Teaching in the Dark:
The Promise and
Pedagogy of Creative
Writing in Prison

So these expressions of poetry and prose come as a great relief for me because these young ones seem to defy the order of the day. They are not mentored; they will mentor themselves. They are not given opportunity, they will make their own. They are given no future, they craft their own out of deeply felt words carefully set into sentences that redefine their souls to the world beyond the walls of their confinement. So while all else fails, literature steps forward to hail the new day with their voices claiming they live, that they want a life, that they want redemption and a chance to make something of themselves.

—Foreword by Jimmy Santiago Baca, From the Inside Out: Letters to Young Men and Other Writings

Te errell uses James Baldwin’s “My Dungeon Shook” to write a letter to his own nephews. LaVon writes angrily, in blank verse, to his 17-year-old self. Lue Lee falls in love with the sestina, using the following six end words to write an apology letter to his daughter for killing her mother: you, father, mother, remember, end, mind. Doppler furiously composes haiku after haiku to break his writer’s block. Chris begs me to be harder on his writing. “Make it bleed,” he cries. “How will I become a better writer if you are too soft on me?” Mayfield writes elegy for a galley mate who hanged himself during our three months together. One killed a fellow traveling carnival worker at the age of 15; another shot his father; a few committed gang-related murders. Several are in for life for crimes they committed before they were 20.

Some have been institutionalized for more than 25 years, moving from group home to juvenile detention centers to this place that they’ll leave “in a pine box.” These men know how to do their time, and an air of quiet resignation clouds around them, a sad gray aura. Others seem new to the place; they are impatient, skittish, and angry. Marcus’s anguished eyes nearly devour his face, and a woman’s name is tattooed across his neck in green three-inch letters. I hope she still loves him, I find myself thinking.

In the time we are together, life happens, even inside these walls. Someone gets married, another
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is transferred to a different correctional facility 400 miles away, one learns his father has terminal cancer, one is reunited with a brother after 17 years. Some inmates work feverishly on their upcoming parole hearings and offer the same excuse when they turn in their late papers that generations of students have used: ‘I ran out of time.’ I thought time was all they had. Yet in this way, and many others, I learned that my conception of them—as human beings, as inmates, as students—was far different from their lived, incarcerated reality. I learned that they were much more like all of my other students than I even imagined them to be.

What does it mean to teach language and literature to these incarcerated students?

How far will our literacy pedagogies travel? Will they travel to this darkest of places? What are the inherent tensions in promoting freedom of self-expression to the incarcerated when even their bathroom and shower habits are regulated? Does creative writing have any potential to promote correctional goals of restorative justice? These are the questions I asked myself as I prepared to teach a college-level creative writing class at a high-security men’s correctional facility. In this article I try to address those questions as well as share some of the work of my remarkable, incarcerated students.

Language arts teachers from elementary school to college embrace creative writing as a useful way to unlock creative potential, to foster students’ love of language and to offer a powerful outlet for self-expression. Within the teaching profession, the capacity of creative opportunity to liberate minds and hearts goes largely unchallenged. Rarely has this claim been tested, though, in the most restricted of educational settings: penitentiaries. There is a dearth of research on the teaching of creative writing to adult male felons in prison settings. While there was some attention paid to teaching in prison in the 1970s and 1980s (Hedin; Hruska), there has been little recent activity in this field, despite the increase nationally in educational opportunities for inmates. Some emphasis has been paid on the teaching of writing in jail or detention settings, especially with juveniles (Salzman; Winn). Given the current rate of incarceration of grown men in our incarceration nation (Alexander;
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Meiners), more attention must be paid to maintaining the humanity and dignity of those who find themselves incarcerated, especially those serving long or life sentences. And in this age of incarceration, what can traditionally prepared language arts teachers do to try to offer the power of language to these underserved former students? We can go to them and teach them.

Teaching a Creative Writing Course in Prison

A couple of springs ago, I taught a creative writing course in a high-security correctional facility outside St. Paul, Minnesota. The facility houses approximately 1,500 inmates. Although college courses are offered in the facility on a somewhat regular basis, many of the inmates are “non-Specter eligible,” a status named after former senator Arlen Specter (PA), who sponsored a bill to forbid offenders who have been convicted of felonies from taking classes offered through federal or state funding. (This bill stands in stark contradiction to the significant evidence that the most powerful tool against recidivism is education.) By donating my teaching services, the non-Specter eligible men were able to enroll in the course. That also meant that 13 out of my 16 students were doing serious time for serious crime.

The students ranged in age from 22 to 60. Of the 16, 11 had been convicted of first- or second-degree murder, with the other offenses ranging from felony assault to criminal sexual assault. The length of time for which they had been incarcerated ranged from 5 months to 25 years.

The creative writing class met weekly in two-and-a-half-hour sessions for twelve weeks. I designed a course that, on paper, seemed no different from any regular college creative writing course. I relied on the wisdom of Annie Dillard, Natalie Goldberg, Tobias Wolff, Donald Murray, Peter Elbow, Donald Graves, Mike Rose, Jimmy Santiago Baca, and other writing wizards. I integrated my knowledge of writing process and writing pedagogies into the course. There were weekly assignments that spanned a variety of genres—poetry, fiction, and creative nonfiction. Class time included some direct instruction, guided assignments, workshop time, and peer editing. We read models of other creative work from a variety of genres and critiqued them.

I attempted to create a learning environment that was as much like an ordinary class as possible in terms of pedagogical approaches, assignments, and class structure, although the presence of incarceration and surveillance was ubiquitous (Meiners). Despite the degrees of creative freedom offered by the assignments and assurances of confidentiality I offered, the incarcerated writers were reluctant to write specifically about their crimes or about the conditions of their incarceration, subjects that are often staples in prison literature. In fact, our most heated class discussion occurred after the class watched Eve Ensler’s documentary about teaching creative writing in a women’s correctional facility, What I Want My Words to Do to You. Her first assignment for her incarcerated students is to have them write about their crimes “in excruciating detail.” Half of our class was outraged. They felt the assignment was an invasion of privacy. “This is the only place I can escape from my crime,” cried one. “That’s why I write!” “You’re deluded,” countered another, “living in a kind of fantasyland. Writers are supposed to write about what they know, and this is what we know, man. Crime . . . and prison.” In the end, some students chose to write about their crimes “to work through them,” and others meditated on prison life even within the short confines of a haiku:

Prison is a sad place
Lonely cells in long rows
Don’t go to prison
(Terrell Shaw)

or

A mind is a terrible
Thing to waste, but
Not worse than an entire life
(Lavon Johnson)

Others were much more likely to engage in creative work about family, life before incarceration, and expressions of regret and restoration. Toward
that end, in the complementary genres of Rilke’s *Letter to a Young Poet* and James Baldwin’s “Letter to My Nephew,” the students compiled an anthology of letters to young men. (Thanks to the Student Press Initiative at Teachers College, Columbia University, we were able to produce an anthology of the men’s writing [Appleman]). The following two pieces, a letter and Lue Lee’s sestina to his daughter, are examples of those letters:

**Cyann: A Sestina**

* Lue Lee

I can’t tell you how much I love you,
You are constantly on my mind,
You look just like your mother,
I wish that I can do more to be a real father,
Cyann, You I will always remember,
Don’t worry little girl, this is not the end.

Don’t look at it like it’s the final end,
Each and everyday I would always think about you,
You are the last thing your mother remembers,
Be strong; don’t let people play tricks with your mind,
Wherever you go, always remember that I’m your father,
Always remember that you came from your beloved mother.

Later on in life, you will become a great mother,
Don’t worry, I’m still here, it’s not the end,
Always remember that you do have a real father,
No one can really tell you what to do, only you,
Your beautiful smile, will always be on my mind,
It’s hard to go back, but just try to remember.

Your mom is gone; she will always be remembered,
Always keep in mind, the name of your mother,
Mommy and Daddy are not there, it’s not the end,
I hope that you will always have us in mind,
I’m here to answer what questions you have in you,
I always and will always be your father.

Nobody can love you like your mother and father,
I know that what happened, is hard to remember,
I lived my life already and I’m here for you,
Don’t forget to go and visit your mother,
Forever always remember to keep us in mind,
This is not our family’s final chapter; this is not the end.

You always be on your mother’s mind,
When you grow up, don’t forget to visit your father,
Your mother and I, our love for you will never end,
You will always be the one we both love and remember,
Life is hard without mom, one day you will be a mother,
Both our lives didn’t end; we are kept alive because of you.
Your life is not at an end, keep that in mind,
For you, you now have taken the place of your mother,
Your Father, I will be the last memory of our family to remember.

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**Ross Shepherd**

A Letter to My Son

Dear Brandon,

My son. It has been twenty years now; so much time squandered, given away in a fit of rage. I am sorry for that. I am sorry for all of the time that we never had together as father and son. I am sorry for all of the things that you never experienced because of the mistakes that I had made and because of the price that I am paying for my heinous actions.

I am here in prison, now; regretting what we never had together. I missed your birth and the bond that your mother and I would have made with you in the first, early days of your life. I missed being able to see your little fingers wrapped around my thumb as I made a solemn promise to always put you before me in all things and to protect you from all of the bad things in life. I missed seeing your proud joy as you took your first steps, and the sparkle in your eyes as you tasted ice cream for the first time. I’m sorry. I gave all of that away.

My heart breaks at the thought of not witnessing you walking into school for the first time. I know that I would have been more nervous than you. I didn’t get to hear you retell every minute of that day as I recall my own experiences from so long ago. I gave all of that away.

I missed taking you fishing with me for the first time and being so anxious to make sure that you would have a great time so that we could have something that we loved doing as father and son. I missed seeing the great, big smile on your face as you reeled in your very first sunfish on your Snoopy fishing pole. I missed out on seeing you jump in surprise at the cacophonous roar of a nearby lightning strike, and watching you sleep blissfully to the music of the rain. I missed your frightful tears after you were stung by a wasp. I gave that away.
These pieces afforded the writers, both serving life sentences, an opportunity to express regret and to take responsibility for their actions. At the same time, it afforded them a chance to express themselves creatively and to discover they had some writing ability.

Creative Writing and Restorative Justice

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In addition to the humanizing effects of the creative process, the anthology itself has notable significance for the authors. First, many of them chose to write to young people, including their siblings, not yet incarcerated. They view this writing as a kind of outreach or distant mentoring. Second, they (and I) view both the publication of their work and the presentation of their reading as a kind of liberation (Freire). Through their words, they become present in the free world, or as one incarcerated writer put it, “I write because I cannot fly” (Chevigny). Finally, the anthology itself is part of a restorative justice effort. All proceeds from the book are donated to the correctional facility’s Restorative Justice Committee and used to fund initiatives such as apology letter workshops, victim/perpetrator meetings, youth offender mentoring, and other restorative justice efforts. This effort is an affirmative response to one of the questions I posed at the beginning of this article. Does creative writing have any potential to promote correctional goals of restorative justice? Yes, creative writing can be part of a larger restorative justice project.

In a recent issue of Rethinking Schools dedicated to the school-to-prison pipeline Linda Christensen reminds us “the school to prison pipeline begins when we fail to create a curriculum and a pedagogy that connects with students, that takes them seriously as intellectuals, that lets students know that we care about them, that gives them the chance to channel their pain and defiance in productive
Perhaps the largest lesson I learned from “teaching in the dark” is that we must respect the humanity of all of our students, even when society fails to do so. Put another way, perhaps if these incarcerated students had found themselves in classroom spaces where they were valued, their life trajectories might have been different. I also learned that students everywhere walk with poetry and prose inside of them that is ready to break out at the slightest invitation. It is our responsibility to issue that invitation in our classrooms.

Yes, the transformative power of our pedagogy and the power of language can travel even to the darkest of places. The proof is in their poetry. I close with a few lines from Ezekiel Caliguiri, an incarcerated student from my class, who just placed first in the memoir category of the 2012 PEN prison-writing contest. Like his patron saint Jimmy Baca, he is equally adept with poetry. Through the opportunity to write his way out of darkness, he has found his voice. And so may they all.

From “These Songs Remind Me”

We are the children
that used to be the future.
the dried brooks in a crook’s eyes,
absorbed by that oblivious sponge
inside the ordinary inertia
of being human.
Dreams that live and die
in a wet abyss
with broken fingers
at the end
of clenched fists.
This is the social tsunami
individuals
in strangled, strychnine paradigms
playing their instruments
and singing songs
about the way we were,
and always will be.
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Works Cited


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