

Professors Transforming Prisoners

by
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12/9/2024

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This essay breaks some rules. As a killer in prison for Natural Life I reserve the right to fulfill the expectation, in some way, of breaking at least some rules, some times. I believe breaking rules is occasionally necessary for everyone, given this culture of constraints and hates. I want to tell you about something that has happened in my prison since Ryan F. Thornell, Ph.D., Director of Arizona Department of Corrections, Rehabilitation & Reentry decided to flood my Unit with higher education. But wait, positive things about prison? From Shajiyah Iman? Not the most pig-friendly convict you've heard of? With multiple suits against ADCRR, one of which Thornell himself is listed as a Defendant? Yes, but none of those things are personal. What I want to do in this essay that breaks essay rules, is introduce you to the PhDs that have had such a profound impact on me + many other prisoners directly, my whole Unit indirectly, + then tell you how higher education is changing how we do time on the yard.

First, I want you, if you are a free person, to know that each of the people I am about to mention talks to us like we are valuable human beings with our own unique knowledge base. They treat us like they treat university students out there, they aren't scared or sketchy, judgy or snobby, and they meet us where we are in every way. In her book "Academia, Activism and Intellectuals" Dr Jay James (who does not come into this prison) presents a dilemma when dealing with prisoners, both ^{non-political} prisoners before they were incarcerated, and those who became politicized inside the walls, she says "The political prisoners currently contained in the U.S. Penal sites present us with difficult questions and challenges as critical thinkers and actors: What is our relationship to the imprisoned intellectual? If you decide to come in and share what you know with us, we will use your gifts to the best of our ability, but you must first develop a relationship with us, and it seems very few are willing to admit prisoners are still really even people. If you intend to treat us like specimens in a curious concrete jar, stay home. If you intend to christianize us or otherwise save our savage souls, you can kiss our asses from outside the wire. We are not pets, or projects to be managed, we are people, in ^a place you are lucky not to be. At the very least you should realize most prisoners are getting out,

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and consider your dealings with us an investment in the future of your community, because most prisoners will reenter it.

Dr Alan Gomez asks the free activist "What do we do on the outside to see there is no outside from the outside?" Why are the PhDs who come into prison so few? Can people be scared to come into a place they truly believe is the right place for people to be who did something maybe they wouldn't have? Or something they have done and haven't gotten caught^{for}? How do you appreciate freedom if you can't comprehend its alternative? How do you comprehend freedom without an in-person glimpse of un-freedom? You should look inside, one day there may not be anything except outside.

Now, let me formally introduce the transformative forces Director Thornell has sent into my prison. Please remember that I had absolutely no respect for people of academia, and believed higher education was a complete waste of time, before meeting these people. I believed I could gain nothing from stuck up Professors, and believed all Professors must, as a matter of course, be stuck up. These beliefs were the first, and the easiest ones, to be shredded.

Dr Alan Gomez is a Historian, and is the best teacher on earth in a classroom setting, I've never seen anything like what he does except in movies. He's a transforming force that has to be completely avoided to not be learned from, because he teaches simply by being. My friends and I that attended his classes in "the beginning" (in reference to the 1st lecture I personally attended on 2/24/2024) would have conversations before class just to see if he would bring up whatever topic we'd discussed, miraculously he always did and we would whisper Veestlahah ("as it is written" in Chakobsa to affirm the Fremmen teachings that one would come from the outside to show the way). We began to call him the Voice of the Outer World, our own personal Lisan alghaib. Truly, fiction aside, Dr Gomez leads the way to Higher Education for convicts. He possesses the profound Wisdom of Sincerity which resonates through everyone he comes in contact with, he is not one who teaches, he IS a teacher. He teaches things that sound simple, but are not, like "Caminamos preguntado" (Walking together asking questions), and "Mandar obediendo" (Lead by obeying), which are pivotal teachings that open the way to understanding there can be, even in prison "Un

mundo donde quepan muchos mundos" (A world where many worlds fit). Dr Gomez is mindful, cautious with his words, teaching us that words create worlds, and while engaging in the development of communities of care, we should be careful not to harm with our words. This last teaching, from where I stand now, seems impossible for me to acclimatize to, I have sharpened my words into double edged razors and I cut thoughtlessly, compulsively & habitually. Like my spiritual Teacher, Bayyinah Khadijah Muhammad, Dr Gomez is patient, but it harms him when I harm others, which harms me deeply, and makes me want to stop. He teaches so much beyond history, beyond humanities, he is a walking philosophy and teaches just by being himself.

Dr Kyla Pasha was someone I had heard about, & had been quite upset with, years before meeting her. I had heard some things about her that freaked me out to the point I decided the rumors were too outrageous to be true, but I'd never heard her name. When she came to our yard years after I'd forgotten the rumors, I didn't know who she was until about 30 minutes into her lecture. She returned, shamelessly flaunting a perfect balance of bitchiness & beauty with the most peculiar mix of shyness and danger. I cringed from some of the things she said, possibly visibly, but I loved her spirit and that love enabled me to withstand terribly uncomfortable teachings. She sashayed across just about every line we believed couldn't be crossed and smiled at us from every forbidden zone. I was told I wasn't Muslim if I attended Dr Pasha's class, but I was addicted to this new way of unlearning. Dr Pasha is a poet, she is a historian, a Journalist, a Playwright and a Religious Scholar. She taught us to write poetry and she taught us the flaws in focusing on rhyming. I rhyme every poem I write solely because she said not to, as offerings, acts of rebellious solidarity. She taught us, like Dr Gomez, by being who she is, in addition to the knowledge we gleaned from her lectures.

Dr Sarah Suhail came in to teach us some important historical facts regarding the

month in which she came to give her lecture. Dr Suhail answered many questions I had been trying to find answers to that were crucial to my personal path. She taught in a historical secular context, and by doing so she revealed what all the Drs had revealed, that there is always more than one side of history. The curious thing about what Dr Suhail taught, was that some of the history she presented wasn't taught differently by the other side, it wasn't taught at all by the other side, which had disturbed me. Dr Suhail exposed those hidden histories I had been seeking in obvious, + some not so obvious, places and she gracefully shifted the trajectory of my entire life.

I need to tell you reader, that I was not easy on these Professors. Before I realized they were turning our worlds upside down to give us different perspectives, I reacted unkindly in a "Who the ~~fuck~~ do you think you are?" type way. New things are often disconcerting, and the way these particular Professors share knowledge and wisdom feels kinetic, and it can be confusing and disorienting. Their lectures are time-releasing, by that I mean sometimes what they teach creeps up and reveals itself days, even weeks, later. They challenge us to think deeper, to analyze ourselves, to inspect our ideas, to look for where we got those ideas + vet those sources, all of which can feel threatening, maybe not to a 20 year old college student, but to a 50 year old Lifer, it feels like a shanking of the frontal lobe. With that being said, let me introduce a Professor that is so intense I have to take Tylenol before going to her lectures, because she is so spectacularly brilliant it hurts.

Dr Dwan is a ray of light for all minorities and marginalized people, a leader of women + girls. Dr Dwan is captivating and draws attention by the power of her intellect even when sitting silently. She is the definition of a force to be reckoned with. Dr Dwan first came into our prison and taught us about Tung poetry, its grammatical structure, or lack thereof, + how it flows

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She questioned our definitions of freedom & caused me to realize, when I responded without thinking (which is not as uncommon as it should be) that I don't believe freedom is real. Dr Qwan had us analyze what we thought freedom would feel like, sound like, look like, and since freedom to me is abstract, she led me to question if my ideas about freedom being unreal is a belief in self-defense? Do I believe freedom is not real only because I will die in here? Or do I truly believe freedom is relative and everyone is in some type of cage? And which cages constitute unfreedom? The 2nd lecture Dr Qwan gave on Media I'd need something far beyond Tylenol to write about right now.

Dr Espinosa is an Ethnomusicologist who brought us music from the Levant. She came in early in my exposure to higher education & although her entire presentation moved me, I was nervous about her playing an instrument that was customarily played by men. It is very interesting to me how much these Professors helped me escape my fears that limited my range of "allowable thought" in such a short time. I remember being uncomfortable, physically, emotionally & mentally, when Dr Espinosa presented several things that I felt were too sacred to be presented academically. It was awkward for me then, and still is, to be face to face with the realization that what is presented as freeing in a religious context has been deliberately refashioned by men to be enslaving in ways unintended by the Source. Dr Espinosa, like Drs Pusha, Suhail, & Qwan had stepped out of her "place" as taught in the majority of places in the world, & it was jarring to me. Dr Espinosa introduced us to how tones can be accepted in some cultures but not in others, how chords & keys can be combined to express things otherwise inexpressible, & how important music is to every culture.

Dr Sharcef taught us about "sumud" (steadfastness), and what that looks like among the most neglected and devastated country on earth right now. She taught us what it looks like to never give up in the face of horrendous torment, torture & destruction. She helped us

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understand more of the history of land from a perspective of the land itself, the trees, the farms, the water, and the many things cultivated in places before catastrophes. She expressed to us the importance of survival, & encouraged us to pursue our dreams even against great odds.

Dr Wicks-Allen showed us the similarities between apprenticeships that were forced on children after the abolition of slavery and today's foster care system. She showed how difficult it is for families to reunite after we are torn apart & encouraged us to not give up fighting to reunite with our children after incarceration.

Dr Allen gave a lecture that made us consider the many ways a family can be comprised, different types of units that make up families, and then explained some obstacles some of those families might have to overcome. He discussed with us why certain types of people desire specific family make-ups & why others might not, and the repercussions of attempting to force people into small minded molds would be an injustice to everyone. Like Dr Wicks-Allen, the message was on the importance of family, especially when the family unit is under duress from external irritants.

Dr Hart, a biologist, gave us an appreciation for how the world has been organized by various scientists over time, before & after microscopic instruments were available, how what people think they know is constantly changing, & how small we humans are relative to all the life on earth. The way Dr Hart explained the categorization of things in our everyday lives is helpful way beyond the context in which he taught it.

Dr Manninen brought in something that I have fallen in love with, Dr Manninen brought Philosophy into my cage. Strangely, discussing free-will & how placing God within the constraints of Their own rules of omniscience negates the possibility of God being free, didn't bother me half as much as the continuous onslaught from all the Professors on patriarchy. I now self-assail every time

a thought that sustains patriarchy enters my mind, which is often. What bothers me about Dr Manninen's exciting way of arguing about every little thing, is the knowledge that I have been judged for simply pondering the idea of Divine Unfreedom & not rejecting it out right, & for liking philosophy so much, which some consider inherently antireligious. I will probably not stop thinking about the fact that it appears that not only I, but God Himself, is contained inside of His Divine Will, & since I think we are all in prisons anyway, even those with relatively unlimited range of motion outside the wire, whether we realize it or not, is a delightful pass time. Maybe one day Dr Manninen will come back & argue with us about freedom? It is possible, in this prison, with this Director, who wants the captives in his care to be educated.

Dr Kim taught us what intersectional feminism is & why it is important. She showed us how Kimberle Crenshaw theorizes intersectionality. When I write stories I have always written women and girls as protagonists in my fiction because it feels right, Dr Kim explained why it feels right, & encouraged us to embrace feminism, & do more to promote it & help others embrace it. Dr Kim encouraged us to break out of cultural norms that suppress women & to allow ourselves the right to dream outside of the cultural limits placed on us around the world.

Dr Fojas came in to explain to us what surveillance is used for, how it is developed, & how it has evolved over the years. She taught us about border security & ways the media is often used as a means of observing people's every day lives, & what that data might be used for. I think these things, being among my very first experiences with college level lectures, scared me more than anything else for multiple reasons. I think it should be even more frightening for those of you who think you are free.

Finally, Lance Graham comes in to teach us, he teaches an Arizona State

University writing class & has taught us many ways to express ourselves & the differences between formal & informal writing. He uses music lyrics to teach us that it is acceptable to use whatever means our hearts move us to ^{use to} convey whatever we need to, & also how to express ourselves in professional contexts. As for writing poetry, Professor Graham reiterated the taboo of rhyming, which for reasons already stated, I will not give up, but I will rhyme ridiculously, insanely even, because Pasha.

Director Dr Thornell sends memos to the population so we can be aware of what is happening in our world, he speaks to us with words like "ovr" & "we", he walks the yards confidently with no vest, no vicious pigs guarding him, he allows us to approach him and he speaks to us as if we matter. He says things like "the role each of us plays in this future, including each of you" when communicating with prisoners.

Should prisons exist? Probably not. Are prisons necessary? Absolutely not. Are prisons the new slavery that upholds a disgusting capitalist society? Clearly. Thornell is not one of us, but he damn sure isn't one of what we had here for decades, & what almost every other prison has as a Director in the United States. If every Director were Thornell, there would be no recidivism, because he reduces the walls that divide us, he does, to an extent, what ovr other Professors are doing, teaching unity by example. If every prison had a Director Thornell, there would be no need for prisons in a very few years.

These PhDs are moving mountains. These people have given us their time, & their wisdom, to not just remove obstacles, but to teach us how to remove them ourselves. I have only studied with them for a few months, Lifers are not allowed to participate in accredited courses, but Dr Thornell & the other PhDs don't mind allowing anyone who wants to attend their lectures & classes to do so. I am grateful, and I am honored, to have been permitted to learn

from these kind, wise, patient people who take community care to a level previously unimagined.

Our Unit is being transformed, so are our ways of life, how we interact with each other on the yard & how we think about things before we act. Also, seeing how things are connected in so many more ways than we'd previously considered helps us make more meaningful decisions, and knowing that we have so many more choices than we believed we did, motivates us to explore our options even in mundane situations. People who ~~don't~~^{didn't} even realize they had any intellectual potential are finding parts of themselves they never imagined could exist, and doing wonderful things for their futures, and for others.

Groups are forming on the yards to discuss politics & science, examining untapped potential in themselves & the environment. We are sharing books, & teaching classes of our own at rec, giving & receiving knowledge, helping each other in new ways. We are learning to live in ways that don't diminish us, that connect us to new ideas & people we otherwise might have never taken the time to know. Now we can get along, we can talk, we can share, we can laugh, we can walk together asking questions.

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