



Witness: A Professor Shares His Experiences Working with Prisoners

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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 murkily 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

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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, Dostoyevskyan, movie-melodramatic hardship that prison inmates suffer, for me remained remote, something that happened to phantom people, people unprotected by that charmed caul that made me and everyone I knew invulnerable, people to whom society tends to ascribe, by virtue of their abyssmal 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

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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 philosopher and 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 dregs 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

Joseph Bathanti, a member of the English faculty at Mitchell Community College in Statesville, N.C., is also the chairman of the Humanities Division and is writer-in-residence. In 1999, he was the recipient of the Ernest A. Lynton Faculty Award for Professional Service and Academic Outreach, presented by The New England Resource Center for Higher Education.

He is author of four books of poetry: *Communion Partners*, *Anson County*, *The Feast of All Saints*, and *This Metal*, which was nominated for The National Book Award and won the 1997 Oscar Arnold Young Award from The North Carolina Poetry Council for best book of poems by a North Carolina writer. His poetry, fiction, and nonfiction have appeared in *Manhattan Poetry Review*, *The Nebraska Review*, *Carolina Quarterly*, *America*, *The Pittsburgh Quarterly*, *Louisiana Literature*, *The Sun*, *The Texas Review*, *California Quarterly*, *Studies in Short Fiction*, *Southern Humanities Review*, *South Dakota Review*, *Kentucky Poetry Review*, *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *Southern Poetry Review*, *The Hollins Critic*, *Tar River Poetry*, *The Cincinnati Poetry Review*, *South Carolina Review*, and others.

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.