

From Shackles to Square Hats:  
Higher Education and Lifer Prisoners

(3577 words)

I remember the day I received my diploma for completing community college. No expense had been spared for the graduation ceremony, and when I looked into the crowd of attending guests, I was glad to see my mom had been able to make it. The feeling was tinged with sadness though, because I knew my high-school friend Colleen wouldn't be there; she was out of the country for the summer. My thoughts wandered to the good times we'd shared growing up together - suddenly, I was brought back to the present when one of my peers in cap and gown nudged me to let me know I was up next to approach the stage. I readied myself, and then tried to look stately and studious as I strode at a steady pace past the stern-faced guards with their batons and pepper spray. I reached the podium and shook the warden's hand. As he handed me my diploma and they announced my name over the prison loudspeaker, I thought about what a long journey it had been ...

When I was a teenager, I killed a person, a young man like myself. Neither of us had finished high school when I took his life over a senseless dispute. Soon after, I was convicted of murder.

I was in the county jail waiting for the state prison transport bus when my friend Colleen came to see me; she was getting ready to go off to college. During our visit, she encouraged me to sign up for any classes that prison might offer, so that I could get a G.E.D. and then possibly enroll in college correspondence courses. A sheriff's deputy stood nearby; he overheard her and asked "Why? He's a murderer. He's never getting out, so what's the point?"

That was 21 years ago. Back then, I glared at the deputy with all the menace my young self could muster, but I had no words with which to respond. His was a question I couldn't answer then, and have struggled to answer since. It was a question that shot at both the morality and the utility of using resources on society's worst individuals. I'm only able to speak on it now after two decades because its answer can be seen in my own experience with education while incarcerated.

Eventually, I did get a G.E.D., as high-school level education is mandated at most prisons, including this one. It seems like the public doesn't have too much of a problem with prisoners attaining G.E.D.'s. Most likely it's because the stereotype of ex-felon gas-station attendants seems fitting and not too threatening to the socioeconomic order. But bring up the prospect of college education, and you get a whole different set of reactions: hostility ... outrage ... indignation ... accusations of favoring felons over law-abiding youth. Such sentiments were brewing long before I entered the scene, and in the early years of the Clinton administration they culminated in federal legislation that to this day bars prisoners from the Pell grant. The decade from the mid-1990's on, was one bereft of higher education in the incarcerated setting, as the cost of books plus tuition was out of reach for most prisoners. When finally the state stepped in with fee waivers, the question was "Which prisoners?" Most could agree on "short-termers," those with only a few years left on their sentences; it was clear that they'd be able to put their education to use.

But what about those with more time, say, 10 or 20 years to go? Or even more troublesome, guys like myself, "lififers" - those with indeterminate "life" sentences with no set parole date? Like the deputy said, "Why? What's the point?" Why should public tax dollars be used to educate prisoners who would most likely only get out in their old age, if at all?

Even more serious was the moral charge that murderers do not deserve an education. Murder is the conviction that consistently receives a life sentence; chances are, the average lifer is a murderer. In the eyes of many in society, murderers don't even deserve to live. So how could anyone contemplate such a notion, funding murderers for college?

Prison administrators never really had to answer the moral charge, because the decision was made for them by another powerful factor: jobs. The use of tuition fee waivers necessitated the creation of an "incarcerated services" department at the local community college where prisoners were to register for correspondence courses; parallel to this was the creation of a "college program" within the education department of this prison, with a concomitant bevy of teachers, proctors, and tutors - another block on top of the already monolithic "adult basic education" (G.E.D.) program. The tuition fee waiver was offered to all prisoners regardless of time to go. We just had to fill out the form, sign our names and check "yes" in the box agreeing to abide by the college's rules.

Length of sentence wasn't even a question on the form.

Still, the moral charge didn't go away. We convicts had to each answer it within ourselves, beginning with the decision to accept public funding in taking that first course. I was slow to warm up to it. I was already in my 30's when community college became available through the fee waiver here. I saw no practical use for higher education. With a life sentence, when was I supposed to use it? But, really, my problem was that I'd internalized the master status of "convicted murderer," and with it the accompanying statuses of "felon" ... "outcast" ... "unworthy" ... "no good." By that time, years of interacting as a convict had convinced me of the validity of such statuses. College was for "them, out there," not "us, in here."

At this prison, the college program started as a pilot with 5 students. I wasn't one of them. However, they extended an invitation to me. I accused them of putting on airs. The way I saw it, we'd committed crimes and forsaken the status of "regular" free people; we'd broken the social contract, so there was no point in striving for a cap and gown, as if somehow that would change what we'd done or how society viewed us. Rather, we should claim our outlaw status and face our stark reality with stoic dignity, for that's all we had left. At least that's how I saw it then.

Besides the "convict's pride," there was another issue I would never admit to. Call it a sense of balance if you will, but the idea of taking college courses and possibly earning a degree seemed abjectly wrong to me, considering that I had denied the person I killed that same chance. To me, G.E.D.'s were okay,

because the administration required them of everyone in here; convicts had to comply or face disqualification from in-prison job assignments that paid a living wage spendable at the commissary. But college was a different matter. College was extra; it wasn't tied to any prison requirements or privileges. And for me, college stood for "the future" - something I had stolen from another human being, and something I felt I no longer had. It was a painful reminder I wanted no part of.

A year later, the invitation was extended again, and this time, it wasn't just the students, but also some teachers who made the pitch. They explained that the pilot program was to be expanded to 25 more students. They wanted to recruit younger prisoners of every ethnicity. This was an extremely difficult task because prison culture is based on a violent code of antisocial norms involving racial segregation and entrenched cliques. The majority of prisoners don't run to the fray, but don't actively steer from it either. They're resigned to what they see as an inevitable number of riots and disruptions. Inwardly, they may be willing to work toward positive goals, if given the chance in a different environment. The years roll by, though, and hope slowly dies as disciplinary infractions pile up and resolve fades into a haze of drug use. At their release date the front gates swing wide open and leave them wholly unprepared to meet the challenges of the real world. The inevitable result is more crime and reincarceration.

The college pioneers sought to change that here by involving lifers. In every prison lifers exert an influence far greater

than their relatively few numbers imply. Lifers are the transmitters of the destructive prison culture central to recidivism. They recruit new prisoners to fight over patches of sand and concrete, to avenge small slights, real and imagined; young initiates are schooled in prison mayhem and imbued with the nihilistic dogma of those who've lost all hope. Now, I wasn't one who was that far gone, but I wasn't a boy scout either; I'd done my share of dirt over the years, and I was surprised they wanted me to be part of their do-gooder program. "Just take one or two courses," they said, "just enough so that the new guys feel alright with this." I sensed I was being hustled to provide convict credibility for something that would otherwise be perceived as a product of "the man, the system," but I went with it anyways. I wanted to ensure that guys from my ethnic group got a piece of the college action, so to speak. Years of racial conflicts over the benches, tables, showers, and phones in prison, had infused me with the doctrine that all state resources should be rightly partitioned, and that "my people" needed their fair share. I rationalized that this was a good enough reason to override my prior personal reservations.

What they didn't tell us was that although the state fee waiver covered tuition, we still had to pay for our textbooks, which averaged between \$100 to \$200 each - a hefty sum in here. When I found out, I felt like quitting, because I hadn't signed up to spend money on this. However, I'd made a commitment, and it would've been improper to back out.

Now, I have to mention that while separation and discord is the norm among convicts, there are times when racial differences are briefly overcome for some common purpose - usually something like coordinated drug smuggling; or an attack on the guards; or a work/hunger strike to protest conditions. This time, we called upon that sporadic solidarity to buy college textbooks. We each bought a different textbook and agreed to share them with one another. I didn't see it as being too helpful for me since I was only going to take "one or two courses." But I knew that it would be a great deal for those who went further.

Ultimately, sharing textbooks made college affordable and gave us a real reason to reach across racial barriers. Each time a course was completed and each time a book was passed on to the next guy, we saw each other a little bit more as fellow students, and a little bit less as "that black guy ... that white guy ... that Oriental ... that Mexican ..."

For me, "one or two courses" became one or two more, and then four or five, to where at some point, I decided to join my peers in earning an associate's degree.

Today, the college program thrives here, and in fact, has spread to other prisons throughout this state.

I could say that all this happened because we were exposed to a basic liberal arts curriculum, and like in Plato's allegory of the cave, we emerged with a wider perspective on life, the world, humanity.

Sure, that's true.



What's equally true is that the specific subject matter of any particular course wasn't what reset our compass; rather, it was the process itself. The process of striving together toward higher education, was one that involved us internalizing core concepts like goal-setting, hard work, responsibility, and community. College made us stakeholders in our own lives again. This meant being responsible for ourselves, for each other, for our families and friends outside, for those injured by our crimes, for the local community, and for society at large. We came to see ourselves as part of a larger social fabric, one affected by our actions, and one we're accountable to.

These lessons grew within us and we in turn spread them to the larger prison population as we actively converted other convicts to our way of thinking. College shifted our class interests in a new direction, and we pushed a stable environment in which higher education could flourish. In the long run, a new paradigm was created, one of inclusiveness and real reform. It was one built on the foundation of our college experience, and because of it, other prisoners are now able to grow through activity clubs, sports leagues, religious groups, self-help classes, musical bands, and arts collectives - all here, and all in a cooperative spirit.

We also developed a spirit of community service. Working with "Toys for Tots" and the Lions Club, we've been able to refurbish toys and eyeglasses for disadvantaged children. Nowadays, we have resident artists - our peers - who consistently donate their paintings to auctions out there to raise money for

charities. And through outreach programs, we speak with at-risk youth in hopes of encouraging them to make better choices.

When I enrolled in that first college course, I never thought I'd end up making a positive difference in other people's lives. From there, I began to understand that my life can have meaning, even behind these walls. It's why I said "Yes!" when some guys here asked me to help rally a team to specially crochet 100 handmade beanie caps to fit newborn babies, in order to bring awareness to the need for extra care during the first few months of life. Help newborn babies? Sure, even the hardest convicts support that. But crocheting in prison? Now that's a tall order. It was a challenge for us, a call to transcend the stifling macho culture we'd been conditioned to for so many years. In the end, we did it. We packaged those 100 beanie caps and mailed them in time as a December donation to St. Jude Children's Research Hospital. I can't begin to describe how it moved us ... with these hands, we did good for a change.

Our college experience and everything we went through afterwards, is what I would point to as the answer to the question of whether it's ethical to spend funds on college for lifer prisoners. As a matter of distributive justice, the overwhelming majority of funds should be invested on educating society's best, the youth out there. And rightly so, because they're the future and have the most promising potential. Let's not forget, though, that funding for college is a vast pool amounting to billions of dollars, and it's not a zero-sum game. Funding should also be invested in the worst of society.

It's a straightforward consequentialist proposition - instill real reform in the leaders and they in turn will instill an ethos of learning and growth into the whole of the group. The positive values shared by college-educated lifers are the same values then carried by the short-termers out to society. This is in everyone's best interest because more than 95% of all prisoners will be released. When lifers mentor other prisoners in the right direction, the result is permanently lower recidivism and safer communities.

Also, many lifers will, in fact, eventually be paroled. It's happened more and more in recent years due to progressive changes in sentencing laws and the public's weariness of pouring money into the maw of the prison industrial complex. In light of this, it just makes sense to help lifers develop constructive values and higher education, so that when they rejoin society, they do so not as mere parolees, but as new contributors.

I've emphasized the utilitarian perspective because its aspects are the most evident, as seen from our college experience here and from longitudinal studies that show a direct link between lower recidivism and higher education. Yet, even if one does accept that society undoubtedly benefits from such a link, apart from the utility of the matter there still remains the moral charge that murderers do not deserve an education. It stems from the same aversion to unjustness that I initially felt about enrolling in college. I took the life of another human being. That's the elephant in the room, in this discussion.

What I did was wrong, and no amount of conversational sidestepping will make that go away. For me, and for all those like me, the moral charge needs to be answered if we're to arrive at any workable normative ethics regarding college for lifers.

I now understand that my vague "sense of balance" was really born from my own personal feelings of guilt. In truth, there is no balance and there never can be. The idea of balance is central to retributive justice, and pure *lex talionis* would demand the lives of those who took life. It seems that this is achieved in at least the cases of those sentenced to the death penalty. But in a number of states, the majority of death row prisoners die from old age after decades of appeals, rather than from an actual execution. In essence, such death-row prisoners are living out their natural lives. Something similar is often said about lifers. For example, I can still see my family and friends when they visit me. I can still write letters; read books; watch tv; listen to the radio; eat good food (sometimes); jog laps around the track on the prison exercise yard ... I can even play my guitar (yes, I have a guitar, a 12-string Epiphone DR-212 - we're allowed to have them here). I can go to college. I can breathe.

The person I killed can do none of these things.

Therein lies the egregiousness of it all. Simply put, what's going on here isn't really "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth," not even close. And from that stems the deep sense of injustice many people feel about college for lifers, because it's

not really about college per se. It's about the magnitude by which retribution falls short. It's about what one thinks the purpose of incarceration is. It's about whether you believe the justice system should be fostering restoration or exacting vengeance.

Those who say "vengeance" are probably disappointed that we're not breaking rocks all day, with only moldy bread and dank water for sustenance. As I've described, there are some things I'm able to enjoy in my day-to-day, experiences that make this existence more bearable. But the limits of the incarcerated setting reduce each experience to a shadow, making the enjoyment bittersweet with remembrance of what can never be reclaimed. Such moments are only crumbs for the soul, rather than the feasts of happiness that retributionists resentfully imagine us reveling in. They need not worry, though. "Life" incarceration, with all its losses and regrets, is quite adept at exacting vengeance, as one's spirit ebbs away with the days, months, and years in here.

I suppose, for a long time, I also subscribed to the retributive concept of justice. It's why I felt I didn't deserve to go to college. I'm glad I did go, though. The college experience taught me a lot. It taught me that long-held prejudices can be overcome for a common purpose, and that while base purposes can be powerful, noble purposes are even more powerful. I learned not to judge a guy by his paint job; I learned that they're all "my people." About myself, I learned that friendship is more important to me than dogma and doctrine.

All those years ago in the county jail, when I was at a loss for words, Colleen stood up and gave me hers. She reproached the deputy, and then smiled at me and said, "Just do what you can, where ever you're at. I know you. You can do a lot of good." Looking back, I realize she still saw me as a person, even when maybe I myself didn't. I know now that I can be more than my worst moment. Yes, I forfeited my freedom, but I didn't forfeit my humanity. Higher education showed me this truth and made the way for me to embrace all that it means to be human.

After completing my associate's degree, I started working on a bachelor's in sociology. The state fee waiver doesn't cover this, and there's no other public funding for this level of costs. Thus, in the past two years, I've applied for eleven different foundation scholarships. Six of them said "no," and five said "yes," so I guess the jury's still out on the question of college for lifers. I'm hopeful though, that the ultimate verdict will be one of faith in the redeemability of humanity. In the meantime, my peers and I continue to daily live out the restorative ideals that now define us.

As for Colleen, she went to graduate school and became a teacher. We've kept in touch and the spirit of her friendship and good advice stays with me. I know she's proud of who I am today. No matter what, I'll keep doing what I can, where ever I'm at.

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