

Rising to New Life in Prison

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Texts: Proverbs 3:13-26 and Matthew 9:9-13

About nine years ago, through the vision of one of my fellow friars, I embarked on a new experience at a medium security prison, Mt. McGregor. A group of faculty from Siena College offered to teach some college courses free of charge. Previously, there were few opportunities for these men to take college courses. There were some correspondence classes set up, but these were cumbersome and were no substitute for face-to-face interaction in the classroom.

The state had no budget for college programs—there had been in the past. After the Attica uprising, programs began that were funded by Pell Grants. But then in 1994 Congress put an end to this, based on the argument that it was not justifiable to provide grants to prisoners while families were having trouble affording sending their kids to college. There's a great documentary called "The Last Graduation" that explains the history of this wave of college programs.

I remember one of the planning meetings we had when we were setting up the program at McGregor. (This was spearheaded by one of the friars, the late Fr. Matt Conlin, former president of Siena and Catholic chaplain at McGregor.) The superintendent mentioned that there was some rumbling on the staff about what we were doing. The same argument was being used as the one that led to the end of the Pell grants in 1994. The superintendent mentioned that there's always going to be some people who complain when the disadvantaged are given an advantage.

I ended up teaching in this program four times. It was for me a great experience. My students were eager to learn, raring to go at the end of the three-hour class period. The exception was my German class—after three hours they had had enough!

But it was an even greater experience for the students. They experienced, to paraphrase Maya Angelou, a rising to new life. Let's face it—none of these guys got into prison by being intensely interested in school. Oftentimes, when they came to prison, they were told, directly or indirectly, that they were stupid—one man in the documentary recalls being branded as an 'idiot.' What I saw happen with my students (and the other faculty saw this too) was that many of them discovered gifts they never knew they had. All of a sudden, they started having a new image of themselves, as people interested in the life of the mind—yes, intellectuals! They experienced the truth of the reading we heard this morning from

Proverbs:

- ¹³ Happy are those who find wisdom,
and those who get understanding,
¹⁴ for her income is better than silver,
and her revenue better than gold.
¹⁵ She is more precious than jewels,
and nothing you desire can compare with her.

These students often would develop a whole new set of priorities, and a whole new plan for their future. For those who took my religious studies course, many of them grew not only intellectually but spiritually, connecting their newfound knowledge and wisdom with the 'fear of the Lord.'

Statistics show that incarcerated persons who advance themselves educationally are far more likely to succeed after they are released, and recidivism rates are much lower. I was able to see this first hand – to witness lives being transformed by education. These men were running rings around most of my students on the Siena campus with their motivation and their work ethic.

None of this should be any surprise to us who profess the gospel of Jesus Christ. As Matthew's gospel reminds us, Jesus was asked: "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" His response was: "Those who are well do not need a physician – the sick do." These men in our college classes recognized their need. Their education was part of their process of repairing their broken lives. I would argue that we're ALL broken in different ways. We all need to learn; we all need healing; we all need transformation. We all need to hear the words of the book of Proverbs: ²¹ My child, do not let these escape from your sight: keep sound wisdom and prudence, ²² *and they will be life for your soul.*

I was reflecting on all this in light of Maya Angelou's poem. I'm not a poet, but I tried to put together a couple of stanzas that Maya Angelou might have added from the perspective of prisoners being educated. Here's my poor attempt:

Does my brilliance surprise you?
I admit, it surprised me too.
But as I keep on learning
A new life has broken through . . .

You can tell me I don't deserve it
You can fail to realize
That with each new subject that I study
Like lofty thoughts, I rise.

Amen!!

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