

**CORNELL AT AUBURN:  
AN EXPERIMENT IN TEACHING AND LEARNING**

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**I. Background: From Rehabilitation to Incapacitation**

There was a time when education was part of the basic correctional and rehabilitative mission of the prison system. As recently as the early 1990s the great majority of state corrections systems offered college-level programs that enabled inmates to earn two- or four-year degrees, usually through cooperation with local community colleges.<sup>1</sup> And every state could cite studies and statistics demonstrating that providing education had a direct and significant effect on recidivism, ensuring that men who had served their time had a better chance to avoid further crime and remain free, by expanding their social horizons and making them more employable.<sup>2</sup>

The studies and statistics are still there, those for New York readily available through the Department of Corrections website. But the programs that generated these statistics are largely gone. In 1994 Congress declared prison inmates ineligible for the Pell Grants and other federal funding that had made college programs behind bars possible. In New York programs of this kind, some of which had long and distinguished histories, virtually disappeared within the next two years.

Education is of course only one casualty of the changes that have taken place in the operation of state and federal prisons over the past twenty or thirty years, changes which by the '90s had become impossible to ignore. For a variety of reasons, few of them related to increases in the crime rate, it had become a political necessity at all levels of government to appear "tough on crime." Higher education, and especially the provision of federal funds for educational purposes, began to be cited, along with drug and alcohol treatment, professional counseling, art and music programs, and even exercise facilities, as one of the luxuries that had turned prisons into country clubs.<sup>3</sup> Craig Haney and Philip Zimbardo, co-founders of the Stanford Prison Experiment, who have been studying the psychological aspects of imprisonment for some thirty years, describe the devastating change that has taken place as a result of this political shift, a shift which has fundamentally altered most people's view of what prisons are for. Starting in the mid-1970s,

the concept that had served as the intellectual cornerstone of corrections policy for nearly a century -- rehabilitation -- was publicly and politically discredited. The country moved . . . from a society that justified putting people in prison on the basis of the belief that their incarceration would somehow facilitate their productive reentry into the free world to one that used imprisonment merely to disable criminal offenders ("incapacitation") or to keep them away from the rest of society ("containment"). At a more philosophical level imprisonment was now said to further something called "just deserts" -- locking people up for no other purpose than that they deserved it and for no other purpose than to punish them . . . <sup>4</sup>

But the effects of this withholding of valuable resources went well beyond incapacitation and containment. Not only were prisoners being left at the mercy of their addictions, anger, and lack of practical skills, and hence truly incapacitated for reentry into society at large, but they were being denied an important means of socialization within the walls, an opportunity for the kind of dialogue and self-realization that could help them withstand the brutalizing effects of prison life.

No inmate in a maximum security facility, however civilized he may be,<sup>5</sup> can avoid the necessity to live a divided existence, to be in effect two people. The private world (in the severely limited sense that term can have for a prison inmate) in which he may be a devout and observant Christian or Muslim, an aspiring poet or essayist, a conscientious advisor by mail to sons or nephews, bears virtually no relation to the world of the Yard, where social groupings are determined largely by race, status often depends on the nature of your crime (murderers rule, sexual offenders are fair game), and survival may require affiliation with a gang, and the consequent obligation to prove your manhood, risking serious injury and the extension of your sentence, by engaging in violence. It can take years for an inmate to achieve a life-saving perspective on this barbarous world, free himself from its grasp, and develop a life of his own. It requires extraordinary inner strength. Education, even if it consists in nothing more than the opportunity for dialogue with somebody who lives apart from all this, can be literally a life-saver. Yet not only is education of a formal kind being withheld from men who desperately need it, but even self-

education is in many cases being insidiously undermined through the provision of low-cost TVs, the tacit condoning of drug use, reductions in the funding of prison libraries, and arbitrary restrictions on access to computer training and software.<sup>6</sup>

## **II. The Development of Cornell at Auburn**

I first began visiting Auburn (a maximum security facility about 35 miles north of Ithaca) as a tutor in the GED program in the summer of 1994. At that time college education was still in place, and to all appearances thriving. Faculty from Cayuga Community College and Syracuse University taught regular classes year round, and inmates were able to work toward degrees at several levels, including M.A. degrees in a number of fields. (One Auburn legend tells of an inmate who managed to earn a Ph.D. in Sociology entirely behind bars, but I never met him, and like much prison lore, he may be a fantasy.) With the removal of funded tuition for prisoners, this program disappeared almost overnight, leaving only the federally mandated GED program (which has itself been cut back over the intervening years).

Fortunately inmates are resourceful; all over the "maxis," people have long been teaching each other English, Spanish, reading and writing, paralegal skills, history, economics, nutrition. In response to this new crisis inmate-run groups quickly formed to provide their own substitute versions of the counseling and other services that the state had withdrawn, but the abrupt disappearance of a formal education program which could establish clearly defined goals, and (extremely

important) provide certification of the achievement of these goals, was deeply demoralizing.

In 1997 I was invited by the Auburn Office of Volunteer Services to begin meeting with a group of inmates who were interested in higher education. My role would be to help them find and pursue correspondence courses, give them feedback on personal writing projects, or simply discuss with them whatever they were reading or might be interested in reading. Over the next couple of years a sort of one-room schoolhouse took shape, with a constituency which fluctuated between ten and twenty, but which at one time or another involved perhaps eighty different inmates. Several group members studied for and passed successfully CLEP (College Level Examination Program) exams in English composition and mathematics offered by the College Board, and others took correspondence courses of various kinds -- para-legal skills, communication, sociology -- offered by universities around the country. Success generated enthusiasm, in the inmates and in me, and I gradually found myself moving from monthly to biweekly to weekly meetings.

But successes of this kind could provide only a limited satisfaction: The CLEP exams were not intended to test examinees beyond the elementary level, and the correspondence courses, despite costing between two and four hundred dollars, typically provided no more instruction than could be conveyed by a "workbook" and a series of multiple choice exams.<sup>7</sup> We found ourselves spending more and more time just reading together, and I was pleased to see the men willingly take on more

and more demanding kinds of literature. At one point we even attempted to work through the Iliad, and though the density of the mythological references and the fact that every character seemed to have at least three names generated frustration, and finally made us abandon this project, giving it a try was felt to have been worthwhile.

In 1999 I was joined by two stalwarts, my English Department colleague Paul Sawyer and Paul Cody, a novelist who teaches English at Ithaca College. Both felt that the existence of an established group of seriously interested inmates represented an important opportunity, and urged me to explore the possibility of providing regular college classes. After negotiating unsuccessfully with schools in the Auburn area, I decided, somewhat diffidently, to approach Cornell, with immediate and highly gratifying results. Lynne Abel, Associate Dean for Undergraduate Studies in the Arts College, agreed to authorize the offering of courses which would correspond to courses normally offered at Cornell, and Glenn Altschuler, Dean of the School of Continuing Education, generously agreed to sponsor such courses, tuition free, and provide the administrative resources for processing grades and issuing transcripts. Cornell at Auburn was launched. In January 2001 we began our first official class, a survey of American literature, and we have continued to offer two English courses per year since that time.

### III. Teaching in Prison

In "The Shawshank Redemption" the wise old con, Morgan Freeman, gives new inmate Tim Robbins a lesson about prison life: "the first thing you got to realize is that every man in here is innocent." For most viewers of the film, Freeman's words probably register as a sardonic comment on jailhouse lawyers, or the incorrigible criminal mind. But it is really a hard truth about the vital role of fantasy in the life of somebody serving a long sentence for a violent crime. I don't mean the yuppy Tom Sawyer fantasy of the film. A real-life Morgan Freeman would be talking about the kind of fantasy that enables you to keep believing that you have a right to exist; a little dignity and value; significant personal relationships; a sex life; something to hope for. Without the ability to believe these things you are going to become uncontrollably angry or unbearably depressed, and the same thing will happen if you believe in them too much, and so set yourself up to be blindsided by some shocking act of violence or injustice.

I have had to remind myself again and again of just how complex the relationship is between a long-term prison inmate and the world at large. The men we work with are very much like Philip Nolan, the hero of Edward Everett Hale's The Man without a Country, an army officer who, having renounced his army commission to follow Aaron Burr, was tried for treason, cursed the United States in open court, and was punished by being kept continually at sea for the rest of his life. Like Philip Nolan, these men are obsessively aware of the outside world, often

extraordinarily well-informed about current events and anything else they can glean from their limited access to the media. And like Hale's hero again, they are recurrently tormented by the sense of having been disqualified for life in the outside world, of having renounced their right to live in it. Even younger men who may be serving relatively brief terms on drug charges – and thanks to the infamous Rockefeller drug laws there are many such at Auburn -- are apt to feel deeply anxious about their ability to reenter society and survive there. A great deal of recidivism occurs among men who upon release have returned to crime because criminals are the people they know and, for better or worse, feel they can trust.

For this reason teaching in a prison situation has to be radically Socratic in method, with professorial authority as inconspicuous as possible, and always ready to be guided by student response. Inmates are acutely conscious that we, the teachers, represent the world they dread, long for, and fantasize in countless ways, and this gives us an extraordinary power. To be in dialogue with us is to be testing their sense of what's out there, and we can hardly be aware of the extent to which our every move helps to validate or undermine their sense of relation to society. It took me years, and my colleagues many months, to build a relationship of trust -- a trust that depends on an assurance that you will be coming back week after week, on sensing that you, like them, are feeling your way into the relationship, on seeing you make stupid mistakes and recognizing that you will not be harsh or scornful when they make mistakes. Gradually a guarded intimacy takes shape, limited but genuine



enough to enable us, the outsiders, to begin to feel with some degree of clarity what it is like to be incarcerated, what it does to a man and what it teaches him.

Formalizing our relationship to our inmate classes by offering them for credit has meant that there is even more at stake in our negotiations, and our relationship to the inmates has changed in interesting ways. The students have become made all the more aware of the limits of their experience as critical readers and writers, and it has become that much more important to make sure that our dialogue always takes place as nearly as possible on an equal footing. It means a tremendous amount to the men to be working with faculty members from a prestigious university, and we are continually being surprised by some new manifestation of the respect and appreciation they feel.<sup>8</sup> But the relationship has two sides. When we are unravelling a few difficult lines in Shakespeare, the word is "shut up, man, listen to Doc!" (I am "Doc" to the Auburn population, and for some reason it makes me very proud.) But there are also times when I am told, affectionately but firmly, "Doc, you the man, but sometimes you don't know shit" -- and this too is immensely satisfying.

And indeed sometimes we don't. Maintaining an open dialogue is not just a matter of tact and consideration on our part, but a means of ensuring that we, too, learn from the experience. Recognizing that prison, and the outside life that gets you there, do indeed hold lessons for all of us is not only crucial to whatever success we can hope to have as teachers, but gives us a truer understanding of the books we read. Mirroring the prison population generally, three quarters of our students are

black, and reading canonical American literature with such a group is genuinely and painfully enlightening. I was made to realize every wrinkle and nuance of the ambivalence about race that is the greatness and the failure of Huckleberry Finn,<sup>9</sup> and the beauty and depth of meaning of the call-and-response sermon that begins Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man. Reflecting on a rugged discussion of Herman Melville's Benito Cereno, it was impossible for me, a well-intentioned New Englander, to escape the realization that "Amasa Delano, c'est moi." A profound sensitivity to race is continually lurking just under the surface of every serious exchange we have, and one of the important functions of our classroom is to serve as a neutral zone, where black, white, and Hispanic inmates can talk candidly, with the text on the table between them as a control, about issues which surface in complex and often violent forms every day as part of life in the Yard.

But while race is often the catalyst for discussion, it does not circumscribe it. I am continually impressed by inmates' ability to extrapolate from their own situation to those represented in the books we read, to recognize that the prisons created for Troy, the protagonist of August Wilson's Fences, or Arthur Miller's Willie Loman, by their inability to rise above their dead-end situations, have a lot in common, or that the confused mixture of ambitious fantasy, distorted religiosity, and the dominant presence of his wife that drive Macbeth are more familiar than they can easily admit. Perhaps the most wonderful experience of this kind that I have had came with our reading of James Welch's relentlessly painful short novel The Death of Jim Loney.

As we discussed the slow psychological deterioration of Welch's hero, an alcoholic half-breed whose Sioux mother is long dead, while his ne'er-do-well white father refuses to acknowledge him, inmates registered an extraordinary sympathy with the many layers of loneliness that enveloped him, recognizing clearly that he too was in prison, his alienation and his paralyzing hopelessness a worst-case version of their own burden as incarcerated men.

It is times like these that make teaching in prison the extraordinary experience it is, keep us coming back and ensure that our classes are at least as rewarding for us as for the inmates. I have been a teacher for more than forty years, at three wonderful universities, and nothing in that time has been more fulfilling and satisfying than Cornell at Auburn. As almost everyone I know who has done similar work would acknowledge, it changes your life.

#### **IV. Cornell Students at Auburn**

I have been bringing Cornell students to Auburn for nearly as long as I myself have been going there, first as volunteer tutors in the GED program, more recently as teaching assistants in our Cornell classes. From a faculty standpoint student involvement has been a great success, and I think nearly all our student volunteers, graduate and undergraduate alike, would agree that working at Auburn has been one of the high points of their time at Cornell.

It could be argued that the appeal of this work for students is largely a function of the current political climate. Students concerned about social issues are frustrated, like many of the rest of us, by what they see as their powerlessness in the face of our current government's resolve to cut back on social services of all kinds. For these students there is an obvious attractiveness to prison work, which mirrors their own frustration in a more extreme form. Here they encounter a social group so radically marginalized that, like the homeless and the addicted, they have become in effect a stigmatized social class, whose rights and entitlements, in the eyes of society at large, are nil – which is to say, precisely commensurate with their utter lack of political power.

There is also of course the glamour factor. Since the heyday of the Black Panthers there has been a deep-seated tendency among left-leaning younger Americans to identify prisons, and the disproportionate number of black men whom the prison system disenfranchises, with the suppression of political freedoms. There is a great deal of truth in this view, along with much nonsense, but there is also a more insidious appeal, potent even for young people to whom names like George Jackson, Eldridge Cleaver, Bobby Seale, or Huey Newton are as remote as Sacco and Venzetti: a desire to affirm one's own political integrity by identifying with men whose profound distrust of white society may or may not have a serious political focus, but seems like hard-earned wisdom and commitment. For middle class kids from an Ivy League university this impulse is apt to be reinforced by a kind of low-

grade romanticism, an impulse to deny the alienating effects of privilege and education and join the ranks of the oppressed.<sup>10</sup>

In the face of all these temptations, the performance of our student volunteers has been nothing short of remarkable. Even among the growing body of politically aware students interested in prison issues, those who actually commit themselves to working with prisoners are a small, self-selected group, and our volunteers have never displayed the slightest hint of the “visit-to-the-zoo” attitude that is the common reaction of non-involved students who express curiosity about the program. They have had no difficulty fitting into our classroom routine, and their age has proven to be one of their greatest assets. Young inmates are fascinated to meet people whose backgrounds are totally different from their own, yet who can share many aspects of their view of the world. Such encounters are immensely enabling for men whose cultural horizons have been severely limited – who indeed may know little more of the world than a single inner-city neighborhood<sup>11</sup> --, and I have found that a validating response from a Cornell undergraduate to an inmate’s thoughts or written work is often much more meaningful than that of a faculty member. Moreover, inmates naturally find it possible to talk frankly about their doubts and perplexities with undergraduates than with middle-aged professors, and because of this rapport the undergrads have been able to pass along information which helps us make our own classroom presentations more accessible and the discussions we conduct more inclusive.

Though none of our volunteers has ever felt any real concern about physical danger,<sup>12</sup> we were at first somewhat anxious about the fact that more than half of our student volunteers were female. But we were very quickly reassured by the inmate's reception of them. The reaction of the inmates themselves to the first (and only) bit of sexually suggestive behavior we have encountered made it clear that anyone who stepped out of line would be headed off by his fellow students. Since then the closest thing to sexual harassment has been the concealing in student essays of notes inviting female volunteers to become pen-pals. Several women have mentioned their sense of having to be very circumspect in expressing sympathy or approval, which is almost bound to be overinterpreted by men starved for female company, but the men's obvious interest in them is tempered by a courtesy and respect which, I am assured, compare favorably with the conduct of male students at Cornell. On the whole I am inclined to agree with the female volunteer who suggested that one of the things our inmate students (many of whom have lived in all-male confinement since their early teens) are most anxious to learn in our classroom is how to interact in an appropriate way with women.

But valuable as such social interaction is in itself, Cornell student participation has extended a good deal further. Because of the size of our recent classes, and the widely differing levels of preparation our students bring with them, we have been using two classrooms, with one group concentrating on the critical reading literature and writing essays about the assigned texts, as in any 200- or 300-

level Cornell English course, the other group pursuing something more like a freshman writing seminar, with an emphasis on basic techniques of composition and argumentation. Though a faculty member or graduate student normally supervises this group, the bulk of the work is done by a group of undergraduates, who have been meeting regularly to design assignments, organize classroom activity, and discuss the progress of particular students. Having to write essays is one of the most challenging components of our classes for most inmates, and a good many promising students have been literally scared away by the threat of having to expose their writing to our scrutiny.<sup>13</sup> By working patiently one-on-one with such students, and candidly acknowledging their own limits as grammarians and rhetoricians, our undergraduate TAs have helped us retain a number of potentially first-class students who are now ready to do the kind of work that had seemed so threatening before.

#### **V. Student Research at Auburn: Possibilities and Problems**

Our program differs in one significant respect from what I take to be the typical setting of undergraduate field work, in that the faculty involved are not themselves engaged in research, and indeed have a certain investment in restricting themselves to the role of teachers. This is primarily a matter of keeping faith with our inmate students, providing them with the assurance that our interest in them does not involve any intention to reduce them to case histories, but it also removes

one potential source of friction with the Auburn administration. They and the Department of Corrections are extremely sensitive to bad publicity, and they are understandably inclined to assume that anybody whose research involves a significant amount of contact with inmates is probably more or less of an advocate for them.

Nonetheless I think Auburn provides an excellent opportunity for student research. Cornell at Auburn has managed over the years to establish a good working relation with corrections officers and administrators, and we have gained the trust of inmates. A prospective student researcher who comes to Auburn as part of our program can be assured of a friendly reception from our students, and a willingness on their part to talk about life in prison and (within definite limits) the circumstances that led to their incarceration. We have also necessarily learned a good deal about the workings of Auburn and those of the corrections system generally, and are thus in a good position to help researchers find their way around the institution and the field. A number of our present and former students are active in inmate organizations which are concerned to develop relations with groups on the outside interested in the rights and welfare of prisoners, and welcome our attendance at their meetings.

Thus we are well equipped to supervise the prison field work of Cornell undergraduates, and though as a matter of policy our own emphasis is not on research, we have a number of plans which we think will provide good



opportunities for students who want to turn their Auburn experience to research purposes. The quality of our undergraduate volunteers, and the number of students who have expressed interest in taking part in future classes, suggests that a seminar for student volunteers, including several meetings with groups of inmates, would be a valuable addition to our program. Students might be given the option of participating for credit, in which case we would require a term-paper. It is also high time to formalize a relationship which already exists de facto, by integrating volunteer work at Auburn with students' work in such courses as those that Professors Mary Katzenstein, Barry Maxwell, and Suzanne Pohl have been offering on prison-related topics.<sup>14</sup>

We also hope to expand Cornell at Auburn, which has so far been restricted to courses in English, Philosophy, and a one-time course in African history. Though the commitment of time and energy required is a formidable obstacle, the satisfaction it produces is a strong inducement. Several faculty colleagues have visited our classes and expressed strong interest in further participation, and I am currently preparing to present to the administration of the College of Arts and Sciences a proposal for integrating Auburn courses into the College's regular roster of teaching assignments. If several departments – Government, History, Mathematics, and Psychology are obvious candidates -- were given the option of including one Auburn course each term as part of one professor's regular teaching schedule (provided, of course, that there were a faculty member interested in taking

on this assignment), we would be in a position to offer a menu of classes, rather than one or two each term, to Auburn students, while greatly reducing the extra commitment of time and effort required of participating faculty. Ideally such a program might eventually be able to offer participants the promise of a two-year degree or general studies certificate. More immediately it would enable us to incorporate many more student volunteers, and make participation attractive to students in a broader range of disciplines.

Tomorrow the World. In the meantime, Cornell at Auburn lives, and we look forward to its playing an ongoing and valuable role in the lives of Cornell undergraduates.

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1. See Joseph T. Hallinan, Going Up the River: Travels in a Prison Nation (New York: Random House, 2001), pp. 17-18.
  2. Though much of this essay could apply equally well to female inmates, in what follows I will be assuming as context a maximum security facility for men, the only kind of which I have first-hand knowledge.
  2. Though much of this essay could apply equally well to female inmates, in what follows I will be assuming as context a maximum security facility for men, the only kind of which I have first-hand knowledge.
  3. It is worth noting, in view of the appalling effectiveness of this sort of complaint, that prisoners received less than one percent of Pell Grant funding, and that Pell Grant funding was an entitlement program available to all qualified persons, so that prisoners were not in competition with other potential recipients. It is also worth noting that no prisoner received more than \$1500 per year, or roughly 7.5% of the annual cost of maintaining a prisoner in a maximum security facility.

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4. Craig Haney and Philip Zimbardo, "The Past and Future of U.S. Prison Policy: Twenty-Five years After the Stanford Prison Experiment," American Psychologist 53 (1998): 709-27; the passage quoted appears on p. 712.
  5. I do not use the term "civilized" casually. Men who have managed to preserve their humanity under prison conditions have a degree of civilization, and a sense of the value of civilization, that most of us never attain, probably because the only way to get there is by having to deal with real barbarism on its own terms. Such is the nature of prison life that the first stage on the road to civilization is to become an adept barbarian. In his excellent account of his years as a teacher of writing in the Washington prison system, The Funhouse Mirror: Reflections on Prison (Pullman: Washington State University Press, 2000]), Robert Ellis Gordon describes a list compiled by one of his students of the rules every new inmate has to learn, such as: never avoid a fight and always fight dirty; be known to possess a serious, hard-core porn collection; never make eye contact; learn to masturbate fast.
  6. Of course the provision of cheap personal television sets is not necessarily intended to have a demoralizing effect on more rigorous mental activities, but it is widely perceived by inmates as a deliberate strategy, and there have certainly been cases in which this purpose was clearly present. A classic example is the history of the "Bibliotherapy" program, introduced in California prisons in the 1940s as part of an attempt to improve the psychological climate. Herman Spector, the San Quentin librarian who originated this program, saw his library as a "hospital for the mind," and over twenty years, by means of classes and discussion groups, he brought literacy in San Quentin to the point at which inmates were reading at an annual rate of nearly 100 books per man (i.e. two books per week), and submitting hundreds of their own manuscripts for publication every year.

Two of the more successful products of Spector's program were Eldridge Cleaver and George Jackson, and their very success was largely responsible for the program's undoing. As a result of the extraordinary notoriety attained by Soul on Ice and Soledad Brother, simultaneous with the growing influence of the Black Panther Party, the bibliotherapy program came to be seen as not just rehabilitative, but dangerously empowering. When Spector retired in 1967, he was replaced by a corrections officer, rather than a librarian, and his invaluable files on the growth of the program over twenty years were destroyed. During the next few years library facilities, including the law library, were severely cut back, personal TVs were made available on easy terms, and interest in reading and writing plummeted.

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On the history of the bibliotherapy program see Eric Cummins, The Rise and Fall of California's Radical Prison Movement (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994), pp. 26-28, 82-84, 249-50; Hallinan, Going Up the River, pp. 79-81.

7. The generally low quality of such courses is only one of many ways in which the needs and ambitions of inmates are exploited, but it is perhaps the most disgraceful, since these courses are marketed by reputable colleges and universities. Grades are assigned mechanically, extended writing assignments are almost non-existent, and feedback is minimal. In most cases, once the initial packet of course materials has been prepared and mailed, the remaining duties of the "professor" could be performed by a chimpanzee.
8. An episode which illustrates this appreciation, and still leaves me feeling awed, centered on Ted Conover's book New Jack, which describes his year as a corrections officer at Sing Sing. At an inmate's request I brought in a copy. A week later the book was declared contraband, and when it was discovered that this inmate had a copy, rather than implicate me and risk the suspension of our program, he lied and said a friend had smuggled it in during visiting hours. He did this in the full knowledge that he would be "keeplocked" (i.e. confined to his cell for 23 hours a day) for a couple of weeks, as indeed he was. That he was willing to take one for the team in this way is extremely humbling.
9. My reeducation about this unique book and its ambivalences began in an embarrassing and enlightening way. Before we began discussing Huck I spent a few minutes talking about Mark Twain himself, his life and the complexity of his experience with and attitude toward the question of race. As we worked through the opening chapters, we came to the set piece which describes, in comic-darky fashion, Jim's reaction to Tom Sawyer's having stolen his hat while he slept. Though we commonly read distinctive passages aloud before talking about them, I suggested we skip this one, because the racial caricature was such a crude vestige of old-fashioned prejudice. The men were incredulous and highly amused at my manifest insecurity, and I was rightly charged with "doing a Twain" on them.
10. This impulse is by no means confined to students, and is in fact one of the most common occupational hazards of prison teaching. It is a recurring theme in Gordon's The Funhouse Mirror (see note 5 above), and lurks unacknowledged in the writing of many people who have done similar work. I myself, God help my innocent soul, have imagined being sentenced to do

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time at Auburn for some heroic act of civil disobedience, bonding with inmates in a new way, spending my evenings reading Gramsci and Bonhoeffer in my cell, etc., until (after perhaps two weeks) my character and actions are utterly vindicated and I am forced to return to Cayuga Heights.

11. One feature of life at Auburn is worth mentioning in this connection. A large section of the yard is filled with clusters of picnic tables, each 3-5-table cluster painted a different color. Each cluster is the meeting-place of a group of prisoners from a particular background, ethnic, geographic, or, more often both – e.g. the Hispanics from a particular part of Brooklyn; the Dominicans from the Bronx; the Native Americans. In the nature of things such groupings cannot compete with race or gang affiliation as a source of identity, but they are nonetheless a very important means of orientation and guidance.
12. The fear-producing effect of prisons is a common theme in books on the subject. Chapter 5 of David Matlin's Vernooykill Creek: The Crisis of Prisons in America (San Diego State University Press, 1997, pp. 57-62) begins, "Walk into a prison and it'll scare you to the core," and Kenneth McClane's fine but somewhat melodramatic essay about a visit to Auburn, "Walls: A Journey to Auburn" (in his essay collection Walls, Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991, pp. 29-44) strikes a similar note. I am not a courageous person, but my experience on first sitting down with a group of inmates was that within three minutes I had forgotten who they were and what they might have done; they were just students, and it has been that way ever since. The right attitude is defined in the opening words of Drew Leder's wonderful account of teaching philosophy in Baltimore prisons, The Soul Knows No Bars (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000, p. 1): "The first time I entered the prison was the only time I saw it. From then on I was used to it or had trained myself to see through it and beyond." This is not to deny that one might be caught in a yard riot or even taken hostage, but in general, the danger of exposure to violence or abuse is less than one would face at a major league baseball game.
13. For some students, of course, writing anxiety is a function of limited educational background, but in a good many cases the problem is psychological. The same inmate who dreads having to produce a formal essay (which must, he imagines, meet an impossibly high standard to constitute "college" work), and hides his anxiety behind a puffed-up vocabulary and grandiose phrases, is often fully capable of producing fluent letters and concise, efficient legal briefs entirely on his own.
14. Nearly all our volunteers have been recruited from one or another of these classes, and it clearly makes sense to develop this relationship. I have discussed with Professor Maxwell the idea of integrating the work of his prison-related classes with that of Cornell at Auburn, and while for the moment the number of students we can accept as volunteers, and the kinds of work we can offer them, are necessarily limited, this will change as Cornell at Auburn expands.