Prisons: America’s School of Choice

by

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“ ‘It is just as if a problem had been set: to find the best, the surest means, of depraving the greatest number of people!’ thought Nehlúdof, while getting an insight into the deeds that were being done in the prisons and halting-stations. Every year hundreds of thousands were brought to the highest pitch of depravity, and when completely depraved they were liberated to spread broadcast the moral disease they had caught in prison.”

— Leo Tolstoy from *Resurrection*

Recent political events made me think about my relationship with schools and prisons. I have had some close encounters with both in my life. As an educator I have been a university professor at institutions of higher education in Missouri, Illinois and Texas. I have taught composition, literature, communications, education and criminal justice.

My life as an academic underwent change in the mid-70’s when I made a decision to pursue developing education programs for disadvantaged and truly at-risk students in a large urban jail in San Antonio, Texas. I was recruited by a good friend from my undergraduate days in the St. Louis Archdiocesan seminary; Harry Martin a catholic priest, who was the chaplain at the Bexar County Jail in San Antonio.

A newly completed jail addition included closed circuit radio and television broadcasting capabilities. There were no education programs at the institution and the jail had just been placed under a federal consent decree to reduced overcrowding and begin providing programs for the 1200 inmates. I began with volunteers, secured foundation and governmental grants and had the political education of my life.

My work in San Antonio resulted in award winning programs that included a licensed GED testing center, the development of the first computer assisted education program in a jail in the United States and the permanent funding by the County government of my education programs and professional staff.

When I left the County Jail, I then worked as a program consultant for jails and prisons across the country in twenty-four states. I worked with architects, governmental planners and non-profits. It was rewarding, exciting and frustrating. I began to feel like I was a finger in the dike of the rising tide of incarceration and the construction of more prisons.

Later when I decided to pursue theology studies at Thomas Starr King School for the Ministry in Berkeley, California, I became an advocate for institutional change working as an intern and volunteer with the UUSC’s National Moratorium on Prison Construction. This advocacy work led to my working as an alternative sentencing consultant with Jerome Miller and his new organization National Center on Institutions and Alternatives. The focus of my work with the Moratorium and NCIA was upon finding alternatives to incarceration. This was satisfying work, not as financially rewarding and still as frustrating given the political realities.

All told I worked as a jail administrator and corrections teacher and consultant for over two decades. As a result of that work I have come to some conclusions about the connections and similarities between educational and corrections institutions.

In 1787 Benjamin Rush, a prominent Universalist and signer of the Declaration of Independence, met with Benjamin Franklin and a group of Quakers and other free thinkers in Philadelphia to devise an acceptable and humane answer to the usual punishments of torture, mutilation and execution.

Their answer was based on the concept of penance and forgiveness: offenders were to be incarcerated to give them time to meditate and do penance for their crimes. Today's jails and penitentiaries can be traced directly to that meeting.

The penitential or rehabilitative model devised by these well-intentioned men was composed of solitude, reflection and study of the Bible. In effect, this model of prison was not unlike a school — albeit a school with severe restrictions and sanctions.

Today, we can still think of prisons as schools — schools for training criminals in the craft of crime. And that is not a far-fetched idea. As more and more students, particularly African American males, have encounters with juvenile detention centers, adult and juvenile probation, jail, prison and parole, they have more exposure to crime and criminal ways.

These schools are expensive, too. A year of imprisonment now costs an average of over $30,000 per year per inmate, not too far from the cost of tuition at a college. According to the Vera Institute of Justice, the average cost of housing an inmate in the United States was $31,286 in 2012. Annual costs vary of course with Kentucky costing the least at $14,603.

Prisons compete with educational budgets in every state. In fact the current state budgets reveal that every state spends less on education than on corrections. While politicians argue over allocating resources for schools and colleges, the “prison industrial complex” is much more likely to get any amount it deems necessary.

The call for more prisons by politicians and voters gives evidence that prisons have by default become the public school of choice, especially for people of color.

The jails and prisons of our country are very real reflections of how we feel about others and ourselves. The fact that these institutions turn out people worse than when they went in reveals, in effect, an inherent, collective death wish. The mad march to build more prisons, to incarcerate more people and to ignore the roots of social problems is a direct analogy to the nuclear arms buildup.

No politician would dare suggest that we slow or stop this rush to incarcerate more and more people. But we cannot achieve peace without a dismantling of our domestic weapons of species suicide—prisons and jails.

There is talk among liberals—like myself—about the coming demise of jails and prisons. Such talk is still very premature, although I think frequemtly about the eventual abolition of such institutions. I suspect jails and prisons are going to be with us for a while.

We must work with that situation and strive to transform penal institutions into “houses of transformation” instead of “houses of punishment.” If there is one thing my career in criminal justice has taught me, it is that “punishment” doesn't do much except lead to the need for more punishment.

All contemporary studies on child abuse and domestic violence point out that abusers and batterers were themselves abused and punished physically as children.

I am not surprised, then, that our detention facilities are bursting at the bars with more and more “offenders.” Until we as a nation decide to deal with people who transgress our rules and mores in some other way than retribution, I don't think the abolishment of houses of incarceration can be anything more than a utopian glimmer in the eyes of educators and social justice advocates.

We are still in a phase in the treatment of offenders that proclaims “rehabilitation doesn't work; nothing works.” Instead we are told daily that incarcerating people for longer and longer periods of time is the only thing that reduces crime.

I believe a negative answer like incarceration does little in the long run beyond creating more jobs for construction companies and prison guards and administrators.

It is effective in keeping undesirables off the streets, particularly African American males, but what about the future costs? More than 2.5 million people are now housed in all the jails and prisons in the United States, the highest rate of incarceration in the world today. Combine that figure with the two and a half million people on probation and parole, and you come up with an astounding three percent of the adult population under control of the criminal justice system. The percentage of black males in that number is a staggering 35%. Blacks account for 12-14% of our population. One out of every three black males will be part of the justice system at some time in their life.

Given such numbers, one wonders how much longer we can call our nation “the land of the free.”

I doubt that any of our answers to the law and order problem are going to get far if we don't address the fundamental social questions of adequate housing, nutritious food, appropriate education and life skills commensurate for coping with the twenty-first century.

As long as our public schools operate like detention centers, with their para-military structure and legal enforcers (that is, teachers, principals, security and truant officers), we should not be surprised that so many students respond in dismay and anger. All too often our schools become schools for crime.

Schools that foster competition through “teaching to the test” breed winners and losers, and losers all too often go to jail. Schools that practice authoritarianism in the classroom develop people who feel they are better than others are, even if they have to kill to prove some superiority. Schools must teach human dignity and how to learn responsibility and self-discipline.

The fact that many schoolteachers in our city could now be considered consumers of weapons and combat gear was reinforced for me a little a few years ago by a personal experience in the battle zone of our city.

I went to a teacher training session as a consultant for a new cognitive skills program being piloted at one of the public schools on the north side of the city. There I was a witness, almost a party, to a bit of the daily combat in that area.

During the lunch break, at the suggestion of a school administrator, I moved my car from the street to the supposedly more secure staff parking lot on the school grounds. Pulling into the driveway, I found my route was blocked by a car whose driver was firing a handgun at two teenage males twenty yards away.

Four shots were fired. All missed the fleeing boys, who ran inside the school I was visiting. The shooter fled, not pursued by anyone. School security police listened to the teens' story and went back to their business of guarding the inside of the building.

One officer told me that it was just some kids that didn't know how to shoot straight and said he thought it was too bad they weren't more accurate; the neighborhood could do without their likes, both shooters and victims. The callousness of his remark was haunting in its acceptance of the war zone mentality.

The whole incident was just another unremarkable event in a part of the city that has become desensitized to the violence and disregard for life that abounds in the area. I'm reminded of the desensitization of guards and inmates in a prison. A prison, a ghetto, an inner-city school; the parallels are obvious and frightening.

While my life was briefly at risk during this incident, the lives of the families in the neighborhood are put on the line night and day.

Just as prisons can only attempt to educate inmates a few hours a day, so too schools only have students a small portion of the day. The education of the streets and the neighborhood continues unrelentingly twenty-four hours a day. No wonder the inner city schools are inadequate havens and agents of positive change.

The solution for the city schools lies not in the building of new schools in crumbling and dangerous neighborhoods, but in the rebuilding of those neighborhoods.

The dangerous environment of inner city schools needs administrators and staff that are equipped to deal with the realities of the assignment. Using such school assignments as training grounds for neophyte teachers or, worse yet, as punishment for some political transgression, does not better the lot of the young students who often risk their lives making it through the day in their neighborhoods.

Young people may be thought to be safe from guns and knives in the school secured by metal detectors and security officers. Once on the street, as I saw first hand, everyone is at risk.

These schools need a re-education of administrators and staff. This should take the form of a leadership training program for teachers and administrators focusing on the realities of urban education. This at-risk education leadership program would incorporate the latest progress in cognitive development programs, security precautions, anger management, and behavior modification.

If we can't see our way to paying inner-city educators the equivalent of “hardship” pay for a difficult assignment, at least then we should begin realistically preparing educators for the inner-city school experience.

If we would take a good look at our social institutions and work toward fostering cooperative, humanistic approaches to dealing with people, then I believe that real progress could be made toward eliminating ignorance, poverty and crime. Authoritarian models of family, school and government do not abolish problems—at best, they only contain them. Dictators get trains running and keep the lid on, but the effect is eventual psychic and physical chaos.

Until we have solved the problems of murder and violence, we had better separate the perpetrators of these acts from the public. Once we have isolated, detained or incarcerated these people, it becomes society's job to put together institutions and programs that work towards reducing criminal behavior.

The real “crime” in our criminal justice system is what Karl Menninger aptly calls the “crime of punishment.” We must work towards transforming our jails and prisons into secure treatment centers.

Please note that I used the word “secure” because I believe that we have the right to be protected from people who have proven repeatedly by their acts that they are not currently able to function in a normal environment.

Once we have secured our safety from the truly violent, it becomes the duty of every jail and prison to work mightily towards the treatment, training and education of inmates for eventual reintegration into the free world. Anything in our institutions that trains for crime, lawlessness and inhuman behavior must be eradicated.

Our incarcerated, probated and paroled populations are increasing so rapidly that many social critics believe society itself is in trouble. The numbers of jails and prisons have grown to the extent that some analysts are saying that the institutions themselves have led to a decrease in crime. How many people would have to be incarcerated, how many prisons built to accomplish that goal? It is a frightening vision.

Dehumanization and punishment do nothing to promote goals of social transformation. The experience of incarceration—social removal—is in itself heavy punishment for offenders. They are removed from their homes and families, their occupations and possessions, from all the customs that define their personalities.

This displacement can be the foundation for negative change. Under names ranging from “unfreezing” to “brain washing” by any power that wishes to reform personality structures, such internal change is the common experience of jails and prisons, concentration camps, the military, and some schools.

Additional punishment in the terms of harsh treatment, squalid conditions and a routine of depersonalization degrades individuals and produces further antisocial behaviors. It produces “animals,” a term commonly heard to describe jailed humans.To change people already caught in vicious or unfortunate cycles, we must remove ourselves from the common view of such people. What they have done, the choices that have brought them to jail or prison, should not prejudice us. Instead, we must remember what kind of people we want to help make instead of expressing our opinion of what kind of people they seem to be now.

Such detachment is never easy, but this philosophy makes it less hard, because it says people can change, that human beings are dynamic, constantly re-made through interaction rather than forever determined by an unchangeable past.

And this philosophy is motivating because it places some of the responsibility for what people are on all that are with them. All become teachers of one another.

People are not “born to raise hell.” People learn their lessons from parents, neighbors and from society. Antisocial behavior, whether aggressive, malicious, impulsive or uninformed, is taught. The kind and quality of a person's experiences will be reproduced in that person's attitudes and actions. Behaviors which bring pleasure or avoid pain are learned. Whoever or whatever has given a person the experiences he or she finds rewarding or which help avoid pain will be that person's teacher.

I believe people truly learn by practice, not by rote memorization or osmosis. And what we seek out, repeat and finally learn is determined by social context. Societies change, interests change, technologies change, supply and demand change. The major needs of our incarcerated population are”

self-management skills,

literacy and communication skills,

and employment skills.

It is important that we continue to work to transform and eventually to dismantle houses of punishment. After all, social justice and charity begin at home. We must reach out to witness for peace and justice in the world, but we can only effect world peace when we have begun to change ourselves, as well as our institutions, schools and prisons.

We give lip service to schools, but we give our dollars to prisons and their construction. Instruments of punishment and “vindictive justice” take priority over schools. Perhaps schools would get more money if they were presented more as places of punishment, rather than as institutions of social progress.

The French philosopher Michel Foucault states in his powerful treatise *Discipline & Punish: the Birth of the Prison* that we should not be surprised “that prisons resemble factories, schools, barracks, hospitals, which all resemble prisons.”

Fyodor Dostoyevsky is quoted as saying that “the degree of civilization in a society can be judged by entering its prisons.” I think that is still true today. Even truer is another corollary: If you want to understand our culture, take a look at our schools as well as our prisons. I think the two institutions often look more and more alike.

When I was a student attending Catholic elementary and secondary schools in Saint Louis, I thought school was one of the safest places in my neighborhood. My parish elementary school was adjacent to our church. My high school was part of church: it was the diocesan seminary for training priests. School was a regimented place, but it was also a safe and secure environment.

Today's schools with their large classroom size, inadequate resources and poorly trained teachers contribute mightily to the high dropout rate of students. And, of course, students who drop out of school have a much higher chance of being incarcerated and placed under the control of the criminal justice system.

To effect change in schools will be to effect change in society. The changes needed in schools—more resources, more diversity, more training, smaller class size, more community involvement—all of these can and should be implemented in our prisons and jails. When we begin to implement some of these ideas, we will truly begin to help schools and prisons become agencies for positive social change.

What can we do to foster these changes? I think the primary responsibility for all of us is to stay informed and, most importantly, vote. Vote for people who have a humanistic understanding about education and law and order.

Voting in our democracy for candidates promoting democratic values is the key to positive change in our correctional and educational institutions.