

GROWTH IN PRISON

Growth comes in closing the gap between our intentions and our actions, between our words and our walk ¹

Recently, a long-time volunteer asked me about growth in prison. "Growth in what way?" I responded. "You know," she replied, "growth in maturity, in transitioning from concerns only about self to being productive members of the Norfolk community." Once I understood, I, having spent nearly forty years at the Massachusetts Correctional Institution at Norfolk (Norfolk or MCI-Norfolk), began to wax eloquently about my growth. Quickly, the volunteer raised her hand, not unlike a traffic cop, and proceeded to disabuse me of the notion she was asking about my growth. Rather she told me she was wondering about growth I may have observed in other prisoners. A bit chagrined, I began to consider the many programs which are offered at Norfolk and had been over the past four decades. I decided that I could only do justice to those programs in which I had been involved personally thereby being able to observe participants first hand. Before I was ready to share my thoughts, it was time for the volunteer to leave. So, I have chosen to respond on paper.

There were and are a plethora of programs at MCI-Norfolk which have provided prisoners the space and content for growth. I have picked four which meet the criterion of my personal involvement. These are: Project Youth, the Boston University / University of Massachusetts Prison Education Program, the Cursillo, and the Norfolk Debating Society.

Before discussing each, I would be remiss if I did not note other programs which are instrumental in the growth I have witnessed second hand in those prisoners who had chosen to participate - Restorative Justice, Youthful Offenders Committee, Second Thoughts, Alternatives to Violence, Jericho Circle, Victim / Offender Education Group, and NA/AA.

PROJECT YOUTH

Project Youth is the longest continuously operating program in the Department of Correction (DOC). Project Youth began in 1964 and remains active fifty-nine years later. Project Youth members give presentations to high school students and at-risk youth, usually twice a week. Up to thirty-five students or at-risk youth from across the state and from out-of-state come to MCI-Norfolk and listen to and ask questions of four prisoners who relate what they have done to bring them to prison and taking responsibility for their actions. Drug addiction, alcohol abuse, and driving while under the influence are prominent topics.

My primary role in my twenty-five years in Project Youth was to assist in training speakers, age 18 to 23, to develop their individual presentations. My greatest joy was watching our young team members grow and develop as they prepared to give their fifteen to twenty minute talks. Addressing up to thirty-five unfamiliar faces can be a daunting task and one which most of our speakers had never before experienced.

I watched members grow in self-confidence as well as recognizing the pain they had caused others, both family members and in their respective communities. Speaking to diverse groups at least once a week, they had to face the full effects of the bad decisions they had made. One member who had had a devastating drug addiction related to me how the best therapy he had was to talk each week about his choices, recognizing how destructive they had been not only to himself, but to everyone who cared for him.

How effective is Project Youth in fostering growth in its members? From 1991 to 2023, 183 members have left the program and returned to society. Of those 183 members, only 5 have come back to prison for committing a new crime - a recidivism rate of 2.7%.²

THE BOSTON UNIVERSITY / UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS PRISON EDUCATION PROGRAM

From before 1982 when I entered Norfolk until the COVID pandemic, Boston University offered classes leading to a Bachelor's Degree. For a portion of those years, Boston University also offered a Master's Degree program. The University of Massachusetts, until PELL grants ended, offered pre-college and freshman / sophomore level classes. Working together, the two universities comprised the Prison Education Program.

I served as the college clerk in the school for over a decade and, full disclosure, I also earned a Master's Degree. In my clerk's position, I witnessed first-hand the transitions in so many prisoners / students from anger to introspection after being introduced to the writings of William Shakespeare, the poetry of Emily Dickinson, or the philosophies of John Locke and Descartes. Reading assignments, class discussions, and one-on-one sessions with professors opened many eyes. As Khalil Gibran wrote on Education in *The Prophet* the wise teacher is the one who brings students to the "thresholds of their own minds." I watched numerous prisoner / students crossing over their own thresholds year after year.

How effective was the Prison Education Program? The recidivism rate for graduates has been computed at 1%.³ Yet, the Boston University / University of Massachusetts Prison Education Program is no more at MCI-Norfolk. During the program's tenure, scores of prisoners participated each semester. On average, a dozen or more graduated each year. Emerson College is about to begin a college program at Norfolk. While Emerson College is surely welcome, only twenty Norfolk prisoners have been admitted.

CURSILLO

From the early 1980's to the COVID pandemic, the Cursillo - a four day retreat centered on Jesus Christ - was sponsored annually by Norfolk's Catholic community. I lived my four days in 1994 and then assisted in coordinating the prisoner service team for each year thereafter. The Cursillo involved up to twenty-five volunteers who met monthly throughout the previous year to prepare for the retreat.

At the Cursillo, each volunteer gave a presentation and sat at a table with another volunteer and six prisoners. Incarcerated persons of all faiths were welcome. There was no attempt to convert anyone to Catholicism. Rather, the Cursillo offered a chance for volunteers and prisoners to discuss and to share about various negative issues such as drug addiction, alcoholism, and the losses of loved ones. The emphasis was not on the past, but on the present and the future. I observed many prisoners bond with volunteers at their tables. Volunteers offered truths as well as listening ears which helped prisoners see beyond the narrowness of prison life and their own circumstances.

Up to seventy prisoners participated in each Cursillo. And, the interactions did not cease after the four days were over. Monthly meetings - known as Ultryeas - were held on every third Wednesday of each month for one year until a new Cursillo began. In those meetings, volunteers and prisoners were reunited. In addition, several small reunion groups met each week with prisoners and volunteers participating.

How effective was the Cursillo in fostering real growth? For some prisoners, the experience was life changing almost immediately. For others, growth, begun in the four day retreat, blossomed throughout future years attributed to the Ultryeas, attending small group reunions, and participating on service teams. The Cursillo, however, is no longer at Norfolk - not the four day retreat, not the Ultryeas, and not the small groups. Efforts by both prisoners and volunteers to revive these programs have seemingly fallen on deaf ears.

THE NORFOLK DEBATING SOCIETY

The Norfolk Debating Society (NDS) had a long and storied history at MCI-Norfolk. From 1933 to 1966, NDS compiled a remarkable record of 144 wins to 8 losses in debates with various college teams from many states and even from England. ⁴ Sadly, NDS disappeared after 1966. It was, however, revived briefly fifty years later. But, NDS, as with so many other worthy programs, ended with the advent of the COVID pandemic and has not been reinstated.

I was a part of the NDS team in 2016 and on until COVID. I participated in training for numerous debates and served as one of two rebuttalists. Several other incarcerated persons

also joined the team, drawn from the then functioning collage program and from Toastmasters. In 2016, we bested a team from Boston College - the resolution was that the United States should impose a carbon tax on greenhouse gas emissions. We successfully argued in favor of the resolution.

During the remainder of the short revival, we tackled diverse topics concerning healthcare for all, the Electoral College, and others requiring our mastering unfamiliar issues. It was in that preparation, working together on presentations, and actually debating - sometimes with each other - which provided the growth I witnessed, not only in myself, but in our twenty plus members as well. Since the pandemic, attempts to revive NDS have proven fruitless.

JUVENILES

For me, the quintessential example of growth in prison I have witnessed - albeit second hand - has come from a group of disparate prisoners who had two things in common. First, they were all serving life-without-parole sentences for crimes committed when they were age 17 or younger. And, second, they, despite having no hope of being released, chose not to simply sit back in despair, but rather to participate in programs motivated only by the desire to change and to grow.

That work paid off for many of those juvenile lifers when the Supreme Judicial Court in 2013 ruled that mandatory life without parole sentences for juveniles was unconstitutional. As a result, juvenile lifers serving life-without-parole became eligible for parole once they had served at least fifteen years. Many had served twenty, twenty-five, and even thirty or more years behind bars. Since 2016, 39 former juvenile first degree lifers have been paroled.⁵ Not one has been returned to prison for committing any new crime, let alone murder.

When asked if growth can occur in prison, one need only cite those ex-juvenile first degree lifers. Rather than wasting away in prison, they sought to grow and to change - to close that "gap between [their] intentions and [their actions]." Since they were serving life-without-parole sentences, the DOC offered little in the way of programming. Still, those juvenile lifers accomplished what few had thought possible - they "closed the gap between [their] words and [their] walk(s)."

COMMON THREADS

Are there any common factors for the prisoners whose growth I have witnessed? I say: "Yes." First, all of the prisoners who participated in the programs described in this essay did so voluntarily. In some DOC programs prisoners are forced to participate lest they lose certain privileges. But not for the participants I have witnessed grow, they all had assessed

their own needs and then sought out programs which they believed would meet those needs. Once the prisoners had taken that first step by their own volition, they were open to looking deeply within themselves and embracing growth.

Second, non-correctional personnel such as volunteers, professors, students, and college debaters played significant roles in fostering growth. These non-correctional personnel brought non-judgmental attitudes, especially since, for the most part, non-DOC persons are unaware of the crimes for which the prisoners are serving their time. As a consequence, it was as if prisoners had a clean slate and did not feel the need to be defensive. In that environment, prisoners were encouraged to listen and to share life experiences.

Third, personal contact, within proper security bounds, was vital to growth. This was especially true for the Cursillo and the Boston University / University of Massachusetts Prison Education Program. Unfortunately, the DOC is now expanding the use of personal tablets for learning. While the tablets have value, they cannot match the give-and-take in a classroom or at a table during the Cursillo. Tablets serve to isolate prisoners from and to reduce opportunities to discuss materials and to learn from each other. The problems with online learning were starkly evident during the pandemic when so many students in the outside world fell far behind in learning. Instead of promoting increased learning by tablets, the DOC needs to find a better balance involving one-on-one, personal contact. Unfortunately, at present, the DOC is actively discouraging contact with members of the world outside prison walls. This trend needs to be reversed.

Fourth, all of the programs in which I have personally observed growth were coordinated by prisoners - often lifers. Fellow prisoners are more capable of spotting problems and acting to help an incarcerated person overcome issues which may be blocking growth. When the most successful programs were in operation, the DOC had minimal contact administratively beyond providing meeting space and some basic supplies.

FOLLOW THE MONEY

It is my belief that one can judge the priorities of any state agency, in this case the DOC, by studying how it spends its funds. In Fiscal Year 2023, the DOC expended over \$764 million. Of that amount, over \$470 million was spent on 3,989 full-time employees or \$117,860 per employee. In that same fiscal year, the DOC expended \$16.1 million on Inmate Programs for 5,962 prisoners or \$2,707 for each incarcerated person. To put those figures into perspective, 62% of every dollar spent by the DOC went for employees while a mere 2% went for Inmate Programs. ⁶ And, that disparity has remained constant over the past five years.

CONCLUSION

Hundreds of prisoners have successfully passed through the programs described in this essay. The recidivism rate calculated for these programs has been less than 3%. The DOC, on the other hand, has a perennial recidivism rate of +/- 30%.⁷ These prisoners who have completed these four programs and rejoined society, as well as the juvenile ex-lifers, have rebuilt their lives and are now productive, law-abiding citizens. Their growth in prison resoundingly answers the volunteer's inquiry.

The success of the non-DOC run programs begs the question: When will the DOC learn what works and what doesn't, assuming the DOC is interested in lowering its recidivism rate? In December 2021, only 52% of prisoners were participating in educational programs. In 2023, there has been little improvement as the DOC claims 53% of prisoners were enrolled in educational programs.⁸

If the DOC is truly interested in fostering growth in prisoners, then the DOC must reverse certain restrictive policies. Everyone understands the need for security, but all too often, a fantasized fear trumps common sense. The most recent example is the drive to exclude volunteers and guest speakers at various group meetings and programs. Today, the DOC requires a 60 day notice to the Central Office to clear guests from merely attending a regularly scheduled group meeting. Pre-pandemic, guests were cleared by institutional personnel and the process took from one day to, at most, a week. So, what has changed? Why does the Central Office considers itself more competent to clear a guest for a single meeting than the particular institution's staff?

For whatever the reason(s), the DOC is marching backwards and the growth of incarcerated persons will continue to dissipate. As long as the DOC continues to allocate a mere 2¢ per dollar for programs for prisoners, the recidivism rate will remain stuck at +/- 30%. What company, particularly one which expends nearly three-quarters of a billion dollars each year, would remain in business with a failure rate of 30%? Since the DOC will regrettably always be with us, at the very least, the executives in charge should be held accountable for these failures. They should either adopt a new philosophy based on fostering growth in prisoners or, in the words of former General Douglas MacArthur, they should "just fade away."

Gordon Haas
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END NOTES

- ¹ Kristen Armstrong, *Living Faith*, Creative Communications For the Parish, Vol. 39, #1, 6/23/23.
- ² Statistics provided by Project Youth Coordinator Patrick O'Shea. Percentage calculated by the author.
- ³ This figure is anecdotal based upon tracking the few graduates of the Prison Educaiton Program who returned to prison. The 1% recidivism rate has never, to the knowledge of the author, been refuted.
- ⁴ Daniel S. Throop. *The Inside Story of a Legendary Prison Debate Team*. News Inside, The Marshall Project. Issue 13, April 2023, at 14 - 16.
- ⁵ Gordon Haas. *Parole Decisions For Lifers For The Years 2022*. Lifer's Group Inc. at 16. See: www.realcostofprisons.org/writing or Facebook @ LifersGroupMCINorfolk.
- ⁶ Gordon Haas. *MA DOC Expenditures and Staffing Levels For Fiscal Year 2022*. Lifer's Group Inc. at 1, 2. See: www.realcostofprisons.org/writing or Facebook @ LifersGroupMCINorfolk. Average expenses per full-time employees and per prisoners were calculated by the author.
- ⁷ *Prison Population Trends 2021*. Massachusetts Department of Correction. May 2022 at 46.
- ⁸ *Behind Bars, but seeking a brighter future*. The Boston Sunday Globe. July 2, 2023, at K6.