

Of Balls And Chains: Great Books Discussion Program Fosters Free Thought In Prisons - Amity360

August 21, 2008

Prison isn't known as the most salutary place for developing the intellect. In *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, the narrator reflects on Ivan's eight-year tenure in a Siberian labor camp: "During his years in prisons and camps, he'd lost the habit of planning for the next day, for a year ahead, for planning for his family. The authorities did his thinking for him about everything – it was somehow easier that way." Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, who died earlier this month at 89, based the novel on his own experiences serving hard time for alleged anti-Soviet agitation after World War II. And while it is always hazardous to equate a narrator's views with the novelist's, the comment certainly draws attention to the soporific effect that imprisonment can have on the mind.

If Solzhenitsyn was similarly affected, he evidently did not allow his confinement to dull his wits entirely: he won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1970, and the gulag entered the Western imagination thanks to his writings. But most convicts don't have the luxury of turning their imprisonment into fodder for a Great Book; in the United States today, some are barely literate. Of course, they tend to be locked up for drug dealing, theft, and murder rather than their political convictions, and their cellmates aren't usually members of the Muscovite intelligentsia. And naturally, the quality of life at federal and state penitentiaries in the US is – to say the least – a step up from labor camps in Stalinist Russia. Yet a tightly regimented routine, a hierarchical environment, and a steady diet of television and sloppy joes are certainly sufficient to blunt a prisoner's intellectual faculties. But when inmates are given food for thought, it's a whole different ballgame, according to Peter Buttross, a Mississippi poet and philosopher who has been co-leading a Great Books discussion group at a local prison for five years. "In these prisons, you will find spirituality, religiosity, and devotion to intellectual and spiritual pursuits that dwarf what I have experienced in university life," he explains over the phone. "There is an urgency there that I have never seen in graduate seminars. It's a question of survival for them whether they understand these texts. That's the meat for the week to sustain them," he says.

Tom McNeely, a Natchez, Mississippi attorney, single-handedly started the prison discussion club in the late nineties. He and Buttross hold their bi-monthly sessions at a Corrections Corporation of America facility in Woodville, Mississippi. Their program now has the substantial support of Dr. Daniel Born and his Great Books Foundation in Chicago, which supplies the reading material for the program, as well as training for volunteers in other prison groups.

The point of the Great Books prison program is certainly not to impose on the inmates a set of values that have been drafted by sexist and racist dead white males, as some critics might argue. In fact, the Foundation's anthologies promote a very roomy canon: selections range from Sophocles and Rousseau, to Toni Morrison and Gita Mehta. The purpose of reading Great Books is primarily to encourage prisoners to engage with Big Ideas. "Why not make them read the latest crappy memoir or Danielle Steele?" Born asks rhetorically. "Reading the books that matter will help the inmates think about the issues that matter," he says.

Inmates are not spoon-fed the material, either. The Foundation advocates a Shared Inquiry approach to teaching, a democratic strategy that privileges question-and-answer

sessions over top-down lectures.

But while Buttross embraces this approach philosophically, he has found he must occasionally stray from the Socratic Method to cater to his students' wide range of educational levels. "I have to be able to accommodate everyone, from the guy who's been in jail for 109 years and has read the whole Encyclopedia Britannica, to the one who has trouble just reading the material," he explains. "At times, I've found that I need to orient the group a little and break the rules of Shared Inquiry by talking about more than the text before us. Sometimes, I'll talk about the history of festivals in Athens before getting into Greek tragedy. These guys don't always have an academic background, but they do have street smarts, and if we can get them through the language, they can always deal with the subject matter," he notes.

Most outside programs in penitentiaries are faith-based, but the Great Books in prisons program is a laical initiative; it promotes knowledge for its own sake. "We're kind of an oddball," says Buttross. "We come in, we're free, but we're not selling a religion or a philosophy. We just want everyone to leave with their own ideas, without pushing the guy they disagree with in the nose."

Buttross and McNeely may not proselytize, but the Great Books program does have an agenda: to instill Enlightenment values – such as the importance of rational thought and freedom of speech – to empower inmates intellectually and socially. "A lot of why these guys end up where they are is a certain insecurity," claims Buttross. "Reading great stuff and challenging them to deal with it can instill a certain amount of self-confidence; it's therapeutic. If they can stand shoulder to shoulder with a thought in these texts, they can do so with anybody and anything," he says.

Nurturing a tolerant environment within the racially polarized prison, however, has not always been a forthright task. The Natchez jail is roughly 65% black and 35% white, and the Great Books program there counts members of both groups. McNeely and Buttross initially accepted all those who signed up for the class, but a few years ago they had to bureaucratize the admissions process because the classroom "was becoming a meeting place for inmates to socialize and exchange information," Buttross explains. "The racial mix of the group has over the years varied, sometimes predominantly black and sometimes predominantly white." The screening process does not exclude anyone based on creed or politics; rather, the application process helps to ensure that "we have in the group people who are actually interested in reading and discussing serious literature," Buttross clarifies. Discussing the Great Books has generally tended to dispel any antagonism between inmates. "When you tell them that anyone can have their say and they realize that someone is listening, that they won't get kicked out, it takes the edge off," says Buttross. He has witnessed what passes for a watershed event in jail: "A leader of the white group offered to share his magazines with one of the black guys. This reading material is pretty precious to them, it's read from cover to cover, from *The Nation* to *National Geographic*," Buttross explains.

One of the keys to racial détente is sticking to the text, and not letting discussions veer into prison politics or anecdotal rants. "There's a temptation to use the discussions as a bull session, for the prisoners to talk about themselves," explains Born. "But we try to stay clear of that stuff; we're not interested in prisoners' personal stories. We don't talk about what they did to land in prison, whether they were justly or unjustly punished, or how much time they've done," he says.

Occasionally, details of the inmates' criminal exploits do leak out. And yet the prisoners' world forever remains a chiaroscuro to freemen. "Over the years, information is volunteered," says Buttross, "but you never know what's going on in prison. You believe what you want to believe in their stories; maybe they're confessions, maybe they're creative non-fiction. You see shades and reflections and shadows, but you never know for sure. One guy will disappear after two years of attending the program, and then he'll show up again months later, and you'll never find out what happened," he remarks.

The racial mix of the group has certainly not discouraged McNeely or Buttross from assigning works by the likes of Frederick Douglas and John Brown – or texts that deal with imprisonment and violence explicitly, for that matter. "We tried to put Julius Caesar on one time," McNeely says, "and we just finished Sophocles' *Antigone*. We assigned parts and did the voices, and read the whole thing together. We've handled what's going on in revolutions, we've read Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*. Here, they can say things that they wouldn't say anywhere else in the prison, and we are here to make sure it doesn't get out of control," he adds.

Surprisingly perhaps, the prison administration has never censored the curriculum, although some of Western civilization's great texts could be considered highly inflammatory reading material – think of Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*, or Thoreau's *Civil Disobedience* – for a group of convicts. "That's not what prisons necessarily want inmates to be exposed to," says Buttross. "They want them to be exposed to stuff that will make them be good prisoners. But I don't see where pursuing the truth should ever be snuffed out because everybody can't deal with it. We let them know that they are permitted to doggedly follow every idea out to its end. I tend to do just that. Sometimes they look at me as some kind of revolutionary," he says with a chuckle.

McNeely and Buttross have no means of empirically testing the effects of the program on the inmates, and they certainly don't see the Great Books as a miracle cure for recidivism. But they have heard positive feedback through the grapevine. "We're not trying to change the world or anything," says McNeely. "But we do hear from guards that some of the prisoners think it's a wonderful thing, and that we've toned down some of the inmates. We do think we have a successful program that needs to be expanded," he adds.

Lack of funding is one of the main obstacles to its expansion. But the Great Books in prisons program got a leg-up this year when Born, of the Great Books Foundation, teamed up with the Tennessee Department of Correction and the faculty at Middle Tennessee State University to launch a nine-week pilot project in three Tennessee prisons last spring. MTSU English professor Phillip E. Phillips received an MTSU Public Service Grant with matching funds from the MTSU College of Liberal Arts to start the Great Books in Middle Tennessee Prisons project, and he recruited colleagues to volunteer as teachers at the Riverbend Maximum Security Institution, the Lois M. DeBerry Special Needs Facility, and the Tennessee Prison for Women. Born and Phillips are currently seeking new sources of funding to repeat the program, and expand the project to more Tennessee facilities, as well as to prisons in other states.

Sharmila Patel, the Director of Education for the Tennessee Department of Correction, had organized book clubs in prisons before, but she jumped on the Great Books idea as a welcome departure from the norm. "In groups that talk about popular literature, it ends up being more about the pleasure of reading and about feelings," she says. "But Great Books have a focus on ideas, so you're not talking about whether or not you liked it, but on the thoughts behind it."

Like in Mississippi, the inmates are engaging at sophisticated levels. During one of his evening discussion groups this past spring, Phillips was intrigued by an inmate's deconstruction of Emerson's essay "Self-Reliance." "One participant called attention to Emerson's claim that too often people perform works 'as an apology or extenuation of their living in the world...Their virtues are penances,'" Phillips relates. "He agreed with Emerson on this point and said that he could relate to Emerson's desire 'not [to] wish to expiate, but to live.' To live, in this case, meant to live honestly, authentically, in Emerson's view and in that of the inmate participant, who agreed with Emerson's larger premise that nonconformity is essential to any notion of selfhood. The inmate, like Emerson, was not advocating nonconformity for its own sake; rather, he was making the point that people should act according to their own conscience, not according to the expectations and conventions of society." Evidently, the prisoner wasn't pouncing on the idea of nonconformity to rail against the justice system; instead, he was using the material to construct a clear-sighted argument. In fact, Born, who has attended some of the discussion groups and traveled to Mississippi to train the faculty volunteers in Shared Inquiry, has generally found that the issues that spark the most interesting debate among inmates are precisely "questions of justice and truth," he says.

The reception to the program among inmates has also been comparable to the Mississippi experiment. "When I first heard about this class," one inmate at Riverbend wrote to Phillips, "I was inclined to believe, once again, some more individuals wanted to come in on another one of their feel good missions. I refuse to be a part of anything that free-world people introduce inside prison where I feel I would be exploited so somebody will feel good about themselves...However, from the time I first met Dr. Phillips...I knew that they were here simply because they wanted to share a part of their world without no other expectation than for us to give them a chance to enhance our lives," he concluded.

It may sound trite and romantic, but it still rings true: the Great Books discussions give inmates the opportunity to transcend their literal and metaphorical imprisonment through the power of the imagination. After all, "this isn't the manager class we're dealing with," says McNeely; for many of the inmates, the program is an induction into a world of culture that they have, to use a Heideggerian term, always-already been excluded from due to their socio-economic backgrounds. Ironically, it is in jail that they are being offered the opportunity to overcome some of their disadvantages.

In fact, few places are as conducive to learning the value of the "examined" life as prison. "After several years of doing this, I've realized that the intellectual and spiritual lives of these inmates are the only things that are truly theirs, the only thing that can call their own," says Buttross. "Many are as devoted as monks."

It's a germane comparison that Solzhenitsyn himself literalized in the figure of Alyosha, the devoted Baptist prisoner in *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*. "Why do you want

freedom?" Alyosha asks Ivan in the final scenes of the novel. "In freedom your last grain of faith will be choked with weeds. You should rejoice that you're in prison. Here you have time to think about your soul," he says.

Like the Russian novelist, Buttross has also noted a gift for introspection among inmates that is rarely found beyond the prison walls. And yet the tension between freedom of thought and a captive body is not always an easy one to navigate. "How do you maintain your spirit alive when your body has to toe the line?" Buttross ponders. "The prison's job is to put the chains on; ours is to take them off. But we must be careful how we do it – because it is a prison, after all."

Sources and Further Reading

- English Faculty Take Great Books, Learning to Three Prisons - [Newswise](#)
- Great Books Foundation Supports Prison Literacy Project - [Reuters](#)
- [The Great Books Foundation](#)

*Photo Credit: blogs.kansascity.com
August 21, 2008*

[Close Window](#)