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I remember my roommate's telling me what a rewarding experience she was having teaching literature in the mid-80s at the women's maximum security prison in New York State. She told me how her students' reading of Ntozake Shange's choreopoem, *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf*, was the most powerful she had ever heard performed, even on Broadway. "These women have lived through those stories; they are their stories. It's unquestionably the most talented class I have ever taught."

Intrigued, I began to fantasize that maybe some day I, too, would have an opportunity to teach at the prison. It reminded me of the challenges of the Honors seminars I have had the privilege of teaching over the years. But I wondered what a white male professor would have to offer these women. How would they respond to me? I even had a vision that some day I would indeed teach at the prison but then promptly forgot about it.

Approximately fifteen years later, in the fall of 1997, a memo was circulated by the Director of our Weekend College inviting Marymount College faculty to submit course proposals for a new, privately funded College Bound Program at the same women's prison. Though the vision had receded with the years, the memo jogged my memory and I knew I would have to submit a proposal for my favorite psychology course titled, "The Perennial Quest: Self-Actualization," based primarily on Scott Peck's book, *The Road Less Traveled*. Though a number of proposals were submitted, somehow it felt like this was my turn, and my proposal was accepted. And thus began a series of events that eventuated in my beginning to teach a variety of college-level courses in two of the local women's prisons in New York State.

When I walked into the classroom that first day in the spring of 1998 I could read the deep frustration, anger, and depression on many of the women's faces. "What have I gotten myself into?" I asked myself. But somehow I did not despair and felt the grace of my purpose there. It wasn't long before we were laughing and crying, telling our stories and making the most of our being there, learning and growing together.

I honestly believe that my maleness and whiteness became transparent in a very short period of time. I became a confidante, a fellow seeker, a father-figure; I was no longer "other." One inmate wrote in her final paper

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# White Male Professor at a Women's Prison

by John D. Lawry

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John D. Lawry is a professor of psychology at Marymount College in Tarrytown, NY. He was the author of "Students and Teachers Through the Eyes of a Course in Miracles" in the Summer 2000 issue of *Paths*. He is the author of *May You Never Stop Dancing: A Professor's Letters to His Daughter* (St. Mary's Press, 1998) and *College 101: A First-Year Reader* (McGraw-Hill, 1999).

Thank you for providing us with insight, your knowledge, and your love. It is a good feeling to know that someone does care, and also that someone knows that we are not what society portrays us to be. We are just people who have been dealt a bad hand in life, but some of us would like to give that hand back!

In retrospect, I now believe that I was not mature enough to teach at the women's prison until recently. My teaching experience at the prison has been very positive and I am now convinced that my being there at this time rather than at an earlier point in my career is providential. I feel like I am on a mission, and the response of my students supports that feeling. Indeed, teaching at the prison has been one of the most satisfying experiences of my 37-year career in higher education.

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I would be hard pressed to explain why it has been so satisfying, but it has a lot to do with the gratitude and motivation I witness on the part of the students as well as a sense of accomplishment and a sense of making a difference on my part. The fact is that this College Bound Program is making a difference. The *New York Times* (June 24, 2001) reporting on this program quoted a penology expert who said: "It is the largest, most robust, most linked to the community of any program in the country." A study was recently conducted by Michelle Fine, a professor at CUNY Graduate Center, on the program's effect on recidivism and prison management. I am happy to report that the results were astounding. Compared to a general (female) population recidivism rate of 29.9% between 1985 and 1995, those who participated in the College Bound Program had a rate of only 7.7% over a 36-month post-release period. That's a reduction of almost 75%!

But even more than this, I believe I am learning from these women as much as I am teaching them. They have challenged my stereotypes about prisons and prisoners, not to mention my being challenged by their honesty, courage, and spirituality. They keep me "being real" and will not tolerate academic jargon and verbal pyrotechnics.

This is not to say that there have been no challenges. Perhaps the greatest challenge for the students (and professor!) is the length of the class periods, approximately two and a half hours with a short break in the middle. This has proven to be difficult for some of the students who are not used to sitting and focusing for such an extended period of time. Another challenge for me has been the wide diversity in preparation and aptitude in the students. Sometimes I have to repeat instructions, etc., a number of times with resultant annoyance on the part of the quicker students (the majority). However, I must add that this annoyance was often offset by the good will, humor, and camaraderie among the students. Especially noteworthy was the surprisingly easy dialog between the women of diverse racial, ethnic, sexual orientation, and religious backgrounds. When there were occasional ethnic and racial remarks by the students, I held my breath only to discover that there

was no cause for alarm. More often than not, the remarks were followed by laughter. These women have been forced to learn how to live together.

The most recent course I have taught is a non-credit 12-week course in "emotional literacy." Based on Robin Casarjian's book, *Houses of Healing: A Prisoner's Guide to Inner Power and Healing* (1995), the course, as stated in the syllabus, is "designed to foster self-understanding and emotional and spiritual growth; and encourage responsibility and accountability towards oneself and others" — no small matters for people convicted of serious crimes.

The discovery of Casarjian's book was a fortunate accident. I was looking for another reading to supplement Peck's book and the other books that I had used when I taught my first course in the prison mentioned above. I happened to read an interview with Casarjian, in which she told the story of how the book and course came into existence. It seems she was invited to give a presentation in a prison in the Boston area, where she lives, on the subject of forgiveness. Expecting a few men to voluntarily show up for a talk on forgiveness, when she arrived at the prison, whose total population was 700 at the time, she found 120 men waiting for her to begin. Out of that experience came the inspiration to write the book. Upon reading about this book I intuitively knew this was the book I was looking for. Needless to say, this book was by far the most popular and provocative of all of the seven books we read that semester and, as a result, I became interested in the course that Casarjian has since designed around the book.

I contacted Casarjian and obtained a copy of her *The Houses of Healing Training Manual*. In the Introduction, Casarjian tells us:

At a time when many prisons are cutting back on treatment and counseling services, it is particularly important to find ways to offer help to those who want it. Too many prisoners are being released without being offered opportunities to face and heal some of the core issues that got them to prison in the first place.

And that is exactly what this course does: encourage inmates to face and heal themselves.

Beginning with the exhortation to "do" the time rather than just waste it, Casarjian introduces the concept of the Self as opposed to the sub-personalities that began to erode the prisoners' freedom on the "long and winding road from childhood to prison." As one inmate wrote, "When the course was announced, I realized it had my name on it. I was someone who still needed to heal. So, I decided it was time to pick myself up and start all over again." From there the course "gives participants the skills to read and understand the emotions that motivate their choices, perceptions, and feelings about themselves and others," including anger, resentment, grief, and guilt. Finally, the course describes the power and necessity of forgiveness, "a bold choice for a peaceful heart," and offers techniques of transformation such as reframing, relaxation, journaling, meditation, and spiritual awakening.

The power of the course is extraordinary. Indeed, as one inmate wrote at the end, "I am not the same miserable, hurt and lost soul who was first incarcerated three years ago." And another wrote, "I have learnt so much about myself that I don't think this would have been possible had I tried this self-discovery on my own."

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I am currently on leave from the prison and do not know if I will return to teaching there. It is difficult teaching overload, driving a long distance to a night class, and not getting home until 9:30 in the evening, especially for someone in the twilight of his career. But I worry about these people who now have names and faces and stories. Most of the faculty in the College Bound Program keep coming back, and I am now beginning to understand why. There is something about the place, the women I mean, that gets to you. For some reason, you can't forget them. They have done terrible things, some of them. But as one inmate wrote, "I am more than just an alcoholic (read, "addict, murderer," etc.) and this statement provides healing for my raw wrenched soul."

Perhaps therein lies the secret of the draw; we're all more than our mistakes, our weaknesses, and when I am with these women I feel more than just a professor. I feel like a whole person who is appreciated and loved for who I am. This is an experience unlike any other that I can remember having in a

long time. I can't help agreeing with Casarjian when she writes about seeing prisoners as "people-in-process." To quote:

Quite honestly, some of the most thoughtful, mature, compassionate people I have ever met are people in prison doing life and long-term sentences. Many have murdered. They committed their crimes many

years ago and have used their time to grapple with their actions,

the impact of their actions, their feelings, and their profound and appropriate guilt and remorse. Out of a difficult past they have re-created themselves as humans of great depth and compassion.

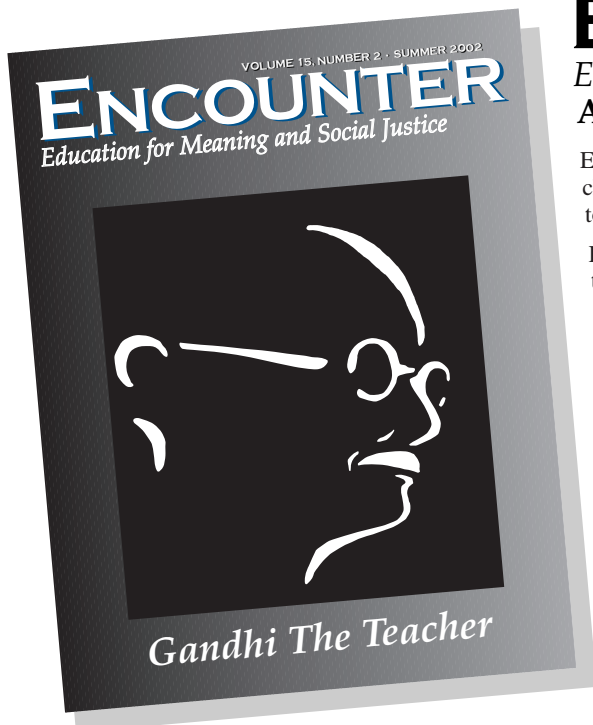
Most of the faculty I teach with would agree.

#### Note

Portions of this article were published in the Marymount College student newspaper, *The Cormont*.

#### Resource

For those interested in learning more about the emotional literacy course described above, consult the webpage of The Lionheart Foundation which is the sponsor of The National Emotional Literacy Project for Prisoners, [www.lionheart.org](http://www.lionheart.org). The book, *Houses of Healing: A Prisoner's Guide to Inner Power and Freedom*, by Robin Casarjian can be purchased only from The Lionheart Foundation, Box 194 Back Bay, Boston, MA 02117 for \$15.00, which includes s&h.



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