

Voices from inside the Oregon State Prison

The writing/poetry class at Oregon State Prison in Salem has become one of my best teachers. I learn a great deal each time I meet with the class, and thought I'd share some material with you. The class focused on techniques for writing interviews. We explored the Q & A style. I asked about six questions and let

the class choose which one they wanted to answer. The following answers were not rewritten or cut, and I only used names when permission was given by the writer. I am proud to work with a group that has skill and enthusiasm.

Fortunately, my work with prisoners has

provided me with some real insights about how it feels to be in lockdown. Most of us can only guess how we would handle loneliness and the oppression of being incarcerated. So, at every opportunity, I ask prisoners, "What's life in the penitentiary setting really like?"

Change

Dan Symonds: "Change is not something that I like to do as a rule. Especially if someone else is trying to be the instigator of that change. 'Don't push me' is my immediate response. 'Hold firmly to the status quo' is my motto. But this stubborn reaction can lead to trouble. Change is necessary and unavoidable. To embrace change requires a surrender to the possibility that greater good could come about as the result of a new course of action. And for any one who reads the paper, watches TV, or sticks their head out the window, this requires a leap of faith. In fact, change is a positive force because it causes us to grow as an individual. Being taken out of your comfort zone develops character and perseverance. It puts you face to face with the creative force that drives the universe. Change brings you closer to where you need to be. So go ahead and push — but don't push too hard."

Have I changed since my incarceration?

Socrates Ladner: "This is debatable. Have I changed or just modified my behavior? I have changed how I perceive

others as well as respond to people and situations. For example: Judging: Before working on my flaws, I would judge the behavior of others instead of examining my own shortcomings. If someone would cut in front of me in line, I would yell at them, thus, creating a negative situation. It would have been better if I would have thought the situation through, the perceived offense, and understood that it was not directed at me. My response nowadays, is to view someone cutting in line as a minor inconvenience that will only delay me for a few seconds or minutes. This is minor. The positive part is that I can improve my patience.

"Breathe in, Breathe out. Let it go. I once viewed negative behavior in others as a personal attack. The reality is that this was egotistic feelings I didn't even know I had, and a need to control others, due to my low self-worth. Fortunately, I am now aware of these flaws and I practice replacing them. It's not about me. It's about what positive contribution my behavior leaves behind. I'm the only one I can control. Nowadays I practice the Serenity plan. Practice leads to evidence."

What have you done to change your criminal behavior this year?

Socrates Ladner: "It's not just this year or any one year. It's throughout my entire incarceration set. In 1995, after being in and out of segregation, I woke up. I hated segregation and still do, so I started my life's journey to change for positive growth. I did and still do all the programs I can get myself into such as Pathfinders, Breaking Barriers, Toastmasters International, AA, 7th Step, and I get involved rather than just being a shadow in the chair."

When was the last time you cried?

Kenneth Lloyd Huddleston: "What time is it? I'm a crybaby sometimes, sad songs, sad movies, and the news (no need to add sad to that one) but most of all when I think of my past life's choices and the crime I committed hurts the most. And that is more punishment than any physical prison can ever do. If ever there was a hell, it's trapped in my heart."

Do prison reform groups make a difference?

Anonymous: "For reform to take place there must be a change in what the hearts

and minds feel and think about incarceration in the public at large. And how much does the public think about prison? Probably not very much unless it is when they are watching reality TV shows about prison life on MSNBC or the like. These shows like to dramatize the violent aspect of life behind bars, probably because that is what the public wants to see. But the real story that could lead to reform is the wasted potential that lives here. The prisoners who are forced to face their demons and find new direction for their lives; the inmates who choose not to buy into the gangster mentality of prison that is glamorized on TV shows and bravely make changes in their psyche that lead to positive change. For this change to take place requires grace in a prisoner's life. For prison reform to make a difference in the public requires that the public somehow learns about grace as well. The question is whether they can be pulled away from their TV sets long enough for that to happen.

How has writing influenced my life behind bars?

Wallace E. High: "The stimulation to produce something of value, while held in confinement with limited opinions, has been especially rewarding to me and, I trust, to the many with which I correspond routinely. Before entering this institution, I had suffered a severe stroke which reduced my mental capacity in the areas of short-term memory, focus and comprehension. Also my emotions of sadness were totally unshielded so that I would cry at the drop of a hat, much like a 5-year-old child.

"Fortunately, I was soon under the care of Dr. Ruthven, OSP's psychiatrist who diagnosed my condition and prescribed appropriate medication sufficient to make me able to function in a nearly-normal state of activity. His astute perspective salvaged my abilities and encouraged me to use more efficiently the 60 percent brain function left to me.

"Accordingly, I set about writing with a vengeance poetry, short stories, haiku, letters to editors, essays and general correspondence. I believe the art of writing has compensated me immensely."

Defuse resentment.
Walk in peace through the hostile
This is real courage.

— Wallace E. High

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