next to me, writing me humorous notes and, at the last session, even slipping me a magnificent full-page portrait of an angel done in pencil. I was mindful of Pat's warnings to not get too close to any of the inmates, and yet I was drawn to Raymond's candor and brilliance. He seemed determined to make this group work, and I realized later that he held this single weekly hour in such high regard because it was the main thing he looked forward to. The men used to be able to go outside every day and sit in the grass, he explained, but new regulations led to the paving over of the outdoor areas to prevent prisoners from burying tools or potentially dangerous commodities in the soft earth.

Although I learned a tremendous amount about the way of life inside from the class discussions following each reading, it was from the quiet discourse with Raymond that I learned what life had been like for many of the inmates outside these forbidding walls. After a comment was made about the perceived vulnerability of men who were readers of poetry and "thinkers," Raymond whispered to me, "That mask he's talking about, that mask you have to wear...that ain't nothing compared to what you got to wear outside. And after a while, you just get tired." When I asked him what he had grown tired of, he responded with a distant look in his eye: "You get tired of being tired."

These comments were prompted by discussion of a short story we read called "Abalone, Abalone, Abalone" by Toshio Mori. It is the story of an older man who has unearthed a great collection of abalone shells and polished them to perfection. A younger man admires this collection and begins to build his own, but he becomes frustrated at the amount of work required to clean the grime off the shell in order to reveal its latent beauty. The story led to a discussion of masks and inner beauty, of protection and refinement. One man seemed proud as he declared that his refinement, he knew, would come through incarceration. "My dark side came out when it was time for me to protect myself," he continued. "Out of the darkness, into the light!" cried one man, and the rest of the men smiled and nodded in agreement. I was pleased that at this, the final session, a man sitting in the back of the room who had seldom uttered a word finally took the floor. All were quiet as he began to speak:

I put on a mask out on them streets to deal with the life I was dealing with. But now I know something. I know that the real beauty's ain't on that outside. It's in here—you just got to work on it. And I know that we all have a certain amount of good within us.

After all the words had been spoken and the inmates ushered away with their prized copy of Langston Hughes' poetry or some other volume in hand, I sat for a moment and looked at the walls surrounding me. I realized that to my

eyes, these walls are simply a matter of a temporary place to be before moving on. For these men, the walls that lie between us are a way of life. Moreover, they are symbolic of other barriers the inmates have confronted and will confront.

As I drove away from the prison and back to the ivy-covered entrance of Princeton University, parking brake down, I found myself recalling the man who nearly went to this university, the one who believes things could have been different if he had...the one who lies somewhere in between where I've just come from and where I'm going. But for one brief moment in time, we were in the same place. And there was nothing that lay between us.

### Note

1 People & Stories/Gente y Cuentos <[www.peopleandstories.org](http://www.peopleandstories.org)> is a grassroots humanities program structured to give participants access to works of literature which are generally accessible only to the highly educated, and to promote dialogue on issues sparked by the stories. Short stories of literary merit are read aloud and discussed using a well-developed method that draws upon the life experiences of basic readers to understand literature. Participants are introduced to difficult texts in a reading and discussion that brings forth their inherent abilities to tackle difficult topics. The structured dialogues that develop encourage participants to move beyond stereotypes, communicate better across racial and cultural differences, refine critical and analytical thinking skills, and lead to a sense of mastery and accomplishment as challenging issues and texts are examined in rigorous ways.

### Works Cited

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