

Joseph Murtagh

(essay)

"A Hive of Mysterious Danger"
Missouri Review Spring 2010

Winner: Jeffrey E. Smith Editors' Prize

Dostoevsky once remarked that the degree of civilization in a country can be judged by entering its prisons. In America, we have the federal system, which means our prisons are a reflection of the heterogeneity of our states and municipalities. Pick at random from the nearly 5,000 institutions that make up the U.S. prison system, and you will be hard-pressed to discover any underlying principle of order or coherence: scattered across the American landscape are huge, hulking fortresses and tiny, compact jails, prisons of unthinkable cruelty and violence and prisons that offer inmates classes in cooking and horticulture, prisons in which the inmates eat their meals in common and prisons in which the inmates never leave their cells, prisons that hold the most hardened

Photograph by Daniel West

criminals in the world and prisons that hold the drug addict who stole eighty-three dollars from the corner store last January. It used to be that lawbreakers were exiled to foreign lands, but now they are exiled right here at home, cast into domestic wildernesses of iron and stone from which roughly nine-tenths will emerge, while the rest will languish for their entire lifetimes. A common misperception is that prisons consist of only two populations, prisoners and guards, but American prisons are also home to doctors, psychologists, dental hygienists, drug counselors, math tutors, chaplains, barbers, nurses, union reps, administrators, volunteer service coordinators, all of whom go about their daily business in an environment in which the usual petty frustrations that attend working in the United States are complicated and intensified by the fact that this workplace is a prison. Here space is a precarious commodity, the air is riddled with danger and the rhythms of life are hedged around with a bewildering code of rules that bears little relation to the rules of the outside world. Here it is nearly impossible to disengage yourself; there is always the apparatus seeking you out. It goes without saying that if you were to remove the rooftops from these prisons, you would uncover a world of dramatic intensities, a world of cruelty and faith and madness and perversion and boredom and humor and tragedy and despair. But it is a world almost entirely ignored by the broader taxpaying public, a world that for the past four decades has grown steadily larger.

It's eight o'clock in the evening at Auburn Correctional Facility, a maximum security prison in the Finger Lakes region of upstate New York, and the twenty or so members of English 129: Literary Existentialism have just finished reading a portion of the *Genealogy of Morals* by Friedrich Nietzsche. The prisoners (for that is what all of the students in English 129 are: inmates at Auburn serving sentences ranging from two to three years to life) have zeroed in on a passage in the *Genealogy of Morals* where Nietzsche discusses the concept of mercy. Nietzsche isn't known for his thoughts on mercy, and the passage stands out in a book that is otherwise written in a vein of jovial contempt. There are times when my role as instructor of English 129 becomes almost meaningless, when the discussion develops its own spontaneous energy, ricocheting back and forth among the prisoners like a ping-pong ball, and this is one of those times. Nietzsche has hit a nerve, and it's not hard to guess why. Because with that peculiar sympathy for the incarcerated that is so characteristic of Nietzsche and the

other authors we are studying in class this semester—Camus, Dostoevsky, Kafka—Nietzsche has postulated that, much as an elephant might ignore a mosquito buzzing around its ankle, a civilization might advance to such a degree of power that it would no longer feel compelled to punish its criminals. “It is not unthinkable,” writes Nietzsche in *The Genealogy of Morals*, “that a society might attain such a *consciousness of power* that it could allow itself the noblest luxury possible to it—letting those who harm it go *unpunished*. ‘What are my parasites to me?’ it might say. ‘May they live and prosper: I am strong enough for that!’” Among the jumpsuited members of English 129 this insight has prompted a flurry of interpretation that stretches out in unexpected directions, broadening the scope of Nietzsche’s meaning: that it is a special type of forgiveness but that it is nevertheless forgiveness that Nietzsche is talking about; that what Nietzsche says about societies being able to forgive out of an excess of power might also hold true for individual human beings; that we tend to associate forgiveness with weakness but that when looked at from another angle there is actually a taunting self-pride to the act of turning the other cheek, a sort of “hit me again, I can take it” mentality that demonstrates a superior fortitude to one’s attacker; that maybe there is even a connection to Jesus here. Which last point brings howls of objection from several inmates who recall that Nietzsche is the philosopher who “killed God,” that the most notorious of God’s assassins couldn’t possibly have anything to do with Jesus. Undaunted, the owner of the Nietzsche/Jesus analogy, a laid-back African American man in his early twenties who is rare among the students for having had some college education, and who I later learn has been carrying on a pen-pal correspondence with the novelist Jonathan Franzen, continues: “I don’t think the comparison with Jesus is so crazy. Maybe in his idea of forgiveness Nietzsche is offering a philosophy of nonviolence, like Gandhi or Martin Luther King. You know, he’s saying, ‘I’m so strong on the inside, I don’t *need* to hit back. It’s not even worth the effort.’”

“Turning the other cheek, Superman-style,” agrees the inmate sitting to his right, while in the back of the classroom a tall, lanky, very somber man in his midthirties who hasn’t spoken in class once this semester but who has privately expressed misgivings to me about the atheistic views of the authors we are studying, raises his hand and announces to the class that Nietzsche reminds him of a quotation he has memorized from the writings of Ali ibn Abu Talib, a central figure in Shia Islam: “When you have overpowered an

enemy, show him forgiveness out of gratitude for the ability to overpower him."

"I think Nietzsche would have liked that quote a lot," I tell him.

A mood of quiet reflection settles over the class as the prisoners nod to each other their approval of this wisdom, and a fourth speaker raises his hand. "I can see why this philosophy would be appealing to guys in prison," he says.

Auburn Correctional Facility sits at the hub of a vast network of political and economic influence that spans not just the city of Auburn, New York (population 28,574, governmental seat of Cayuga County and, according to its website, "the birthplace of talking movies," although it would perhaps be more accurate to call it "the birthplace of the electric chair"), but also the New York State Department of Corrections; the New York State Correctional Officers and Police Benevolent Association (NYSCOPBA, for short); the State University of New York (furniture for which is made by the inmates at Auburn for an hourly wage of twenty-five cents); the New York City Metropolitan Area (which assists the chronically depressed rural economies of upstate New York by housing its criminals in the many state prisons located there); and the Republicans in the New York state legislature, who for decades have benefited from a controversial measure that allows for the manipulation of depopulated upstate electoral districts by counting prisoners as part of the voting population. (Of the prisoners in his rural district in western New York, Sen. Dale Volker, a Republican and one of the principal architects of the Rockefeller drug laws, once famously quipped to a local newspaper that "the cows would be more likely to vote for me.") Prisons have arisen to fill the vacuum left by a three-decades-long implosion of industry and manufacturing in upstate New York, and Auburn prison is no exception, employing over eight hundred members of the surrounding community to cut hair, clean teeth, tend addictions, maintain order, prepare reports, sound alarms, file paperwork, conduct searches, take temperatures, carry firearms, provide counseling, supervise staff, seize contraband, direct volunteers, answer phones and teach classes like English 129. Especially for those who would otherwise have to leave the state to find a competitive salary, the pay for these positions is decent. Starting salary for a correctional officer at Auburn is in the upper-thirty to lower-forty range, with eligibility for pay raises based on performance, and the package includes dental, vision, retirement and vacation benefits, while professional and managerial

If you were to remove the rooftops from these prisons, you would uncover a world of dramatic intensities, a world of cruelty and faith and madness and perversion and boredom and humor and tragedy and despair. But it is a world almost entirely ignored by the broader taxpaying public. . . .

positions offer more. The tax dollars that pay the salaries of prison staff bolster the local economy when they are recycled back into small businesses with names like Curley's Restaurant or Sharky's Hair Salon. What Bethlehem Steel has been to Buffalo, what Eastman Kodak has been to Rochester, the prison is to Auburn: not just a means of employment but the emblem of a shared involvement, occupying a place as familiar in the local landscape as the American Legion or the public library or the elementary school named for notable Auburn resident William H. Seward, Abraham Lincoln's secretary of state (other notable Auburn residents include Harriet Tubman, NASCAR driver Jerry O'Neill and, coincidentally enough, John Walsh, host of *America's Most Wanted*).

One of the first things you notice visiting Auburn prison is the statue on the roof, an eight-foot caricature of a smiling blue-and-yellow colonial soldier that looks like it belongs more on a gigantic Christmas tree than on the rooftop of a maximum-security prison. This is "Copper John," and the sight of it rising incongruously above Auburn's melancholy brown walls is symbolic of the prison's history. It is a history that, as if repelled by the bare, brute facts of incarceration, has tried to put a smiling face on prison life and in so doing has demonstrated an unceasing display of contradictory impulses, a drive toward restless experimentation. It was here that the policy known as "the Auburn System" first evolved in the early nineteenth century as an alternative to solitary confinement; under this system prisoners ate and worked together but were subject to a strict code of silence enforced by flogging. It was here during the same period that the state reaped enormous profits by opening up the prison to private enterprise while simultaneously telling inmates to labor for the good of their souls. It was here that still more

profits were reaped in the nineteenth century by charging admission to tourists. Alexis de Tocqueville visited in 1846 while preparing his sociological report *On the Penitentiary System in the United States and Its Application in France* and wrote of the prisoners laboring under the Auburn system, "They are united, but no moral connection exists among them. They see without knowing each other. They are in society without any intercourse; there exists among them neither aversion nor sympathy. At Auburn, they are really isolated, though no wall separates them." At Auburn the electric chair was first introduced as an apparently more humane method of execution than public hangings, and it was here on the morning of August 6, 1890, that the electric chair claimed its first victim, a twenty-nine-year-old man named William Kimmler, who had murdered his wife with a hatchet and whose execution was given the following description in the *New York Times* under the headline "Far Worse than Hanging; Kimmler's Death Proves an Awful Spectacle":

Blood began to appear on the face of the wretch in the chair. . . . The capillaries or small blood vessels under the skin were being ruptured. . . . An awful odor began to permeate the death chamber, and then, as though to cap the climax of this dreadful sight, it was seen that the hair under and around the electrode on the head, and the flesh under and around the electrode at the base of the spine, was singeing. . . . The stench was unbearable.

All in all, the execution took eight minutes; the current had to be turned on twice. What's striking about this revelation, like most aspects of Auburn's history, is the dissonance between the humanitarian impulse and the singeing flesh, as if to the reformers both prisons and prisoners were the result of an unfortunate incident that with a little clever tinkering might be done away with altogether, regardless of the fact that the outcome of this tinkering was usually violently extreme suffering for those on the receiving end of it. "The prison should not be seen as an inert institution, shaken at intervals by reform movements," writes Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish*, but rather, "the prison has always formed part of an active field in which projects, improvements, experiments, theoretical statements, personal evidence and investigations have proliferated."

One recent example of such proliferation is the alliance that has formed between two of upstate New York's cardinal industries: incarceration and

higher education. Both Bard and Cornell now have prisoner education programs, and it was while studying for my PhD in English at Cornell that I met the person mainly responsible for Cornell's involvement with Auburn prison, an emeritus professor of Renaissance literature named Pete Wetherbee, who has written about his experiences teaching at the prison in an unpublished essay:

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 MA degrees in a number of fields. (One Auburn legend tells of an inmate who managed to earn a PhD 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).

The backstory here, glimpsed in phrases like "removal of funded tuition for prisoners," "disappeared almost overnight" and "cut back over the intervening years," is the period beginning in the mid-'90s during which the newly elected Gingrich Congress chose, in passing legislation that prohibited prisoners from receiving Pell Grants and other forms of federal funding that made education behind bars possible, to ignore the mountains of evidence suggesting that prisoner education played a direct role in reducing recidivism by giving ex-offenders marketable skills that assisted them in making the difficult transition back into society. It was into this dark chapter in the history of U.S. prisons that Pete Wetherbee stepped, first as an informal lecturer guiding inmates through the novels of Melville and Twain and later as a founder of what is today known as the Cornell Prison Education Program. Thanks to the accreditation system of a local community college and the financial support of a foundation run by Warren Buffet's wife, by the time I joined as an instructor in the spring of 2008, the Cornell Prison Education Program was on the verge of becoming an official degree-granting institution, offering prisoners a two-year associate's degree with a

core curriculum of math, science and English courses. But for several years it was just Pete and whichever volunteers he rounded up from his colleagues at Cornell who were willing to make the forty-five-minute trek north to Auburn each week to teach writing and literature courses to the inmates. There is something heroic in this: the vision of a retired English professor taking upon his shoulders the responsibility abnegated by the U.S. government when in the name of "getting tough on crime" it slashed prison counseling programs for drug addicts and paranoid schizophrenics who would soon be back on the streets. There is very little of the martyr, though, in Pete, who has an agreeable, down-to-earth personality. He moves through the prison environment with ease, equally at home chatting about the Red Sox with the guards or about his passion for the poetry of Milton and Dante with the inmates. The prisoners call him "Doc," and there is an odd similarity to the character of the same name from *Back to the Future*. "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 my time at Auburn," writes Pete in his prison essay, which includes, buried in an end-note warning against the tendency of left-leaning professors to romanticize the prisoners, this surprising declaration: "I myself, God help my innocent soul, have imagined being sentenced to do 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."

Each week that spring I and the other instructors from Cornell piled into Pete's car and drove north to Auburn. Each week we entered the massive prison gates beneath the smiling face of Copper John. Once inside, our bags were searched, our bodies metal-detected, our hands stamped with an invisible substance that showed up blue beneath the infrared light we waved our hands under at the front desk. Prison teaching, at least at Auburn, although I'm sure it's the same elsewhere, is something of a crapshoot. The slightest disruption in the routine—say we arrived late or one of our names was accidentally left off the checklist—could send us home with an entire week wasted. More serious complications, like a fight among the inmates, could shut down the prison for hours or even days. On a typical evening we were escorted by the guards through the prison's labyrinthine corridors, past a series of heavy metal doors, out into the exercise yard, where we walked among the prisoners in the open air as they milled around or played softball

The execution took eight minutes; the current had to be turned on twice. What's striking about this revelation, like most aspects of Auburn's history, is the dissonance between the humanitarian impulse and the singeing flesh, as if to the reformers both prisons and prisoners were the result of an unfortunate incident that with a little clever tinkering might be done away with. . . .

or huddled in front of an outdoor television set watching HBO (*John Adams* and *The Wire* were particular favorites; when asked about *The Wire* one of my students replied that it was "practical": Practical for what? I wondered). Finally we arrived at the row of prefabricated trailers where the classes were held. There were a couple of ground rules. We couldn't tell the prisoners they were slaves, that they were being exploited for cheap labor—apparently there had been problems with academics telling prisoners this in the past—nor could we say anything to "incite" them, to encourage them to rebel against their jailers. Beyond this we were pretty much free to teach the class however we wanted, a surprising amount of leeway given the intensity of the security apparatus we had to pass through on our way to the classroom. What strikes you immediately as the prisoners file in and take their seats is how much freedom they're granted. There is no assigned seating, which means they're permitted to stand up, walk around, approach you (the class typically ended with all the inmates shaking my hand and thanking me for coming), all of which occurs out of the line of sight of the guards, who are posted down the hall and interrupt the class only if they absolutely have to. You get so used to thinking of prisons as places of reduced mobility that it's startling to realize there are areas within the prison where a limited amount of free association is possible: the exercise yard, the mess hall, the classroom. As for the guards, as long as you kid around with them, you can hit it off fairly well. The first day I signed in, a guard looked at my last name on his

checklist and said, "All right, hotshot, let's see you take your shoulder out of your socket." "You've got the wrong guy;" I told him, "you're thinking of Riggs," this of course being a reference to *Lethal Weapon*, which set the tone for the rest of our interactions. I thought at first that the guards would look down on us as a bunch of bleeding-heart do-gooders, but volunteerism is so much a part of the prison's routine that we blended in with the other groups that volunteer regularly at the prison—Alcoholics Anonymous, Bible study groups, the Quakers—and if the guards thought it was unusual, they never showed it, although there was perhaps a slight but justifiable resentment that the inmates were receiving an Ivy League education when many of the prison staff had attended community colleges or hadn't graduated from college at all. As one managerial-level employee I spoke to put it, "You know, I applied to Cornell and got rejected, so you're telling me I'm not Cornell material, but *these guys are?*"

At any rate, the result of the prisoners being able to move around freely is that after twenty minutes or so you forget you're in prison at all, at which point the class seems more like an adult education session in which all the students happen to be wearing the same green outfits. Part of what contributes to this are the look and feel of the classroom, which are similar to those of a high school: there's the same flickering fluorescent lighting, the same big wooden teacher's desk, the same cheesy motivational posters on the walls with pictures of rock climbers and kittens and U.S. presidents. The class gets very lively, with plenty of laughter and conversation, which helps create a pocket of normalcy in what is otherwise a strange and forbidding place. All of which adds to the illusion that you're not in prison. It's tough to keep up the illusion for long, though, because every so often the thought pops back into your head: *These are prisoners; I'm with prisoners*, at which point you experience a fleeting sense of vertigo, not because you're scared but because a war is being waged in your brain between society's definition of *what* these guys are and your own sense of *who* they are. You've just spent the last couple of weeks getting to know them, and they don't seem that different from the sort of people you might meet in a bar somewhere. Of course they are different, in a big way, but for the moment the impression is all that matters, and the impression is one of singular beings. Here is a man with a goatee and a spidery-looking tattoo on his hand who has read *Being and Nothingness* three times and is a recent convert to Judaism; another with dreadlocks and a Jamaican-style hat whose daughter is a freshman in college; another with a shaved head and missing teeth who despite working eighty

hours a week making license plates has found the time not only to come to class and comment intelligently on Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* but also to write a six-page essay on it. Inevitably what happens is that the label of *prisoner* falls away and is replaced by a vision of concrete personalities. There's a tension here that's similar to the problem of coming up with a proper definition of an individual person. Listing a person's attributes isn't the same thing as defining his essence. If I were to tell you about my friend Dwight, I would list his attributes thus: Dwight lives in New Orleans; he's an English professor at Tulane; he's a brilliant scholar of the eighteenth-century novel; he has black curly hair and a great sense of humor and a wife named Megan. But really I've told you very little about "who" Dwight actually is. All I've done is describe the "what" of Dwight, those properties he could easily share with others. What I haven't communicated is the specific experience of just what it's like to be in the presence of Dwight, that mysterious, essential, soul-like quality of *who-ness* that makes Dwight a unique human being unlike any other human being who has ever lived. It's exactly the discovery of this quality of *who-ness* among the prisoners that gives rise to that peculiar sense of vertigo I spoke of a moment ago. All your life you've thought of these men as an abstract *what*—prisoners, inmates, criminals—and now you're getting to know them for the first time as actual people. It hits you with astonishing force, the sheer particularity of each individual: hair, face, mannerisms, speech. You notice it almost as quickly as you notice that the class consists of ten blacks, four Hispanics and three whites. And it occurs to you that as much as you recognize that there are certain people in this world whose behaviors are such that they need to be isolated from general society and that incarceration in these cases is a necessary public good, one of the primary consequences of the prison industrial complex, whether intentional or not, is to stamp out as much as possible within its boundaries this very natural, very organic quality of individual human *who-ness*.

U.S. prison populations have exploded in the past thirty years. It sometimes happens that we hear statistics without fully comprehending the reality behind them, but in this case, the statistic really is a crazy one to wrap your head around: in the past thirty years the U.S. prison population has jumped from under 200,000 to around 2.3 million. Think of that, really try to grasp what it means: *that's an increase of 2 million human beings incarcerated since 1972, roughly equivalent to the populations of Rhode Island, Wyoming and Delaware combined.*

Historians date the rise of the modern prison boom to the early '70s, around the time that New York State passed its notoriously draconian Rockefeller drug laws, but its origins can be traced back to the turbulence of the '60s. For the children of boomer parents, the memory of the '60s has been sugared over by the legendary hedonism of Woodstock and the Summer of Love, and it can be difficult for those who grew up in the comparative calm of the '90s to fathom just how cataclysmic the '60s were as a period of social and political unrest. With the war over and the GIs home, the mood of the '50s had been cautiously optimistic, and suddenly the nation was plunged into a very frightening period whose long list of troubles included foreign wars, political assassinations, domestic terrorism, economic boycotts, campus upheavals, violent and occasionally lethal mass demonstrations, police brutality, urban rioting during the "hot summer" of 1967 and following the murder of Dr. King, a massive upsurge in unemployment and crime. It caused many Americans, especially in the Southern and Midwestern states, to fear that American civilization was on the verge of a titanic and irremediable breakdown for which the only remedy was a swift embrace of the right-wing "law-and-order" philosophy espoused by the Republican presidential campaigns of Barry Goldwater ('64) and Richard Nixon ('68). With the civil rights movement in full swing, much of the anxiety in the country boiled down to tensions over race. The apocalyptic political rhetoric of the '64 and '68 Republican campaigns, which spoke of "drift and decay," "wave after wave of crime in our streets and in our homes," "riot and disorder in our cities," "a breakdown in the morals of our young people" (Goldwater '64), "cities enveloped in smoke and flame," "sirens in the night," "unprecedented lawlessness" and "Americans hating each other, fighting each other, killing each other at home" (Nixon '68), was targeted to a specific portion of the electorate that Nixon in his 1968 acceptance speech defined as "the forgotten Americans, the non-shouters, the non-demonstrators"; in other words, those mostly white Americans who blamed the country's social ills on a collusion between angry black militants and radical student organizations on the college campuses.

The stringent criminal justice policies that run like a red thread through the presidencies of Reagan, Clinton and Bush started out as a reaction to a radical shift in the social fabric. It was to an improvised assortment of Northern Catholics, Southern Protestants and working-class whites—the "silent majority," in the language of the 1968 campaign—that the law-and-order appeal was mainly pitched, by all appearances successfully. For

These were men who for whatever reason had chosen not to play by the rules in a serious way, and while that central fact could never be omitted, for a few moments each week they were allowed to begin the process of amending their mistakes not on the state's but on their own terms.

instance, a 1969 poll recorded that 81 percent of the public believed that law and order had broken down, with respondents attributing the surge in crime to "Negroes starting riots" and "communists." This attitude wasn't solely the result of political propaganda, however, but had its roots in the boom years following World War II, when the Northern auto and steel industries drew millions of blacks and poor whites out of the rural South into the inner cities of Detroit, Baltimore, Buffalo and Cleveland, a dramatic shift in demographics that fueled new racial tensions and subsequently the changes in prison policy.

On the website of the New York State Department of Corrections you can look up inmates and their crimes. Type in a random name, say, "Henry Jones," and up will pop the seventeen Henry Joneses who have been imprisoned in New York State, all of whom are black and whose crimes range from robbery to manslaughter to criminal sale of a controlled substance in the third degree. While teaching at Auburn I was warned by fellow instructors and guards alike not to look up the crimes of my students, that it would "make me see them differently," but being naturally curious I looked them up after the first class. The crimes themselves—mostly burglary and drug trafficking, although there were a few murders—didn't surprise me as much as the incongruity between the criminal past and the behavior of the individuals sitting in the classroom. I was also teaching at Cornell that semester, and the contrast between the prisoners and my Cornell students, who frequently showed up in class in their pajamas and spent the hour either struggling to stay awake or sending text messages to their friends, made the prisoners' conduct stand out even more. It wasn't that the prisoners were gifted

academically, although their discussions of the texts were always complex and interesting—many were writing at an eighth or ninth grade level and required serious help with basic grammar and usage—but they showed an intense appreciation for the privilege of being in the classroom. You could see it in the way they carried themselves, the excessively polite manners, the attentive nods, the handshakes at the end of class. Without exception they were trying very hard to make a good impression. When asked at the beginning of the semester why they were interested in taking the class, almost all of them responded with some variation of the following: “I want to take advantage of this opportunity.” The word “opportunity” implies a certain positive orientation toward the future, not necessarily something you expect to find in abundance among a group of prisoners, and while the desire to take the class might have been motivated by practical considerations—a college class looks good in front of a parole board, for instance—the feeling I got was that the word was being used in a much broader and more open-ended sense than it customarily is. Opportunity in this instance meant not only a chance for personal advancement but what amounted to almost the same thing: a break from the routine idiocy of prison life. Here at least was a chance to be judged according to criteria that had nothing to do with the color of your skin or whom you ran with or what corner you came from or the crimes you had committed. These were men who for whatever reason had chosen not to play by the rules in a serious way, and while that central fact could never be omitted, for a few moments each week they were allowed to begin the process of amending their mistakes not on the state’s but on their own terms. “You have no idea how much we look forward to this each week,” said one inmate to me after class one evening. “This is such a breath of fresh air, such an *amazing opportunity*.”

In March 2009 a report by Human Rights Watch revealed that from 2005 to 2007, inmates in New York State prisons were sentenced to a collective total of 2,516 years in disciplinary segregation for drug-related charges. Denied medical treatment and confined to forced isolation for up to twenty-three hours a day, prisoners were kept in “the box,” sometimes for more than a year. Said one such inmate whom Human Rights Watch found with his hands and feet shackled with heavy chains, “I’ve been in fourteen months straight, and just got another twenty months for possession. . . . It’s really taking a toll on me. . . . I need some kind of therapy because the cell is closing in on me. I feel paranoid, I can’t sleep. I feel like people are

against me. I'm restless, I'm talking to myself." Said another, "I've had fifteen, sixteen drug tickets. No assaults or anything like that. I've never been in a treatment program. Now I'm in the box 'til 2012. I'm a drug addict. If you know I'm a drug addict, why are you putting me in a box?" Another report by Human Rights Watch concluded that "in recent years U.S. prison inmates have been beaten with fists and batons, stomped on, kicked, shot, stunned with electronic devices, doused with chemical sprays, choked, and slammed face first onto concrete floors by the officers whose job it is to guard them. Inmates have ended up with broken jaws, smashed ribs, perforated eardrums, missing teeth, burn scars." In 1995, a federal judge, referencing a pattern of brutality at Pelican Bay Prison in California, concluded that the violence "appears to be open, acknowledged, tolerated and sometimes expressly approved" by high-ranking corrections officials. Another federal judge in 1999 concluded that the Texas prison system was pervaded by a "culture of sadistic and malicious violence." In 2003, the former executive director of the Texas prison system, Lane McCotter, was sent by Attorney General John Ashcroft to oversee reconstruction of the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. Ivan Frederick, the highest-ranking soldier to be convicted of torturing prisoners in the Abu Ghraib prison scandal, served a previous stint as a corrections officer. So did Charles Graner, whose smiling face appears above the pyramid of naked prisoners in the famous photo.

In 2001, Human Rights Watch collected written testimonies from individual prisoners for a report on abuse in U.S. prisons: "Inmates are looked at and treated as subhuman across the board. If an incident can be covered, it will be. If it can be ignored, it will be, says K.J. in Georgia. You have to fight to be safe, says W.M. in Texas: To give you an idea what I mean, I now have scars where I've been gutted, under the right side of my chest below my heart, where my neck was cut open and under my left arm. That's not the many minor cuts and wounds can't include in this letter because of lack of times & space. People start to treat you right once you become deadly. T.B. in Texas: I hate to say this but if you weren't racist when you came to prison more than likely you will be when you leave. In Texas prisons race is the main issue and until people wake up and realize that nothing will change. J.G. in Minnesota: I found out how people earn respect here, you have to beat someone or shank them. B.L. in Florida: I was young and yes I was weak. My weight was only 120 lbs, the first few months I was raped and beat up many times, I would always Fight back, I wanted my attackers to know I was not a Willing Subject for their evilness. I went to the Guards for help and was told there was nothing that could be done, that I would

have to stand up like a Man and Take Care of my own troubles. L.O. in Texas: When I was sentenced I didn't hear the part of sentencing that state, "You are hereby sentenced to six years of hard labor to the Texas Dept. of Criminal Justice. While there you will be beaten daily, savagely raped, and tortured, mentally, to the point of contemplating suicide."

As I mentioned earlier, the class I taught at Auburn was on existentialist literature, with works by Camus, Kafka, Nietzsche and Dostoevsky on the syllabus. Existentialism, I told my students, and winced as I heard myself say it, is a "philosophy of the streets." It was an overly dramatic statement, but I meant that existentialism is a style of thinking grounded in the messy ambiguities of life. One thing that distinguished philosophers like Nietzsche and Kierkegaard from the philosophers who preceded them was a willingness to reflect seriously about human emotions that, while not wholly neglected in the Western philosophical tradition, had tended to take a backseat to reason: emotions such as love, terror, pity, revenge, grief and joy. The prisoners in my class had an entire grammar of experiences to draw from, a familiarity with the courts, for instance, which gave them a special insight into Kafka's *The Trial*, or a knowledge of what it means to be an outsider, which made them sympathize with Dostoevsky's Underground Man, and they quickly warmed to the idea of drawing connections between their experiences and the concepts they encountered in the readings. The danger of such a "literature as equipment for living" approach was that the class might degenerate into a glorified academic therapy session, but it never happened, which I attribute more to the students than to any pedagogical skills on my part. I was constantly asking the prisoners if the works we read "surprised" them. "Does it surprise you," I would ask during a discussion of *The Trial*, "that Kafka understands your experience of being arrested so well?" To which the prisoners replied, "No, that's what literature is *supposed* to do." I was invariably the one who came off as naïve in these exchanges. In the heady atmosphere at Cornell I'd unconsciously picked up a set of shopworn, vaguely Marxist notions about literature that I was never entirely comfortable with but that I'd adopted slowly and against my instincts, the way you adopt the customs of a foreign country after living there for several years: that literature is bourgeois, that it lacks universal appeal, that to talk of its "human" merits is intellectually shallow. One of the best things about teaching at Auburn, however, was hearing confirmed what I really never stopped believing: "No, that's what literature is *supposed* to do."

What both my students and Nietzsche understood was that when you force punishment on a prisoner from the outside like this, it remains basically alien to him, a meaningless stroke of bad luck to be dealt with like any other stroke of bad luck—with hardness, with a will to endure what can't be changed.

Still, there were moments of awkwardness, and this was especially true when the reading material touched on imprisonment. I remember mulling over one such passage from the *Genealogy of Morals* for several minutes, wondering how to broach it in class:

It is precisely among criminals and convicts that the sting of conscience is extremely rare; prisons and penitentiaries are not the kind of hotbed in which species of gnawing worm is likely to flourish: all conscientious observers are agreed on that, in many cases unwillingly enough and contrary to their own inclinations. Generally speaking, punishment makes men hard and cold; it concentrates; it sharpens the feeling of alienation; it strengthens the power of resistance.

When you read Nietzsche, you often feel as if Nietzsche is imparting a secret truth to you that makes you that much smarter, that much wiser, than the non-Nietzsche-reading public. As I sat in my living room trying to anticipate how the prisoners at Auburn might react to this passage, I wondered if maybe Nietzsche had overplayed his hand and ventured into territory he knew nothing about. As eloquent as Nietzsche's description of prisoner psychology was, I worried it would only have relevance on an academic level. Not to mention that bringing it up in class would mean delving into the prisoners' feelings in a way that would never happen in, say, a physics class—would mean asking them how they really *felt about all of this*,

about being here, in prison. The whole thing seemed too gushy, too personal, too much like an episode of Dr. Laura. Nevertheless, the next day I asked the prisoners their thoughts on the passage, and their reaction couldn't have been more farcical. It was like the mood in a comedy lounge after a joke has been cracked about a topic that is totally obvious to everyone in the room. "Nietzsche nails it," said one student, laughing. "That passage, that's it *exactly*," said another. "Man, he really knows," on around the room, each of the prisoners lighting up with that giddy recognition that comes from discovering your innermost experience illuminated in a book.

The lesson here is not that I had misread my audience or even undervalued Nietzsche's keenness as a psychologist but that the prisoners had rejected a common narrative propagated by the U.S. taxpaying public in order to convince itself that the American prison industry serves a higher and more exemplary purpose than the pragmatic one of supplying jobs to communities that need them. Shrouding itself in a veil of humanitarianism, this narrative holds that punishment is fundamentally redemptive, that its purpose is to awaken the conscience. It can be summed up in the words of one of Auburn's first wardens, Gersham Powers (1822): "Force the inmates to reflection, and let self-tormenting guilt harrow up the tortures of accusing conscience, keener than scorpion stings; until the intensity of their sufferings subdues their stubborn spirits, and humbles them to a realizing sense of the enormity of their crimes and their obligation to reform." The worldview here is nineteenth-century Calvinist, but it's not as distant from current thinking as the hyperbole might suggest. No matter how much lip service we pay to the notion of rehabilitation, there is still at the root of our modern understanding of the prison system the idea that the purpose of prison is to isolate the prisoner with his crime and make him suffer in contemplation of it until he is ready to admit his wrongdoing, to *break him*, in other words, as a precondition for reentering society. What both my students and Nietzsche understood was that when you force punishment on a prisoner from the outside like this, it remains basically alien to him, a meaningless stroke of bad luck to be dealt with like any other stroke of bad luck—with hardness, with a will to endure what can't be changed. In other words, rehabilitation can become genuine only if the prisoner is allowed to internalize the process, to feel that he has some stake in the method by which the state is asking him to change his behavior. Failing this, the outcome will almost always be the one Nietzsche refers to: "Generally speaking, punishment makes men hard

and cold; it concentrates; it sharpens the feeling of alienation; it strengthens the power of resistance."

But it's precisely here that education has a role to play. It's easy to forget that of the roughly two million people currently incarcerated in U.S. prisons only a tiny fraction are serving life sentences, which means the vast majority will one day be returning to our communities. If we are going to continue to lock up record numbers of people in this country, we should at least be providing them with a means for breaking the interminable cycle of recidivism. And the studies all agree, education is the best way to do this. One can point to the findings in Ohio that graduating from a college program reduces re-arrest rates by 72 percent, or in New York that 26.4 percent of inmates with a college degree return to prison compared to 44.6 percent of nondegree inmates. One can point to the evidence that prisoner education more than pays for itself, for instance, a 1997 study done by CURE-NY that found that postsecondary prisoner education would produce national savings of hundreds of millions of dollars per year.

In the end, however, the strongest argument for prisoner education isn't based on statistics but on morals. We can deny prisoners many things, liberty, society, citizenship, but short of execution the only thing we can't deny a prisoner is the right to atone for his sins. If there's one thing to be learned from teaching in a prison, it's that this kind of atonement can and actually does happen, but that it doesn't happen in the solitary darkness of a prison cell; it happens in the open space of a classroom, where in the company of his peers an inmate can craft a story anew about himself that puts some distance on the old story, the story of the murderer, the dealer, the pervert, the thief. Stuck away in a cell you will never act as anything other than a person stuck away in a cell, but in a classroom you can at least act like a student, which in turn might lead to acting like a citizen. The classroom is indeed an "opportunity," an opportunity to enter a stage for a bit, try a new role and see what happens. "That a beginning be made man was created," said Saint Augustine. Not every prisoner will have the courage of that beginning. But every man ought to be given the chance.

MEET THE AUTHOR

Joseph Murtagh



Photo by Barbara Adams

"Several people have asked me where I got the title 'A Hive of Mysterious Danger.' I have a hard time with titles, and long after I'd come up with the idea to write an essay about teaching at Auburn Correctional Facility I couldn't think of what to call it. One evening I was at a bar in Ithaca, and this incredibly drunk guy who I knew vaguely leaned up to me and said, 'Hey, buddy, I heard you're a writer?' And he shouts, literally shouts, into my face: 'Well,

the next thing you write, you gotta call it A HIVE OF MYSTERIOUS DANGER!'

"The name stuck. For wide swaths of the American public, that's exactly what prisons are: hives of mysterious danger; repositories of dark fantasies, wild imaginings. The first thing that struck me when I taught at Auburn was how intricately linked the prison was to the mainstream economy. I wanted to communicate that prisons are, for better or worse, as much a part of our communities as police stations or public libraries, and that the taxpayer therefore bears some responsibility for what goes on inside them. One thing we can do is restore funding for prison education at the state and federal levels. This is a hard thing to ask legislators to do, especially in an economic downturn, but the benefits are worth it. So the essay was very much written in that spirit.

"F. Scott Fitzgerald said that there are no second acts in American lives, but I've never understood what he meant by that. Sometimes it seems that's all America is: second acts, and third acts and fourth acts, too, and nowhere is this more obvious than in a prison classroom. Because the people who show up there haven't given up on themselves, and I think it's the responsibility of a well-ordered state to give them a chance."

Joseph Murtagh received his PhD in English from Cornell University in August 2009. He currently teaches at Ithaca College. He was the winner of

the 2004 Creative Nonfiction Award from the *Mid-American Review*. From May 2008 to September 2009 he worked as an organizer for the Working Families Party, with whom he assisted in the 2008 Democratic takeover of the New York State Senate, an experience he's writing about in a book project titled *Campaign Days*.