

Can the Humanities Flourish in Prison?

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What is the power of the arts and humanities in prisons? What is the value of the intimate space that is created between people who live in prisons and the volunteers who come in to teach in those classroom spaces? This is what we, Cedric and Karen, have come to the page to think about aloud, together. We are now two years into writing together about arts in prisons, and it has been six years since Cedric first stepped into Karen's Shakespeare theater classroom in a men's state prison in Colorado. Now into his 22nd year of incarceration, Cedric still recalls that day as "the first time that someone, other than my visitors in the visiting room, looked at me and saw a human being."

For Karen, who founded a nonprofit theater company in Colorado Springs in 2008, the two years that she taught theater as a prison volunteer proved to be a gateway into the veiled world of corrections. Following graduate study in education in New Zealand, she attended the University of Cambridge and is now a doctoral student in Criminology at UT Dallas. In 2018, she undertook a U.S.-wide survey of people who taught theater in prisons. They were mostly actors and directors, although some were humanities academics in English or Communications departments. Karen also conducted in-depth interviews with 36 theater volunteers, both male and female state-trained volunteers who taught in jails or prisons for men, women, or youth. These volunteers, whose average age was 44 with an average of seven years of experience as prison volunteers, ran programs at all levels of security through to solitary housing units.

In the US, there are approximately 5,000 corrections facilities, approximately 3,000 of which are jails and around 2,000, state and federal prisons. It is a massive system, and we know you have heard the numbers: there are 2.2 million people incarcerated, although these numbers have decreased since COVID. With 127 prison theater programs U.S.-wide in 2018, they barely make a programming dent in prisons. But the individual response and experience, both for the arts volunteers and the incarcerated participants, is often profound. Radical experiences of inclusion and belonging shape arts experiences in prisons. In a place of radical exclusion, danger, and fear, both the practice of art and the relational milieu that is the arts classroom ushers in healing, hope, and possibilities for being human in the midst of what Cedric describes as the “carnival of cannibals” that is prison.

When you come of age in prison, as Cedric did, you learn to not only look at people and things but to really observe. After ten years in solitary confinement, small movements and gestures can be radically affecting. When your volunteer Shakespeare class instructor leans toward you to whisper an observation during a showing of Kenneth Branagh’s *Much Ado About Nothing*, you wonder not at the boldness of Beatrice but at the scent of healthy lung tissue that fills your nostrils. In the stagnant stench of prison, you worry that your “foulness” might infect her “beautiful soul,” because the arts and humanities, in prison, are about nothing more nor less than learning to breathe. They are about learning to trust that there will be fresh air tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow—and not really believing it but nevertheless coming back for more. After a Shakespeare performance class in prison, it is about going to bed with, not sugar plums dancing in your head, but with an iambic rhythm that echoes through the night against the blare of a loudspeaker that rarely quietens amidst the bright lights outside your cell that never dim.

In the noisy, brutal, and even deadly atmosphere of prison, the arts and humanities beckon fiercely toward the humane, the human.

Anger, frustration, boredom, hatred and the very real fear of death or serious bodily harm taint every action in the prison environment. Beyond prison, debates ring in University Senate meetings and on social media over the value of English and history and the arts in an economy increasingly dominated by computer science and A.I., by marketing and the all-powerful Amazon algorithm. Inside prison, where time swirls thickly as a murky pool in which people grow older but there is little other material change, reading and writing poetry and prose becomes a way not only of marking time but of making it meaningful.

Here, in the golden hour that is a theater arts class in prison, is the loud roar of Bottom with his donkey's head, announcing his presence. Here are the fervent whispers of Romeo and Juliet under the covers before they part at the song of the lark, revealing their love. Here is the space to contemplate the beauty of movement and speech, to feel language trippingly on the tongue that earlier that morning tasted coffee prepared from hot or cold tap water, depending on the water temperature du jour, strained through a sock. Staff, prisoners, administration, every single one of them rigidly walks a tight line knowing that any violation of the prison code, real or perceived, can be life-altering or life-ending. Here, even here, Cedric arms and armors himself with art: his trusty flex pen, blank paper, and his memories of magical occurrences during his truncated experiences with theater-based volunteers.

One of the gifts of the arts and humanities in prison is that of inclusion. Of his fellow incarcerated artists, Cedric says, "We share the same ferocious devotion to our craft, sacrificing and suffering, catering and cajoling, to reach our practice. We stand steel-spined, steady-eyed, and fire-bellied, as we invited our peers and our captors to see us, one line at a time, one drawing at a time." Particularly in high-security and close custody or solitary confinement-type settings, it becomes important to know that one is not alone, to find out that there are others of the same ilk though differently pigmented or extricated or artistically inclined.

Particularly now, with the reinstatement of Pell grants for prisoners, no one really believes that people go to prison for the education. The last forty punitive years of mass incarceration, when warehousing reigned as the supreme carceral aim, have rather put an end to the idea that prisons rival country clubs. In this long interregnum since Pell grants for prisoners were withdrawn in 1994, the humanities nevertheless insisted on inserting themselves into individuals' lives. People read fiction in prisons, and images danced in their heads. They wrote letters, those letters informed by their reading. They engaged in conversations; they swapped books. At higher custody levels, this latter activity was no small undertaking. Sometimes, to share a book, it meant that one had to carefully separate the pages into bundled parts, as Cedric recently did, carefully separating the pages of

Viktor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning* into packages just thin enough to swish (or, the technical term: *fish*) under his cell door, across the hall, and down the tier to the intended recipient.

Run much like a community theater group, although perhaps with rival gang members or class members who have seriously wounded each other out in the prison yard, the theater classroom in prison becomes a meaning-filled rehearsal space for a different kind of life from the life of punitive deprivation served up with cold Folgers in the morning. In an environment of restraint, control, and coercion, the “free space” of the theater classroom in prison becomes a space for emergence, for being seen, and for relationship. It is a “free space” in the sense that people who live in prisons describe as being “not like prison.” In this vibrant space, words have a way of getting around and ideas have a way of germinating, for the arts have always been practiced in arenas of deprivation: wartime; concentration camps; and prisons. In any total institution or extreme circumstance, the arts rise to the surface as a tube pushed up through the earth for breathing. Like the bell tied to a Victorian cadaver's finger, lest he or she prove to be alive after all, art production signals that the artist is alive.

Art in prison, whether visual, theatrical, or musical, is a radical act of creativity. To create art in an extreme setting—extreme in trauma, isolation, deprivation—is to wrestle limited resources into an alchemical Gordian knot that disgorges something more than the sum of its parts. Sometimes it seems that, the greater the pressure and the more precarious the process, the more rarefied and powerful the offering. Thus, amidst the hefty, seductive pull of stagnation, when one begins one's sentence believing that it is possible to sleep one's prison time away, art demands an alignment with *life*. To put pen to paper is to declare that one is here, located in space, tethered and grounded to a place, yet free—free to draw as and what and if and when one desires. Free to share or not share the work, as one wishes. It is possible, with thumb on the fleshy belly of a four-inch “flex” pen, and index and pinky fingers straddling its length—it is *possible* to illustrate and, thus, perhaps, indicate another world. One can draw people towards oneself and bathe in their presence as they emerge on the page. One can remember a past and envision a future. One can begin to believe in oneself as an actor in possession of intellect, creativity, and agency, despite the stricture and restrictions within which one lives.

In the bounded world of prison, this is not nothing. Let us say that again: to create; to put marks on a page; to read; to recite; to think; to speak: *this is not nothing*. When the alternative is stagnation or death—a very real alternative in the closed and cloistered, locked and closeted world of the penitentiary, where news does not get out, and light and air do not get in—these marks on the page, these words

between people, they matter. They matter in the sense of being important, or even urgent, but they also matter in the sense of calling something into being: they make real - and in that emerging reality they declare that you are here, that you are. While Martin Buber speaks powerfully to the I-Thou relationship with another, there is a potency in the I-Thou relationship with oneself in prison. In the declaration that *I am* in the precarious darkness of a prison cell, one regards one's existence as not only primordial but pre-eminent. Without this divine sense of self, without believing oneself to be here and present, the alternative of self-evisceration, of active harm, or inadvertent stagnation, is very real.

When the authors of this article first met and the prisoner found himself looked at and seen, he fully expected the arts volunteer to turn her gaze away. Instead, there was a moment of fundamental recognition in what Martin Buber terms *das zwischenmenschliche*, the relational space between people in which it is possible to begin to belong to one another. It is this radical act of inclusion as human beings who belong to one another that sets the stage for the enduring impact of the arts in prisons. This is the residue that lingers long after one leaves the scene of engagement (the classroom) and returns to the place of isolation (the cell). Here, in this space of radical inclusion, two or three or twelve in a prison classroom can sit down and not only reason together but create something new: a radical community of inclusion, and kinship, and love.

A prison arts classroom might seem unexpected as a radical setting for love. Certainly, most prisoners and prison arts volunteers don't expect to define it that way, not when they first enter in. Later, however, and upon reflection, many find they can come to it no other way. For, the radical act of art—of believing that which is in the creative human mind and hand and heart can matter—along with the radical act of inclusion, defines the setting as a place that cannot proscribe a radical act of love. To know oneself seen and named, valued and beloved, in the mutual engagement of co-producing art in the most difficult of spaces, is a harbinger of hope, hard on the heels of this radical act of inclusion-hospitality. This is the place and possibility of healing, not only for the prisoners and volunteers who participate but for the staff who wearily circle the wagons each night, trying edgily to make it home in one piece after too-long shifts.

This sense of welcome and embrace in the prison theater space is freely named and acknowledged by prison theater volunteers, because it is also a space of freedom for them in which they feel free to be themselves, free from judgment, free to walk into a wide, warm circle of welcome at the end of their day. There, in the prison theater classroom, volunteers talk about the freedom to talk openly and

honestly with the time to do so, minus cell phones, with minimal distraction. Due to the voluntary nature of prison theater programs, most of which do not earn prisoners time off their sentences (known as “good time”), people are there because they want to be, both incarcerated participants and volunteers alike.

For volunteers who carry inner wounds and conflicts, it is deeply courageous to enter the world of theater in prison. They may take months or even years to slowly ease into the space as the sole or lead facilitator. Perhaps part of the power of theater in prison stems from the transparency of the volunteers. Interacting with theater volunteers is a world away from interacting with prison staff where the overriding orientation is suspicion. Prisoners and staff have different worldviews. They are actively pitted against each other. In these bounded, exclusionary relationships, Cedric feels that the staff want him to feel punished, to exist in a constant state of misery. He seeks and works to avoid that. Yet those around him, those in charge and his fellow prisoners, appear to endorse the belief that incarcerated people are irreparably flawed or evil.

In contrast, there is a powerful two-way flow of healing that operates for prisoners and volunteers in the artistic and relational space of prison theater. This reality resonated with Chad, a theater volunteer in an eastern state prison whose journey toward facilitating a prison theater group was slow and heavily laced with emotion. His journey was deeply shaped by the rape of a close friend that had occurred in the years prior to his prison theater involvement. In Karen’s interview, Chad had this to say:

I refer to it as that grey area that I didn't want to have exist in my life. I wanted to have, “You're good,” or “You're bad, and people who do this should go to jail,” - but then to have all of these guys and see the beauty and the truth and the humanity in these [theater] performances and get to know some of [them], for me it was a huge, I think, growth in - in how I thought about people in prison. And I think there's an element of me trying to fix what happened by doing this work.”

This volunteer’s willingness to embrace his own brokenness, and to find wholeness beyond it, is a testament to the strength, vulnerability, and mutual embrace of participants in the prison theater space, incarcerated participants and volunteers alike. It is representative, a small slice, of what is possible within the glow of prison arts and humanities classrooms. In the end, being human together amid destruction and decay, may be the most important thing. In the slow moment toward one another, the question of *Can humans flourish in prison?* begins to be answered with the qualified, improvisational theater response of a curious “Yes, and ...” A