Learning about Prisons

written by Bill Littlefield | July 28, 2021

Even before I'd been inside a prison, I was sympathetic to the circumstances of some people who are incarcerated.

I'd twice interviewed former professional boxer Rubin "Hurricane" Carter, who spent almost twenty years in prison for a crime he didn't commit. Mr. Carter acknowledged that at the time he'd been arrested, he was no model citizen. But the contention that he'd murdered three people in Paterson, New Jersey, in 1966 was dubious from the outset, and eventually he was set free.

How could anybody spend almost twenty years in prison without becoming bitter? I asked Mr. Carter that, after he told me that he had no resentment. He said something to the effect that by embracing bitterness, he would only diminish his own life. His resentment would have no impact on those responsible for the injustice that had been perpetrated on him: the law officers, the judge, and the men who'd lied on the witness stand, among others. Mr. Carter's bitterness would likewise have had no impact on the system that had made so likely his wrongful conviction and incarceration.

Instead of surrendering to bitterness, he chose to devote himself to helping other incarcerated citizens who were not guilty get a fair hearing. During the final years of his life, he was often successful in that effort. Many of those with whom he worked were released.

It was easy to sympathize with Mr. Carter. Indeed, how could anyone *not* feel bad for a man who has been unjustly deprived of his liberty for twenty years by a system too ready to assume his guilt on the basis of his race and his background?

It was easy to admire Rubin Carter's attitude and his determination to see justice done for others, one case at a time. He was an inspirational figure. It was gratifying to learn of his success.

Similarly, I found it natural and easy to sympathize with men and women who'd been incarcerated for long periods of time for what seemed to me relatively insignificant "crimes": possession of marijuana, for example, or petty theft when the circumstances suggested that the perpetrators were stealing to feed themselves or their families. Wasn't a system bound to provoke doubt, if not outrage, when it kept millions of people poor, homeless, uninsured, and hungry, and then locked some of those people up for becoming convinced that there was no way to live under those circumstances without hustling in one way or another?

Then there was self-defense. Why would a woman who'd been repeatedly threatened and beaten up—even raped or shot or stabbed—be charged with an assault she committed while trying to save her own life?

I thus had sympathy for a lot of the people in prison. But I felt that sympathy at a distance, and as certain as I was that lots of incarcerated people had been unjustly deprived of their rights and their liberty, and that the judicial system's flaws made incarceration of minority and poor citizens especially likely, I also figured that the folks who had been legitimately convicted and locked up for

killing somebody probably deserved the long sentences they'd gotten.

I no longer feel that way.

Since the fall of 2018, I've been a teaching assistant in the Emerson Prison Initiative. This program provides college courses, including a pathway to an Emerson College bachelor of arts degree, to men incarcerated within the Massachusetts Department of Correction system. As it happens, all the men with whom I've been working have been convicted of serious crimes. I haven't learned that by asking them about their records. I've helped them with their writing, and some of them have written about what they've done. In the context of class discussion, some of them have talked about their backgrounds, and what they've learned about themselves, and what they'd like to do next. A big part of being a teaching assistant is listening, no matter what the specific subject matter might be.

They're all serving very long sentences, some of them up to life in prison.

Almost all of my students were very young when they committed the crimes for which they were sentenced. Several of them—perhaps most of them—were first arrested and incarcerated for less serious crimes when they were in their early or middle teens. Some of them grew up in circumstances so dangerous, violent, and damaging that they have been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress based on what they suffered as small children.

These men have grown up in correctional institutions, where people who've broken laws are supposed to have the opportunity to address and "correct" whatever attitudes led to their illegal behavior, hence the term "correctional institution," rather than "house of punishment."

Adolescents and young adults in homes where parents and other adults are using, manufacturing, and selling drugs are at a significant disadvantage. Children who embrace gang culture, whether because that's what they want to do or because that's what they feel they must do to survive, are much more likely to be arrested than children who have other opportunities to socialize.

But adults who are incarcerated have this in common with adults who aren't incarcerated: they're all different people at thirty-five or forty than they were at sixteen or seventeen, or even eighteen or nineteen. The study of the brain has established that as adolescents, we're all operating with unfinished guidance systems.* It's a fact that merits consideration, whether or not the former adolescents under consideration are in prison.

Whether incarcerated or not, adults who have been addicted to alcohol or drugs as adolescents have the opportunity to learn they can live without addiction. This, too, is an important consideration.

Perhaps some incarcerated individuals don't change. But my experience with the men with whom I've worked for the past several semesters has convinced me that some do change, and that education, and the opportunity education provides for self-reflection, can accelerate that change. The men with whom I've worked have studied not only literature, social science, history, and public speaking; they have also learned about restorative justice. Some of them have been recruited to speak to groups of students about their experiences, thereby helping those students to avoid the terrible decisions my students made when they were in their teens and early twenties.

The men with whom I've worked train service dogs. They work at jobs in the prison at the same time they are carrying challenging academic loads. They depend on each other and their professors and teaching assistants, and they quickly learn how to take advantage of the support they are offered. They are grateful for that support and express that gratitude often. They are respectful not only of their professors and teaching assistants, but of each other. They help each other learn. They encourage each other. They are better at that than any group of students I've known, and I've been

teaching for more than forty years. One afternoon about a year ago, one of the students in my study hall angrily left the class, having announced his intention to drop out of the program. I was concerned, but two of the other students told me it would be okay.

“Don’t worry, Bill,” one of them said quietly. “We’ll talk with him.”

The angry student’s classmates apparently reminded him of what he’d be tossing away if he didn’t take advantage of his educational opportunity: next week the student was back in class.

Some of the men with whom I’ve worked study the law and help others in the community to secure their rights under it. They think creatively about how to improve the current system.

But their sentences—twenty-five to life, thirty to life—hang over these men. I think to many of them it feels extraordinarily difficult to establish that they have earned the opportunity to function freely in the community. Some of them have mentioned that they feel it takes only one inmate abusing the opportunity provided through parole or work release to convince some citizens that there should be no such programs.

I’ve heard several incarcerated men and several of the folks who work with them say, “How would you like to be judged forever on the basis of the worst moment of your life?” It’s a thought-provoking question. It’s perhaps just as legitimate to ask whether programs that provide for the re-evaluation and release of prisoners should be judged by the behavior of the few individuals who fail to take advantage of those programs.

Some of the people with whom I’ve discussed my experience inside prison have asked me if I’ve been “conned by the cons.” I don’t think that’s the case. I have brought an open mind to my work in the prison. I have listened, and I have learned that the men with whom I’m working are just people. They feel much of their behavior is “criminalized” and that they are often infantilized.

I believe that the men with whom I’ve worked deserve to have their circumstances reviewed by open-minded people with the authority to release them from prison, having recognized that through various opportunities provided during their incarceration and despite various profound obstacles necessarily built into the fact of incarceration, these men are not the same people they were when they were arrested, convicted, sentenced, and incarcerated, at a time many of them were barely out of childhood. The twenty-five-to-life or thirty-to-life sentence, the actual length of which depends heavily upon the vicissitudes of state parole boards, feels to me counterproductive to the idea of “correction” for any man or woman. It’s more likely to encourage despair than rehabilitation. But sentences like that are especially grotesque when the recipient is an adolescent or a young adult. Before I began working with the Emerson Prison Initiative, I had not thought about that, but ever since, that feeling has become more and more powerful, the conviction more and more certain.

I’ve only had the opportunity to work with a dozen or so men in prison. But it’s significant, I think, that when the Emerson Prison Initiative began, over one hundred men applied for the few available slots. I wish all of the applicants could have the opportunity my students have now. I recognize that to generalize from the number of students in my study halls is perhaps dubious. Certainly it’s not statistically valid. It’s what I have to go on.

My point here is that I’ve come to believe these men should have access to an efficient, open-minded, compassionate system that recognizes that a man incarcerated at eighteen or twenty will be a different person ten or fifteen or twenty years later, and that this no-longer-young man need not be locked up for another decade or two, let alone for the rest of his life. Implementation of this attitude, like the existence of programs to enable incarcerated individuals to pursue their educations, would

reflect a commitment to justice as well as the exercise of mercy and common sense. It is these values, rather than ongoing punishment, that need to inform any decent system of corrections.

*See, for example, the Juvenile Justice Program of the Massachusetts General Hospital’s Center for Law and Brain Behavior.