

Light From the Cage: 25 Years in a Prison Classroom

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Prisons do a very good job of punishing, of keeping “bad” people in and the rest of us away from them, which makes the people inside prison walls essentially invisible and covered with layers of stereotypes and prejudice. Whether intended or not, the number of people we have incarcerated has become a form of racial control, and 2.3 million people behind bars is defining a big part of our national identity.

The Federal Correctional Institution, or FCI Milan, was built in the early 1930's and now houses only men. It is Michigan's only federal prison with a count that usually hovers around 1500 people. The years that I was there from 1986-2010 saw the largest expansion in the country's prison population in our history, earning it the title of *mass incarceration*. It was a medium security level when I began teaching and then changed in the 1990's to accommodate lower security inmates, most of whom were people of color arrested for drug offenses.

After I'd earned secondary certification for English and Social Studies at U of M, and my own classroom had not materialized by Labor Day, I drove down to Milan to see about substituting. The secretary looked at my resume and asked, “Have you checked across the hall about teaching any classes in the federal prison? They have a full-time program over there.” The prison program needed teachers, and I was hired immediately. How strange that a short walk across a hall can change a life.

In 1978, people in Milan Area Schools noticed that many of the inmates in the prison did not have their high school diplomas and decided to create a high school program there under the umbrella of Adult and Community Education. 36 years later, it remains the *only* high school completion program in the country. Most facilities offer classes to pass the GED test, but this is the only one in which people can earn a high school diploma. During the years that I was there, not only did our student

population change, but we experienced steady and sobering budget cuts to our own program. At its height, Milan High School, as the program is called, had 11 full-time teachers and 11 part-time teachers. Right now there are 4.

Prisons are harsh, unforgiving places. Security comes first--always. Though I never had to use it, I had to get used to wearing a large body alarm, worn in a pouch on my belt. A long chain hooked on with a handful of keys I would use a minimum of 24 times a day. I had to get used to the noise. Prisons are jarring, clanging places. Heavy metal doors slam, people shout, keys jangle and the loudspeaker blares all day long. I had to get used to my students moving around the compound only once an hour on “controlled moves,” announced by Control, the “nerve” center of the compound. As contract staff employed by the local school district, teachers had to maintain healthy boundaries with our students, not only to protect us, but to protect them and our program's reputation. I never got used to being constantly on guard about the institution's many, ever-changing rules. We had to carefully watch what we brought in. For instance, if I'd brought in a cell phone by mistake and it was discovered by anyone in the lobby, I would have lost my job--on the spot.

Our high school program was voluntary, but federal rules dictated that every man either had to have a GED, a high school diploma—or spend 9 months in school making an effort to pass the GED test. Many men who we initially tested in our program were far below an 8th grade proficiency level, which would have made passing the GED test very hard—if not impossible with their levels of test anxiety. They badly needed our classes in reading, writing and basic math and most men were eager to then take our high school level classes.

It's hard to go back to school after dropping out. It takes courage to admit how much you don't know, and it takes grit to do the hard work of catching up. I can still see their wooden faces and anxious eyes on their first days back. When asked what decision they made that they most regretted, I heard many say it was their decision to drop out of school rather than their crimes that bothered them the most. I heard this over and over, “If I'd stayed in school, I could have gotten a job and I wouldn't be

here.”

I've discovered that people do not expect to hear that from the first night, my students treated me with such respect and kindness that it never occurred to me to be afraid. I always knew that if I had been threatened in any way, other men would quickly protect me. I heard rumblings of occasional fights that went on in their housing units or other places around the compound, but I had no first-hand experience of any violence, and the men protected me from any of those details.

The diversity in my classroom was stunning: people from all over the world, students of all ages, cultural backgrounds and economic circumstances. I had all kinds of students at all kinds of academic and maturity levels. A few were very difficult, but most of the men I knew were hard-working and grateful. I spent most of my years teaching English, Civics and U.S. History, but in my early years, I taught ABE, or Adult Basic Education, a test-based program of basic skills.

Many of the men I knew astonished me. T-Bone arrived one morning in October, bringing in his own brand of sunshine. He was African-American, stockily built, in his late 50's or early 60's, always wearing a blue knit cap that sat forward on his forehead. From the very first day, he approached the federal teacher on the other side of the room (who almost never interacted with us), grabbed his hat in his fist, bowed a little, saying, “Good *mornin'* Sir! I hope you are having a nice day!”

He encountered me on that first day like I was a member of a royal family with a warm smile and more bows. “Oh my my, I am so glad to meet *you*—and I certainly am glad to be here. I can write my name and I can read “Stop” on a sign, but that's about all. You and I are gonna have a real good time in here!” he said.

Everything we did delighted him. Everyday he arrived in a sunny mood. Every single day, he greeted the staff member on the other side of the room in the same way. One of his classmates asked, “Why are you so nice to him? He never even answers you.”

T-Bone replied, “Cuz I ain't gonna let no one else tell me what kind of man I'm gonna be.

On the last day before Christmas break, I brought in some colored paper for paper chains. All of

the men would have made them long enough to stretch from one end of the compound to the other they were so delighted with them. Just before lunch was called, T-Bone called me over and said quietly, “I made you a little something and put it in your bag, but you need to just pick it up, walk right on outta here and don't look in the sack until you get home. Don't bring it back in here neither. The warden's got one just like it--'cept his is green.” When I got home, I found an orange and white striped hat with an large orange tassel on top. He had crocheted it himself.

Teaching T-Bone was like driving a luxury car, but I would face many steep hills to climb, knowing nothing about a group of students whose backgrounds and lives were diametrically opposed to my comfortable, advantaged middle class background. It would take years before I really knew what and how to teach them.

Thankfully, one of my lessons happened early. Delighted to get a green light to teach a Humanities class, I spent the summer creating lessons that I hoped would be engaging and fun. I had a great group, all eager and waiting outside my door when I got there--except for one man. Mr. Hawks walked in and headed for the far corner of the room, mumbling to people around him when a new lesson was introduced. He did his assignments, but he continued to sulk.

As the weeks went on, he began to rattle me. One night as I introduced a new topic, he raised his hand and asked in an impatient tone, “Mrs. Wenzel, where is the *black* stuff? All we're learning in here is about the white man's art and music. Don't you *like* what black people have done?”

I felt like I'd been punched, my comfort and security all gone. Stumbling through to the end of class, I drove home feeling confused, upset, and filled with questions about where to go from there. I was thinking: *Where did I think I was? Hadn't I looked out at them and seen mostly black men?*

All I could think about was my carefully crafted lessons for the whole semester—and my heavy schedule. Bigger than that was the fact that I didn't *know* much of anything about black music, art or literature, had never had a class in it, had no materials, and certainly no confidence. I felt overwhelmed and dreaded the next class.

Fortunately, I had a week-end to think it over, and I decided to be honest with them, apologize and ask for their help. With a group effort, we finished the semester. Now I see it far more clearly. I had a tendency as a white person to feel like my history and culture is “normal,” therefore most important, but I now knew where I was and that I had to pull myself out of my own comfortable, white-centered reality. It would take many more mistakes to get it right, but what a favor Mr. Hawks had done for me! As the years went on, I found fascinating people and stories about African, Native and Hispanic Americans to include in all of my classes. I heard so many men say, “If I’d had this stuff about *us* when I was in school, I don’t think I would have dropped out.” I was learning that if lessons involved them and *their* people, they were far more engaged. School was hard work, but their focus and commitment were keeping me going too.

Mr. Day was about 40 and wide-eyed with wonder about being back in school after twenty-five years. Every assignment was done perfectly and on time and in a beautiful manuscript. He smiled all the time and thanked me every day as passed my desk on his way to lunch. That year, we were fighting the threat of cuts to a small federal literacy grant, so I told them they could write a letter to anyone they wanted in the federal government. Mr. Day chose Laura Bush, telling me he could just tell what a good person she was. His letter was four pages long and filled with heartfelt pleas for keeping his school.

“Dear Mrs. First Lady Laura Bush,” he wrote, going on to say, “You can’t imagine what this school means to me after so many years. Never in my born days did I think I would get a second chance to get my high school diploma.” He finished his letter with a postscript. “You can show this to you know who if you want.”

I think about prison and its purposes a lot. I think we need to get violent people off the streets so that the rest of us are safe, but so many of the men I knew were not violent and had not committed violent crimes. Even if they had, I saw men turn their lives completely around. Mr. Walls was open about the fact that he had committed murder as a young teenager. When I had him in my classes, he was at the end of a very long sentence, had been a model inmate for many years, and had been moved

from higher level institutions into our low security. Busy preparing to go home, he knew he needed his high school diploma and was a dream student.

Mr. Walls wrote this, “I have thought a lot about this in the quarter of a century I've been locked up. When it is their loved one who is charged with a crime and convicted, people always want leniency, mercy and humane treatment for the person they love. But, when it happens to people you feel no connection with, it is common to hear cries of “3 Strikes and you're out!” and “Execute him!” He also wrote, “I wish citizens would demand that prisoners be treated as they would want their beloved sons and daughters to be treated, because that is who we are. We are your brothers and sisters who have made mistakes and lost our way from the right path. Only through education will we find our way back.”

As this is graduation season, I want to say that there is *nothing* like a prison graduation. As they marched in to the music with their tassles swinging, smiles spread wide across their faces, they walked taller and straighter. Students' families could come, and they sat directly across from the place where each man received his diploma.

Johnny Bananas, as everyone called him, pulled me aside as he was lining up with his fellow graduates. “If you see my parents, don't tell them where they are,” he cautioned, “they think this is *Harvard!* As another student received his diploma and stood for a photo with the superintendent, his mother jumped up, clasped her program to her chest and exclaimed, “That's *mine* too!” One year we noticed a small woman sitting alone and learned that she had come all the way across the country in a bus from her Navajo Reservation in Arizona. “I just couldn't miss this,” she told me.

Education engenders self-respect, dignity and most of all—hope. All of the men in Milan, in fact most people in prisons, eventually go home—and the United States makes it very hard for them when they get out—especially without an education. Their extremely long sentences, often for non-violent drug-related crimes, has created not only mass incarceration but mass *disablement*. I watched many men go home, excited, but extremely worried about how the world had changed and how they

could manage. Mr. Walls went home and wrote letters back to a pre-release class, warning men just how hard it was to be out and how careful they needed to be while still on parole.

Mass incarceration has cost us trillions of dollars, and in many cases, it creates more crime than it solves. The costs of locking up more people than any other country in the world are bigger than the money. I ached for the children growing up without fathers, and hearing what locking away so many people was doing to their communities. We all lose their gifts and talents. Locking this many people up has totally failed to reduce our fears of each other, in fact, it has vastly increased our fears of young black men. Bryan Stevenson, who works mainly with Death Row inmates in Alabama, says, “In our American justice system today, it is better to be rich and guilty than it is to be poor and innocent.” I firmly believe that we who are free in the world also lose with this level of injustice. I think it damages our national moral character.

When I told people of my students' charm, their humor, their tenderness and compassion, people would often respond by saying, “Well, if he's so nice, what is he doing in there?” I want to challenge the power of the fence and relay the idea that they are good and loving people, paying dearly for our policies and our fears. My students worried a lot about the public perception of who was behind bars from what was seen on television. They worried about other cultural stereotypes, especially about young black men. They worried about their children, especially their sons. Once incarcerated, society lets their crimes—and only their crimes—define them. I love what Bryan Stevenson also says—that we are *all* so much more than the worst thing we have ever done. The men also taught me that it is impossible to draw a line between good people and bad people. We *all* make mistakes. We *all* behave in both positive and negative ways.

I was ready to retire, but writing this book has kept them with me, and my students continue to nurture me in so many ways. Their loving-kindness toward me will stay with me for the rest of my life. My dad was an exemplary citizen, and I talked about him in Civics class. In the last months of his life, I was often flying to see him. When I came back after his funeral, current and former students were

standing in a small group. When one of them called me over, they formed a tight-knit circle around me.

They said, “We're SO sorry about your dad, Mrs. Wenzel. We've been praying for you since we heard, and we want you to know we've got your back.” Then they presented me with a large envelope. Wisely, I waited until I got home to open it. It was a huge creative card they'd made with enough space to have even former students write notes. It was filled with expressions of sympathy and overwhelming human kindness. Thankful I was home, I dissolved in tears, and it remains one of my most precious possessions.

Teachers don't like to fail, and I failed with many of the men I taught, their old damage and mental health issues way beyond my skill set. I had all kinds of men—some so difficult they made my *hair* hurt. But, with time and nurturing, most of them became successful students. They made me laugh and their stories and their situations made my heart ache. They upended all of my preconceived notions about who they are and who *we* are as a country. Gently, they let me know that they needed lessons that were about *them*—needing to forge new identities by learning about the contributions their ancestors made to this country and feel proud of who they are. In the process, we all learned together—on many days I learned far more than they did. I learned to see my country's richness in new ways. I learned to see it—*whole*. I learned to see them—whole—imperfect as we all are. I watched them over the years as they summoned up courage, put their heads down and worked so hard I sometimes had to insist they take a break. I watched them swagger in with bravado, talk only about sports or pumping iron in the gym—and then fall head over heels in love with poetry. I watched them take exquisite care of each other—in hundreds of creative ways. I watched their fierce desire to make something better of their lives for themselves and their families. As I watched, they enlarged and sharpened my ideas of who God is. They were among the finest people I've ever known.

