Growing up, the only thing I knew about prisons is that I didn't want to end up in one. I had never visited one, nor did I know anyone who had for any reason. Humphrey Bogart and James Cagney movies were as close as I had come. When we drove out of our rather insular, Italian neighborhood and past the county jail in downtown Pittsburgh or the Blockhouse out on Route 28, my father would point didactically toward their palpable, gloomy silence, and I would imagine in their bowels the same lost souls I envisioned in Purgatory.

The day in 1976 that I set foot on a prison yard for the first time as a green VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America) Volunteer, fresh out of graduate school, fresh out of my mother's kitchen, I felt like I had just stepped into one of those surreal Latin American novels I had been studying in my last master's seminar. Dispersed in front of me in a compound that could have been a schoolyard — except that it was topped by barbed wire crowned with razored concertina wire — were men, many of whom seemed roughly my age, dressed in the kinds of green work clothes that janitors and mechanics wear. They were going around in circles, aimlessly sauntering, mooning at picnic tables, shooting hoops, pitching horseshoes, or simply standing with their hands clamped in the galvanized cyclone fence and staring at the rural Huntersville, North Carolina, real estate on the free side of the steel.

My reasons for applying to VISTA were, to my mind, rather uncomplicated. First, I did not want any of the jobs for which my master of arts degree in English literature (in the mid-seventies that most dubious and ubiquitous of academic credentials) qualified me. In truth, I did not want a "job" job. I wanted to do something interesting, something dimensional, something decidedly important, but not necessarily lucrative. It seemed my future, which my parents and teachers had been speaking of so clairvoyantly since I was born, had finally presented itself, and I was hellbent on refusing it. To complicate matters, I wanted to be a writer.

As I murkyly recall, I had no intentions of saving the world. I did not necessarily see myself as a do-gooder, even though I wanted to do good. In fact, my first geographical choice was Montana simply
because I was dying to go to Montana. Period. Duration was
determined in similar fashion; I opted for a year in VISTA instead of
two years in the Peace Corps because I knew I could stand anything
for a year. In other words, I was not yearning for a vocation, much
less a priesthood. Because I fell under the "generalist" rubric — not
being an attorney, physician, building inspector, or someone actually
trained to do something useful
and utilitarian — I was sent to the
South Piedmont Area Prison
Project under the auspices of the
North Carolina Department of
Correction. Thus, my entrance
into the world of the
disenfranchised — from which
not incidentally, as the son of the
son of a Southern Italian
immigrant, I had issued — was
wholly a matter of happenstance.

Until the moment I found
myself on a prison yard and saw those guys who very easily could
have been me, I hadn't known who I was. This is not to say I grew up
privileged. I came from an Italian neighborhood of bricklayers and
steelworkers, many of whom did not speak English, where noone's
parents had gone to college or ever even dreamed about buying
anything but a used automobile, and where prejudice against blacks
and Jews — despite the fact (or especially because) they lived next-
door — was de rigueur. Kids fought and stole and sometimes ended
up in juvenile court. But even so, I had been somehow shielded from
all this, or maybe lied to about it. That prototypical, Dostoyevskyian,
movie-melodramatic hardship that prison inmates suffer, for me
remained remote, something that happened to phantom people,
people unprotected by that charmed cauld that made me and everyone
I knew invulnerable, people to whom society tends to ascribe, by
virtue of their abysmal social standing, moral depravity.

As I stood on that yard seeing versions of myself in another
incarnation, I experienced a most humbling and terrifying empathy. I
would do anything for those guys if they would just keep on being
who they were, if they would continue doing my time for me. This
was the odd, perhaps guilt-ridden, subconscious pact I made with
them and the universe. My God, I was just so thankful it wasn't me.
The least I could do was help them.

For the next fourteen months, my life would revolve around
that very yard — teaching, coaching, counseling, carting guys to their
mothers' funerals, hustling jobs for those about to max out or be
paroled, setting up work-release and study-release programs, and
simply hanging around and talking with the inmates. Back then the
jargon for what VISTAs did was "resource mobilization" and "crisis
intervention," and I suppose that pretty much sums up the practical
side of my apprenticeship.
But something much more poignant was happening simultaneously. I became aware not only of the vast subculture of poverty and affliction, but also of the underground and fervent subculture of the helping professions. For every bit of "resource mobilization" and "crisis intervention" I engineered, I relied on agencies and organizations whose existences, just like the inmates, I theretofore never had to acknowledge: Planned Parenthood, Social Services, CETA, the county Health Department, the Council on Aging, Churchwomen United, Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous, as well as a battalion of socially committed or simply charitable souls, all of whom were altruistic volunteers. Such service was a tremendous, yet odd, notion. Theirs was not the rhetorical, conceptual charity impressed upon me by Catholic catechism, but very real, practical, charitable action. What's more, as a fledgling writer, I was christened with my unlikely first literary preoccupation — the unthinkable phenomenon of prison — which I'm still plumbing today.

The theologian Thomas Moore said "deep changes in life follow movements in imagination." This is precisely what happened to me. I experienced a radical and epiphanic shift in my imagination as a result of being with prison inmates and in close proximity to the community of mercy — which inevitably responds to suffering — on a daily basis. I discovered a rare and secret world from which my acculturation had sheltered me. Up to that point, the only interactions I had known between the haves and the have-nots were when my family dropped off discarded clothes at the Goodwill box or when, as a young student, I was shaken down by a nun for mission money to send to Fiji or Borneo: actions I knew which were well-intentioned, but yet whose purpose remained an abstraction. In prison, suddenly I was an eyewitness: imbedded in my psyche was the image of an illiterate middle-aged white man in prison greens seated at a prison picnic table next to a retired black librarian as she taught him to sound out words like dog and cat. This vision quite simply rearranged my life's agenda. Indeed, I can recount any number of similarly poignant, life-changing tableaux to which I bore witness. Once "aware," in the evangelical sense of the word, of that other world, it was no longer in my power to be uninvolved. If I never again enter another prison, my consciousness will remain influenced by the mere fact that prisons exist, and that orbiting them are people who show up to help.

Such witness inevitably gives way to political awareness. As a VISTA volunteer, I began to discern the disparity among the classes, that the parabola arcing from rich to poor was dizzying, that with syllogistic precision the men confined to prison — at least state
prisons, which are all I know about — came exclusively from the
drugs of that demographic dead man's curve. Once again, harking
back to my life before prison, I was a most apolitical fellow.

Somehow in my education — with bachelor's and master's degrees
in English literature from a good university, I was ostensibly
educated — I'm a tad ashamed to admit I had somehow escaped
the kind of "awareness" that might have spurred me to action.
What had I learned? I was downright innocuous. To invert the old
maxim, ignorance is always an excuse.

When asked to recount my career, I always say my first
teaching job was in a prison, and in the narrowest sense this is
true. What I fail to say is that my teaching in prison was in many
ways the beginning of my own education. Prisons are but one
shackle in the ponderous chain of group homes, halfway houses,
soup kitchens, mental hospitals, battered women's shelters,
juvenile detention centers, and homeless shelters. The same
characters show up in each script. It's no secret that all social ills
are intimately connected, but it's something I had to learn by
seeing it for myself.

For instance, when I first started my VISTA stint at
Huntersville Prison, I became friendly with a guy almost exactly
my age named Juju. He was pulling time for drugs and petty
theft. He'd get out, come back, and occasionally I'd even see him,
invariably wasted, on the street in Charlotte, the city in which I
was living at the time. I hadn't seen him for a good eighteen years
when I ran into him, two springs ago, at our local homeless
shelter, here in Statesville, about fifty miles north of Charlotte,
where I now live. He was ravaged, sick and worn out, still wasted.
We talked some — amazingly enough he recognized me — but
there wasn't much to say. A few months later he died of AIDS in
the shelter hospice.

Does it go without saying that people are not aware of places
like prison, of people like Juju? The media notwithstanding, the
"information" which inundates the culture remains to most
citizens abstract and cannot provide an eye-witness's brush with
reality. Folks, as a rule, do not cross the tracks. If one does not
have occasion to witness for oneself the bedraggled "unwashed
masses," it is quite easy, even therapeutic, to deny their existence.
It is instructive to note that in North Carolina, a state rich in
penitentiaries, that all Depression-era prison road camps, at least
one in each of the one hundred counties, were built deep in the
country at the end of remote roads, decidedly away from public
scrutiny. In the same vein it is easy to remain ignorant, in denial,
about that which one has never been educated.

How does one teach this? How are charity and tolerance
transformed into a pedagogy? I'm not really sure. But I do know
that somewhere in the classroom, space must be made for the
people who, by the very nature of their identities as cultural
pariah, cannot be there.
About the Author

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His numerous awards include the Wachovia Playwrights Prize and The Playwrights Fund of North Carolina Prize for his one-act play, "Afomo," which was produced by the Lab Theatre of the University of Tennessee at Knoxville. He is a 1994 recipient of a literature fellowship from the North Carolina Arts Council and a 1995 recipient of the Samuel Talmadge Ragan Award, presented annually for outstanding contributions to the Fine Arts of North Carolina over an extended period.

Bathanti holds a bachelor and a master of arts degree in English literature from the University of Pittsburgh and the master of fine arts degree in creative writing from Warren Wilson College. He has taught at Central Piedmont Community College, Davidson College, Wingate College, and Saint Andrews College, and was a North Carolina Visiting Artist at Anson Community College and McDowell Technical Community College.