Praying Through the Bars:

A Pastoral Testimony For Prison Visitors

Keith R. Maddock

Smashwords Edition

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Preface

When I was overseeing seminary students visiting in the local jail, written resources for them were sparse. Keith Maddock is filling this void with a second pamphlet, for which I am grateful. His annotated bibliography on this subject is the finest one I have seen.

Visiting persons incarcerated in our jails and prisons has never been easy. Now it is even harder, as Keith Maddock notes, with our penal system greatly overcrowded and the guards often overwhelmed. The visitation program at the seminary where I taught was put on hold while a new jail was being built. The conditions in the old jail were so difficult that the students were not able to get in, even though they were approved by the prison authorities.

At the same time, Christians are called to be present precisely where people are most poor and marginalized. Jail visitation is a ministry "unto the one least of these" (Matt. 25:45), which Jesus supported in a stunning way: He asserts that when we visit those in prison, it is as though we visit him (Matt. 25:40).

Keith provides a model in this pamphlet of unflagging perseverance in visiting persons behind bars, even when he honestly admits that he is not sure sometimes whether his visits are making any difference to those persons. His writing calls us to be faithful rather than worry about success. And he gives us stories, reflections and specific tools to encourage and guide us in this important ministry. Moreover, he offers an alternative to the more traditional evangelistic and totally Bible-quoting approach which many persons of faith will find congenial and encouraging.

For sustained ministry in jails, you will need ongoing training, support, and supervision. Finding others in your faith community who might be interested in such visitation would be a good place to start. Reading this book and discussing it, praying for discernment of whether to proceed with such a ministry, obtaining the blessing of your faith community, then finding someone who can provide some initial training - all would be good initial steps.

Finding a way into the prison systems is the next important step. If the jail or prison has a chaplain, that would be the logical person to approach. If there is no chaplain, you will need to inquire about the staff person who oversees visitors, in particular ministers and other persons of faith. There may well be forms to fill out, perhaps a police background check, then obtaining some kind of badge of identification in order to be admitted for visits. Once the visitation gets underway, you will need to debrief with others who are also visiting, support each other, and find ongoing oversight from a person who is experienced with your setting. Again the chaplain at the jail or prison would be the best person, if such a person is available.

As you can see, just getting into the jail can be daunting! The jail or prison has its own culture, which at first appears alien and perhaps intimidating to us who are coming from the outside, as Keith notes. It takes some time to become acclimated and know how to best invest one's time. Again, this book can be useful in finding an approach with inmates that fits for you. Many persons who pass these hurdles and begin a ministry of regular visitation find themselves strangely attracted to it, and continue for many years. A ministry of presence may be one of the most important benefits of your visitation. My hope and prayer is that you will explore such a ministry for yourself and for your faith community, and that you will find it rewarding in ways never anticipated.

Bill Ratliff
Retired, Earlham School of Religion

Professor of Pastoral Care and Counseling
Richmond, IN

Introduction

From the Outside Looking In

> Prison life with its endless privations and restrictions makes one rebellious. The most terrible thing about it is not that it breaks one's heart – hearts are made to be broken – but that it turns one's heart to stone.
>
> Oscar Wilde, *De Profundis*

A prison warden, doing his rounds, asked each inmate whether he was innocent or guilty. Of course, most of the prisoners loudly protested their innocence. Only one admitted that he was guilty of the charges that brought him there. The warden turned to the guard on duty, saying, "Throw this one out before he corrupts the innocent!" This ancient Sufi tale reflects the dilemma faced by prison chaplains and volunteers on a daily basis. It is the nature of their vocations that they regard each prisoner as a candidate for redemption and rehabilitation, regardless of circumstances. On the other hand, the same vocations make them accountable for the well- being of the spiritual and secular communities they belong to.

Prisons are unnatural environments, and as such they can deaden the sensibilities of a prisoner or transform misfortune into opportunities for personal reflection and rehabilitation. The average volunteer visitor seldom witnesses the full effect that these institutions can have on people's lives. We are outsiders looking in on a world we can only partially (and then dimly) comprehend. Yet a tug of compassion or empathy for the prisoners' condition may also lead us into this darkness as witnesses to the Inward Light.

Anyone who visits prisoners for the first time with these motivations may indeed be considered naive. We are entering a "high security" environment, taking the risk of interacting with people who have problems relating to addiction, criminal and sometimes even psychotic behaviour. As individuals, we are unlikely to make any immediate or lasting difference in their lives. Yet grounded in our personal faith and our faith communities, by relating to the least fortunate of our neighbours with warmth and discretion, we may help them to focus in on their own hopes for a better way. The most naive assumption we can make about visiting prisoners is that we can do so without faith in their potential for rehabilitation and spiritual growth. Of course, it is also naive to assume we can do so without humility and hopefulness in respect to our own potential.

Since writing the Pendle Hill pamphlet, *Beyond the Bars, A Quaker Primer for Prison Visitors*, [1]I have been mindful of the need to reflect on the theological, therapeutic and creative resources that have been relevant to my volunteer experience. In the pamphlet I wrote that, "A primer is little more than a condensed introduction to a topic," and, "I simply hope these reflections on my experience as a prison visitor will encourage others to consider serving in this difficult but very enriching ministry". This sequel represents a more ambitious project. I hope that *Praying Through the Bars* will serve as a spiritual resource for all who feel they have a vocation to share their testimonies of faith with the imprisoned.

Gaylord Noyce, author of *The Art of Pastoral Conversation*, suggests that a healthy balance of prayerful introspection and sensitivity to the needs and situations of others is crucial for a pastoral ministry of any kind. He writes that, while recognizing the urgency of listening and knowing the way growth takes place "from inside", we also offer to others an account of our experience to help them in their pilgrimage.[2]

I have often found that volunteer prison visitors are hesitant to share their religious beliefs and spiritual testimonies with prisoners. Respect for the privacy of the individual, the frequent superficiality of religious talk in our society, and not wanting to be seen as proselytizing are legitimate concerns that need to be weighed carefully. However, to be excessively concerned about sharing our beliefs may also deprive our visits of their much-cherished warmth and compassion. If we hesitate because of uncertainty about our faith or how to express it, Noyce reminds us that we serve the human good by having courage to listen deeply enough that we ourselves may be changed, and to venture into the self-disclosure that shares our own story with other people. [3] Practice in sharing and communicating our own values and beliefs is one of the primary functions of faith communities, and we need to feel we can draw upon the opportunities and resources of our own tradition at any time, as appropriate.

My reflections are based on the experience of visiting a detention and remand center, otherwise known as a jail - an institution designed to "warehouse" people awaiting trial for crimes they are accused of having committed, or awaiting classification or release after their case has been dealt with by the court. The reasons for incarceration vary widely, from petty theft to serious acts of violence, from domestic disputes to allegations of child abuse, and even "illegal immigrants" awaiting extradition or for their refugee claims to be settled. The institution I visit houses only men, although their masculinity and gender-orientations can also cover a variety of expressions. What they have in common is their basic vulnerability, segregated from human society while struggling daily to recover the divine spark within them that makes life meaningful and precious.

About a month before Christmas I was distributing greeting cards to the prisoners. As usual, they crowded around, reaching through the bars, often asking for something different from what they received. I was feeling stressed - and when I reach a certain stress level, my hands have a tendency to shake. I was aware of what was happening, but there seemed no way to stop it at the time. Later, when the crowd had finally dispersed, a young man came over and asked me if I was nervous. He had noticed my hands, and wanted to assure me that I didn't need to be afraid. I made a feeble attempt to explain the difference between fear and stress, but it probably sounded like a weak rationalization at the time. I thanked the young man for his concern, and moved on to the adjoining unit.

In the next range, the same thing began to happen. As the men crowded up to the bars, my hands began to shake slightly. Suddenly, I had an inspiration. "Would you mind sharing a few minutes of silence with me before I hand out cards?" I asked. Showing a little surprise, the men agreed. I closed my eyes and bowed my head - thinking that some of them might even get impatient with the silence and go away.

However, when I finally opened my eyes, they were still there - and more had joined them. There must have been at least twenty prisoners gathered around the small area where I was standing, and every man had his eyes closed and his head solemnly bowed. I hated to interrupt their meditations. The men were much more courteous, and I felt more relaxed when I began to

distribute the cards. Since that first occasion, many prisoners have approached me and asked for shared silence before submitting other requests. Later I met one of the prisoners on the street after his release. As he approached me, grinning as though I were an old friend, he asked, "Remember me? I used to have a long beard, and you taught me silence." I was deeply grateful for his recognition.

Silence is rare in the units where prisoners spend most of their time. There is the sound of shouting, blaring television sets, clanging doors, raised voices of anger and authority – not to mention the uproar lingering in the prisoners' minds long after the lights are dimmed for the night. A few moments of prayerful silence may be the greatest gift a visitor can bring in from the outside world.

Listening Into Wholeness

Although I had only one personal visit with Fred, he left me with some valuable insights. When I first met him, he appeared surprisingly self-assured for one who had been in and out of jail many times during his life. He was well read in the Bible and could quote suitable passages from it on any given occasion. He was also widely read in other spiritual and religious classics, and was anxious to show off a little of this accomplishment. On the other hand, he was up front about being a "career criminal." Though not something to be proud of, he seemed to regard it as a part of his identity.

After a half hour conversation, in which he did most of the talking, I reminded him that our allotted time was almost over. Then he asked if I would pray for him. When I suggested that he begin the prayer, he reached across the table and grasped my hand. He expressed gratitude for my presence, and then slipped into an awkward silence. I wasn't sure if he expected me to supply the words. Yet I clasped his hand tightly, and became aware of a slight tremor in his grip. As it increased, I ventured to open my eyes, and found him sobbing quietly, his head almost in his lap. I reached across with my free hand and placed it over the one I already held. The tears flowed more freely, and he choked out the words, "All I want is some wisdom."

There were no explanations given or called for. After a few more minutes, a little more pressure from my hands signalled to him that our time was over. I uttered a few words of blessing that he appreciated, and gave him some time to gather himself together, regaining his dignity and self-possession before returning to the area he shared with other inmates. Fred taught me something important about human nature. While other interpretations of his longing for wisdom may be inferred, I like to believe it suggests that hope can survive even in the depths of human failure, when a person tries to understand what went wrong in his life.

Fred reached out to me as a non-professional, "spiritually" aligned visitor, - expecting to establish the kind of rapport that he lacked in other areas of his life. But I wondered if I had the gifts to respond in a compassionate and responsible manner.

How to respond?

The first question is whether a volunteer should respond at all, especially when professional assessments have already been established. Would it not be more appropriate to refer the prisoner to a social worker, an addiction counselor, or even to a professional chaplain? It has been my experience that prison chaplains often function as a referral service to other religious and secular professionals with specific skills to address individual needs. Like other busy professionals, institutional or non-institutional chaplains cannot always give personal attention to everyone who asks for it.

I am in an ambiguous situation myself. Although I have professional training as a pastoral care-giver, I am very aware that it is the prisoners' expressed needs and insights that inspire and empower whatever empathy and specialized knowledge I have to offer. Often the first thing a prisoner seeks is just another human being who is prepared to listen, or to see the world through his eyes. I recognize that many professional pastors also see their vocation as both a response to the divine call and a self-chosen profession, but this often creates a tension between their personal faith and professional obligations. [4]

Whether visitors are professional or non-professional, it is important that they have a spiritual understanding of their own life journeys. Prisoners share the popular belief that self-will and self-improvement are the keys to rehabilitation and success, and they open up to those who appear to have experienced this process in their own lives. In a book entitled *The Spirituality of Imperfection*, we read that the inherent, fundamental message of spirituality is that, "You are a human being, and human beings make mistakes, and that's okay- because you are a human being, not a God." [5]

Seeking Awareness of the Holy

At what point may spiritual and religious concepts be introduced into the conversation? The visitor may wonder if anything is sacred to the prisoner at all. Does he know what feelings of reverence, awe, and humility are? These questions initially focus on feelings rather than "correct" understanding of doctrine or biblical interpretation. Yet we shouldn't underestimate the prisoners' ability to articulate their own needs in religious language when it feels safe to do so. At first, a man might hide behind dry, unemotional facts, or demonstrations of his biblical knowledge as Fred did in my opening story.

Awareness of the transcendent should not be taken for granted when a person seeks spiritual help. The visitor is challenged to nurture, and sometimes even mediate, a positive sense of divine presence. In his book, *That They May Have Life*, Dr. Taylor writes of "listening persons into wholeness." [6]"The gift of listening," he explains, "is not one which is merely a facet of the technical skill of counseling." He quotes from the Quaker writer, Douglas Steere, who refers to the *Eternal Listener*, the third presence, spectator or listener within every pastoral encounter: "That inward listener seems to be able to grasp what is going on at all levels at once so that it hears the words, and even hears in a throbbing but inarticulate way, the unconscious meaning of what is being spoken of, and all three of these simultaneously." Steere adds that, "Without this inner unity there would be no possibility of self-disclosure, no breaking through of the hidden unconscious meaning into the speaker's conscious life." [7]

Faith

Disappointment with religious faith and teaching could suggest some past experience of possessive, anxious, and often defensive uses of the belief system. The person's attitude to the Bible can be either very revealing or a means of concealing some deep personal sense of inadequacy. I might ask if it enlarges the person's self-image, activating all his talents and stimulating his curiosity, widening the scope of engagement, or if it puts him into a straightjacket, constricting his natural intelligence.

I visited a prisoner known as J.J., whom I continue to hear from in lengthy and intense correspondence. He too is well-versed in the Bible and able to use it for his own ends. He also had misplaced pride in his criminal accomplishments, but (when I first met him) was beginning to realize that his skill was related to a helpless dependency on drugs. After being accepted into a rehabilitation program, he wrote to me, "I believe that the ability to love one another comes, and grows, from our relationship and knowledge of life, given by our interaction with God. This is my own perception, from my own experience." In the same letter, he continues, "I'm not even worrying [about a parole hearing] anymore. I'm not the same person I was last November. My entire outlook on life has turned around. I have renewed my relationship with God, and He has shown me my limitations over the last 2-1/2 years, shown me myself, and filled me with his love,

understanding and peace." As a footnote, he quoted from Acts 9:3: "The night is far spent, the day is at hand: let us therefore cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armor of light."

While religious and biblical knowledge often compensates for other dependencies, growth can take place in the movement from restrictive and judgmental attitudes to self and others toward a greater openness and acceptance. I believe that to acknowledge and promote this growth is a fundamental objective of spiritual counselling.

Repentance

Repentance implies acceptance of responsibility for what a person has done or left undone. In theological terms, it has had some unfortunate implications for personal guilt or sin. This is a burden that continues to be carried by prisoners as well as by spiritual and religious counselors. To avoid preserving the stigma of inappropriate guilt, it is essential that we make a careful distinction between that which leads to death and that which leads to life in our own belief systems.

Inappropriate guilt is the product of religious abuse. It is related to a belief that since Adam and Eve fell out of paradise, we are all born in sin. An extreme extension of this doctrine is the belief that there is nothing any of us can do to pull ourselves out of this condition, and we are all condemned unless God, "in his infinite mercy," grants reprieves to a mysteriously chosen few. However well intended or poorly conceived this doctrine, sometimes referred to as the "Protestant ethic," may be, the fact remains that it has taken deep root in the popular imagination - and is reflected in the harshly retributive nature of criminal law and penal institutions. [8]

I don't think I'm overstating the case by suggesting that many (if not most) prisoners have been exposed to this social doctrine, and ask for spiritual or religious counsel as an opportunity to admit that they deserve to be punished. Repentance is a hard decision for the prisoner who has taken on the role of his own accuser and his own judge, believing that God has punished him justly. My first response is simply to ask whether this is actually God's judgment, or if he might be confusing God's position with some lesser authority.

Appropriate guilt is another matter. It begins with acceptance of some responsibility for any conflict or wrong action that they have been implicated in. The prisoner does not try to justify his weakness in terms of a fallen state or adverse circumstances, or even by attributing full responsibility to other people. However innocent he may believe himself to be, he put himself in the position of doing harm - striking a partner in the heat of anger, sexually assaulting another in the heat of addiction or obsession, giving in to the temptation to steal or damage property, or even to take another person's life. Appropriate guilt is a genuine form of remorse, leading toward the search for profound life changes.

The pastoral visitor needs to know if the prisoner is aware of himself as an agent in the problems he faces. Does he have a sense of contrition, a willingness to seek forgiveness while working through his issues? It is important to ask whether the prisoner assumes any responsibility, whether he sees himself as a victim of circumstances, or whether he denies having any role in the problem or expresses any interest in working toward improvement. Prisoners who harbor excessive anger or seem mired in self-accusatory depression are the least likely to seek spiritual counsel. So we find ourselves again asking what has motivated him to ask for the kind

of help we might be able to offer. Has he already reached a significant turning point in his life and is he ready to make some profound changes?

Communion

Communion is related to reaching out, caring and feeling cared for, and an individual's disposition to see himself as continuous or discontinuous with the rest of humanity and with the natural world. The task is to assess whether a person feels open to or estranged from the world, in touch with or isolated from others in his environment.

I had a personal visit with a man who had been pleading for some one-on-one time for months. When we finally had a private room to meet in, he seemed quite agitated at first. So I suggested that we share a few moments of silence to collect our thoughts. He agreed to this, we closed our eyes and waited for the right moment to begin conversation.

In a very short time, he began to disclose details of his life, from early childhood until his present predicament. He described himself as a "loner," with no family connections. He was the youngest of five brothers, and the most unruly of the lot. In his craving for attention, as he described it, he was constantly in trouble with his parents, siblings, teachers, and eventually with the police. After being kicked out of the house at the age of thirteen, he joined a carnival, held a number of laboring jobs, and was married for ten or twelve years. Then he started getting into drugs. At the time of our interview, he was waiting for space to open in a drug rehabilitation program.

Joseph was anxious to speak to a prison visitor because he had recently decided to "invite Christ into his heart," and wanted to change his way of life from within. His intentions were undoubtedly sincere, although I have acquired the scepticism of many visitors who have heard such declarations and were disappointed by the prisoner's subsequent relapse upon release. However, I felt it was important to give him the benefit of the doubt. So we returned to the subject of his self-image as a loner and to his real experience of rejection. Without detracting from his story, I was able to share some of my own experiences of rejection and disappointment.

Then he described a recurring dream. Although he had been "clean" for about three months, he still had vivid dreams of shooting heroin and feeling the drug taking control of his body. I understand that this is a typical effect of withdrawal, but I wanted to focus on the effect of the dream making him feel even more alone. So we talked about what it meant to have "a monkey on your back". It was as though there were an imp clinging to him, and refusing to let go. Members of Alcoholics Anonymous, and similar organizations, report that this experience often recurs after years of substance withdrawal. The demon is always with them, although they have learned to recognize that the demon is not essential to their individual integrity and must not allow it to dominate their self-esteem.

He complained that he wasn't sure of his ability to fight off the devil, and his uncertainty diminished his faith in God. When he asked what the Bible had to say about that, the first story that occurred to me was that of Jacob wrestling with the angel. He enjoyed the part about Jacob winning the initial round until his opponent struck him on the hip. Then I told him about the angel changing Jacob's name to Israel - "one who has struggled with God." I added that, unlike the monkey on his back, God always gives us a fighting chance. The struggle itself is what restores us to the human community. What doesn't kill us outright makes us stronger. I suggested

that his doubts could help prepare him for community life in the rehabilitation center, and even help to make him a stronger person.

In getting to know Joseph, I tried to balance objective assessment with a personal demonstration of trust to enable his self-disclosure. He had asked to see me for very good reasons, yet was still nervous about making himself vulnerable. The initial silence gave him the advantage of gathering his thoughts and initiating the conversation when he felt ready to do so. The extent of his disclosure suggested that he had already reflected deeply on his situation, and had reached a decisive turning point in his life. From my perspective, some of the initial difficulty of getting into another person's world was already overcome. Surviving feels safer than being known, and being known is what help requires. [9]

It took courage for him to give me, a relative stranger, so much insight into his struggle for acceptance and healing. His feelings of alienation and isolation were more painful because guilt or shame had accompanied him through life - although often concealed behind a facade of deliberately bad behavior and drug abuse. Eventually, he realized that he could no longer continue the struggle on his own. A repressed ethical or spiritual conscience told him what he always knew instinctively - that it is not helpful to nurture feelings of estrangement. A sense of belonging can only be realized through accepting such feelings as an invitation to communion, a more profound sense of connection with others.

When Joseph began to open up, I sensed that he had already accepted me as a representative of the human family. He needed to feel that he mattered to someone as a person, and that he could talk to me freely about the things that were important. This had been the kind of relationship lacking in his past life. When he began describing his expulsion from the family as a teenager, I tried to assume a positive parental role that would enable him to break free from past associations.

There was no need for physical reassurance in this case, as Joseph was clearly on the way to a fresh start. I represented the reassurance he required until the next chapter in his life began. Before we ended our session together, however, I left him an address where he could write and let me know how his journey was progressing. As an afterthought, I also suggested, instead of introducing himself as a loner, that he tell people that he was learning to be his own best friend. Secure in his personal identity, he would then find more openings into communion.

Freeing the Creative Imagination

The first time I met Paul, he was spending a good deal of his jail time in solitary, at his own request. He needed time away from the noise and confusion of the general population to express himself undisturbed. I was instantly drawn to his colourful abstract designs. They seemed spontaneous, at times almost explosive, like Jackson Pollock's random splashes of colour. While other inmates and visitors expressed admiration for their intensity, Paul explained that they simply expressed the way he felt.

A couple of years later, Paul was back in the institution on different charges. This time he showed me some drawings. They were as unstudied as children's art, though much more sombre in tone. They seemed to reflect the impassive facade that Paul often presented to other people. His face was almost a mask, and his slow, ponderous speech often made communication difficult. It was only after many personal visits that he began to explain the reasoning behind some of his work. The better acquainted we became, the easier it was for me to share my own

interest in art - and talk to him about the inner struggles that artists often experience when words fall short of what they need to express.

It seemed to me that Paul was exploring aesthetic ideas similar to those of Picasso during his experimental periods – such as the adaptation of African masks in "Les Demoiselles d'Avignon" that preceded his discovery of cubism. Introducing Paul to Picasso's painting, and also that of Vincent Van Gogh (neither of whom he was aware of at the time) began to open untapped potential. He used oil pastels in a similar way to both Picasso and Van Gogh, using short, thick strokes rather than blended colours. He was especially moved by Van Gogh's self-portrait with the bandaged ear, in which similar strokes expressed the acute inner pain the artist must have been feeling at the time.

Paul had never shown any particular interest in religion, and expressed a desire not to be involved in church-run treatment programs. It was important for him to recognize the changes he needed to make on his own terms. There were implied questions in most of his drawings. What lay behind the mask? Was there a real person inside, and how could he be set free? Only after a long process of dialogue did these questions begin to articulate themselves in his conscious mind.

He seemed anxious to show me a particular sketch that represented a personal breakthrough for him. It was a simple figurative piece, like a child's attempt to illustrate the Crucifixion. As in the past, Paul's inner thoughts bore fruit in an apparently spontaneous form. Yet here his figure was more lifelike, and at the same time more explicitly African, than the Picasso-like masks. It reminded me of a dream I had many years ago, when I was about to see a Jungian therapist. I was being pursued by a fierce panther. At the very moment it sprang upon me, my pursuer was suddenly transformed into a warm and joyful companion. When I told the therapist about this dream, she explained that the shadow (or unconscious) often appears as a frightening image, and my dream suggested that I was beginning to prepare myself for confronting and perhaps even learning to befriend my unconscious. When I shared this with Paul, I was rewarded with another of his broad but ambivalent smiles. Whatever he might have thought of my self-revelation, this image certainly encouraged me to appreciate the depth of his imagery, and to encourage him to explore those depths in his own time.

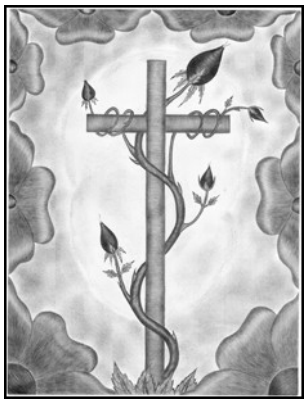
Visualizing Wholeness

Once I started encouraging prisoners like Paul to express their feelings through art, I committed myself to providing some basic supplies, such as drawing paper, coloured pencils and oil pastels. In a short time, other prisoners were approaching me to share some of their work. Some, like Paul, were producing garish and often grotesque images. It has not been easy for me to give them the same attention that I give to more accomplished artists. But, since a reluctance to share their work is close to other shame-related feelings, I am more mindful of its healing potential. Daniel Brown has noted in his book on art therapy that it is not wrong to create disturbing images and that a garish image or loud chaotic sound that does not appeal to you may indicate that there are parts of yourself that need attention [10] Art therapy is not intended to linger on negative feelings, but to bring about acceptance and positive change.

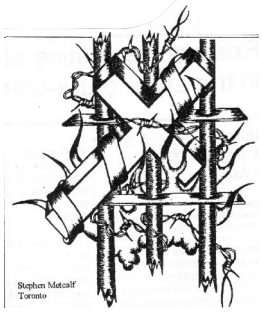
One of the most positive recurring images I am shown is that of the cross. Often introduced as an exclusively Christian symbol, it appears in many variations - evoking a universal sense of healing and transformation. The cross is also a universal symbol of the spiritual moment when

the material world (represented by the horizontal bar) is touched by the numinous (the vertical). The two images shown here are worth considering in terms of what they reveal about the artists' inner struggles and hopes, and in terms of how they may affect the prison visitor.

The first was drawn with coloured pens. The drawing, like many works produced by prisoners with limited materials, has been created with single strokes of coloured ink. Blended or solid colours are often beyond their means, yet the illusion of wholeness can often be simulated through meticulous draughtsmanship. The cross is entwined with a climbing rose, the buds still unopened - perhaps evoking hope for their fruition. The fact that the drawing is framed with segments of fully opened blossoms also suggests some positive expectations. The artist made a generous gift of this drawing, and it has given pleasure and inspiration to everyone who has seen it, including other inmates who needed encouragement to find their own creative openings.



The second drawing is a complex symbolic unit, inviting contemplation. Although the cross is central, it shares the focus with realistically shaded prison bars, barbed wire, and a crackling flame within. Here the cross is entwined with a banner. The artist explained that he originally intended to write words like "Mercy," "Love," and "Truth," on the banner - but then decided against it. I was personally grateful that he left it blank, allowing me to exercise my imagination in understanding its meaning. Like the twining rose, the banner is a sign of healing and transformation - perhaps reminiscent of the serpent entwined on the rod of Aesclepius (the universal symbol of the healing profession), as well as being suggestive of Christ - crucified and risen. There are many levels of possible meaning in any work of art, and therefore many opportunities for exploration with the artist. Creativity is freedom, and shared interpretation may be a way of enabling the imprisoned artist to incorporate that freedom more fully into his daily life.



I expressed my admiration for the artist's skill, and then asked what he was thinking of when he included the flames. Given the opportunity for a more private dialogue, I might have taken

this a step further by asking if he had a fire inside him. The fire may be the most personal element, and the one most difficult to articulate, in an otherwise precisely calculated image. As such, it suggests his real motive for sharing it with me in the first place.

There are other symbols as well that evoke a universal appreciation for the Truth that sets us free. Terry, a young Ojibwa who often found himself living on the streets when he wasn't in prison, sent the following drawing to our service committee. While he didn't explain his imagery in so many words, the eagle is a primary nature spirit, and the symmetry of three birds suggests a profound reverence for the cycle of life. It is aptly entitled "Respect".

Presented as a token of respect for our help, the image suggests a renewal of connection between the artist, his community, and the rest of the world. After it was published (with the artist's permission) in *Quaker Concern* [11]a newsletter of the Canadian Friends Service Committee, I distributed copies of the newsletter on my next visit to the jail. I was surprised to discover how many recognized the picture, and remembered meeting the artist. A few even reported on having seen him drawing the picture. The overall effect was to deepen the bond between prisoners, as well as between the volunteer and his religious community. While I hesitate to impose my own interpretation, I was reminded of an ancient Russian Orthodox icon depicting the "Old Testament Trinity" as three individuals seated around a sacramental table, exchanging glances of mutual accord and understanding.

Poetry also finds a place in the creative lives of prisoners. It invites an economy of expression that is rhythmically satisfying and at a safe distance from prosaic confessions of guilt, shame and other repressed feelings. It also enables the person experiencing loneliness to express his need for love, either real or imagined. Writing a poem can enable a person to attain fresh perspectives, as well as a deeper understanding of his environment. Through poetry, we can explore symbols in our minds, free the imagination, evoke emotions and link them with new patterns of thought. We can use it to develop conscious strategies for handling emotions.

A form of poetry that often represents a primitive stage of self-expression is the "rap," a repetition of rhythmic exhortations and statements vocalized in rapid succession. The lyrics are evocative of intense and often explosive passions - externalizing the inner turmoil. I hadn't given a great deal of thought to rap as an art form until I had a one-on-one visit with J.J. He was obviously a very intelligent man, who could use his intellect to manipulate and control other people. At first, he tried to test my response to some grotesque compositions about guns and violence. I listened quietly and with as much reserve as I could muster. When he asked me what I thought of them, I explained simply that I didn't understand rap. So he asked what kind of music

I did like. At first he didn't appear impressed by my classical preferences. But he smiled indulgently and sat back in the corner, closing his eyes as though receiving an inspiration. I nearly fell off my chair when he began to recite Shakespeare's sonnet, "When in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes" as though it had been composed straight from a rapper's heart.

Since that visit, J.J. and I have had many opportunities for sharing creative insights, and he often writes to me from the treatment center where he is working toward emotional and spiritual wholeness. I have included an excerpt from one of the original poems he sent me. While he has used traditional religious imagery, it has been imbued with his own sense of abandonment and longing. As a result, it is not simply a poem, but a prayer reaching out for meaning beyond the narrow and constricting limits of an addictive and lonely life. Here is a portion of his poem, "Unanswered", reprinted here with his permission.

Long have I kept the incense burning brightly,
But to my soul no answer comes as yet,
Until, sometimes in weakness, I half wonder
If God His blessed promise can forget;
Will He our cares and sorrows truly share,
And safely keep the loved ones of our prayer?
My path would easier be, but I am human,
So very human, Lord, and short of sight,
That often I lose my own way in the darkness;
How then for others can I choose aright?
You love them more than I, and so on You
I lay a load too heavy far for me. Amen.
(Copyright: J.J. Vaughn, 2007)

The Art of Pastoral Conversation

"All real living is meeting."

Martin Buber [12]

Encounters with prisoners correspond with all the high and low points of human interaction. Sometimes the visitor walks away from the prison with a feeling of profound warmth. At other times, the very act of walking away raises issues of personal inadequacy and guilt. At some point between these two poles there lingers the memory of a meaningful encounter with another person, a conversation that has altered your own outlook on the world.

From the prisoner's point of view, the experience may have been far less dramatic. Perhaps your visit was little more than a brief hiatus in an otherwise monotonous and depressing day. Perhaps some referral you made will bear fruit in the prisoner's life as he seeks help from reliable and competent agencies. Perhaps he will remember something you said, or cherish some small token you gave him. The only certainty for the prison visitor is that conversation with the Spirit continues over time, and becomes a potential blessing for everyone who comes into his or her life.

My conversations have taken place in three different modes: in group programs, in one-on-one confidential visits, and in brief encounters through the bars. I am fully aware that the practical initiative in most of these conversations is my own, or at least that of the religious

community that has commissioned me to visit on their behalf. On the other hand, the prisoners have taken the initiative to reach out to me as a member of the greater community, and a representative of some religious authority.

Why do some prisoners reach out to me? As I walk through the corridors, I try to be open to any number of approaches. Some men watch me pass with blank, or suspicious, stares. Others, including those who have seen me pass through before, approach out of curiosity. This is an opening for introductions. Light reading material about the Religious Society of Friends often leads to further questions and opportunities for sharing common values, such as the experience of God in every person. That is often enough to encourage deeper sharing on another occasion.

Other motives are less easy, and perhaps impossible, to respond to. I have seldom been taunted or threatened, but I have been propositioned with requests for cigarettes and even drugs. Usually a respectful, "Sorry I can't help you with that," is all it takes to establish the boundaries. An added, "Is there something else I can help you with?" gives them an opportunity to talk about more important issues in their lives. The important point to remember is that you represent an outreach for reconciliation, not another judgmental voice from the community or the criminal justice system.

On occasion, men have approached me with Bibles in hand, seeking an opening for God-talk. The range corridors are not the ideal environment for this, but it shouldn't be discouraged. Occasionally, I have found that the prisoner with specifically religious concerns has something special that he wants to share - either recent insights into his own spiritual journey or perplexing questions that have been stretching his mind. For example, one man approached me with some questions about the Book of Genesis. When, in the first chapter, God said, "Let us create," who was with him? I couldn't think of a short answer to that one at the time. But when he came to the question, "Since Adam was the first man, and we're all descended from Adam, what colour was Adam?" I felt myself warming up to the topic. The prisoner had already revealed his Native ancestry, so I compared the question to the image of the sacred circle, around which we find the four colours and the four directions. What colour is the sacred circle? In which direction does it point? Unfortunately, distractions from other prisoners interrupted our conversation at this point. But, before parting, we clasped hands through the bars, exchanging the Ojibwa blessing, "Kitchi Megwich."

On another occasion, I exchanged greetings with a Moslem inmate who had attended our group program. He was an interesting man, but sometimes overly persistent in his demands. When I realized he was about to ask for favours I couldn't deliver, I began to move on. But he followed, pleading, "Come on, Keith. Go the extra mile with me. That's what you're here for, isn't it?" His words, reminding me of Jesus' teaching in the Gospels, stopped me in my tracks. It turned out that he wanted to ask after another volunteer who had been grieving for a deceased friend the last time they met. His request was to pass on his condolences, and advice related to the Moslem prescription for mourning.

I am more complete, more fully human for having been a part of such encounters. Martin Buber, the Jewish philosopher, believed that conversation is an essential prerequisite for our humanity. We become persons, or selves, because other people have treated us as subjects, worthy of care and affection. In the experience of the prisoner, alienation between the "I" and the world is a depressing and often terrifying experience. Only when he has reached the point of ultimate despair, does he begin to reflect that something must, and indeed can, be done about it. I

reflected on the prisoner lying alone in his cell at night when I read, “As when in the grave night-hour you lie, racked by waking dream - bulwarks have fallen away and the abyss is screaming - and note amid your torment: there is still life.”[13]

Conversations that begin through the bars may become the seeds for deeper reflection in a prisoner’s, or in a prison visitor’s, life. We are blessed with memories of encounters that confirm our humanity - reminding us that we are valued and cared for. These are blessings that are more than mere rewards for service. They are stages in our personal growth, affirming that we are on the right path regardless of our insecurities and occasional doubts.

I have already mentioned some implications for one-on-one visits. But my reflections on praying through the bars have reminded me of some initial guidelines for opening and guiding extended visits. The first guideline is to put small talk in its place, “giving small talk the credit it deserves while watching it lest it prevent larger, soul-sized talk.”[14] Talk about the weather, or even complaints about the quality of prison food, may put the prisoner at ease in a new relationship setting. Rather than dwell on such issues, however, time constraints emphasize the next guideline - to move on into self-disclosure.

If the prisoner lingers too long at the first level, the visitor may encourage him to get to the point. If something is truly blocking the man from opening up and coming to terms with his situation, he may express frustration about failure to communicate. The visitor may facilitate the process by sharing a similar dilemma - perhaps in the context of Paul’s letter to the Roman Church, “I do not understand my own actions, for I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. (Romans 7:15).” This gives the man time to gather his thoughts and channel them into the questions that have led him to seek spiritual guidance.

My reflections on the art of prisoners suggest that creativity provides special openings for self-disclosure. Art skips over the small talk, and other defence mechanisms, to go right to the spirit of the matter. Images, in pictures, words, or sometimes in music or motion, evoke a longing for harmony and wholeness - the language of the heart. Sharing in this way is the exclusive initiative of the prisoner who has discovered a deep truth about his humanity, and has a pressing need to have it affirmed through sharing it with another. It is important to acknowledge such self-revelation as an invitation to dialogue.

If the prisoner seems to have forgotten the reason for asking to see a spiritual caregiver, it would hardly be appropriate to put up barriers with a question like, “Why did you ask for a visit?” There is always a reason, if only the need to reach out to another human being. So the first thing I usually say to a person I am seeing for the first time is, “Tell me about yourself.” This allows him to begin where he will and to come around to specific issues in his own time.

Dr. Gerald May, a secular therapist who has written helpfully on the distinction between psychotherapy and spiritual counselling, has a perspective on spiritual counselling that applies well to the role of the prison visitor. In spiritual guidance there is little emphasis on troubles, disorders, or sickness. The person is seen primarily as a soul searching for and being searched by God. [15] The only conditions I need to make clear from the outset of our conversation are that everything he says (apart from doing harm to himself or someone else) will be held in confidence, and that I am not there to judge, analyze or solve problems - but to submit his needs to the guidance of a higher power.

Endnotes

1. Keith R. Maddock, *Beyond the Bars: A Quaker Primer for Prison Visitors*, Pendle Hill Pamphlet No. 342, (Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill Publications, 1999). Back to Text

2. Gaylord Noyce, *The Art of Pastoral Conversation,* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1973), 34. Back to Text

3. Noyce, op. cit., 39. Back to Text

4. Paul W. Pruyser, *The Minister as Diagnostician: Personal Problems in Pastoral Perspective,* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1976), 106. Back to Text

5. Ernest Kurtz & Katherine Ketcham, *The Spirituality of Imperfection: Storytelling and the Journey to Wholeness*, (NY: Bantam Books, 1994), 120. Back to Text

6. Charles Taylor, *That They May Have Life,* (Hantsport, NS: The Lancelot Press,1984), 55. Back to Text

7. Quoted in Taylor, *That They May Have Life*, 59-60. Back to Text

8. T. Richard Snyder, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Punishment,* (Minneapolis, MN: Wm. B Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2001). Back to Text

9. James B. Ashbrook, *Minding the Soul: Pastoral Counselling as Remembering,* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 69. Back to Text

10. Daniel Brown, *Principles of Art Therapies*, (London: Thorsons, 1997), 29. Back to Text

11. *Quaker Concern* (Canadian Friends Service Committee), 29, no. 2, Spring 2003. Back to Text

12. Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Robert Gregor Smith, (NY: Collier Books, 1958), 11. Back to Text

13. Buber, op,. cit., 70. Back to Text

14. Noyce, op. cit., 18. Back to Text

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Author Acknowledgments

I wish to acknowledge the support and encouragement of many people who have shared this journey. Specifically, I would like to express my gratitude to the late Dr. Charles Taylor, Professor of Prison Ministry at Acadia Divinity College in Wolfville, Nova Scotia, a pioneer in the field of training volunteers and developing restorative programs for prisoners. I would also like to thank Bill Ratliff, Retired Professor of Pastoral Care and Counseling at the Earlham School of Religion in Richmond, Indiana, whose reading of this manuscript in its early stages encouraged me to continue writing.

Others I wish to acknowledge include members of the Canadian Church Council on Justice and Corrections; members of the JustUs community support group in Toronto; the Canadian Friends Service Committee's subcommittee, Quakers Fostering Justice, and the many chaplains, volunteers, prisoners, ex-prisoners and their families who taught me how to pray through the bars. I would also like to add a special word of gratitude to those prisoners who gave me permission to use their reflections in word and image in this essay.Author

About The Author

Keith Robert Maddock obtained degrees from the Toronto School of Theology in Religious Education and Pastoral Theology, before becoming a Friend in Toronto Monthly Meeting. He served for twenty years as a volunteer chaplaincy visitor at the Toronto (Don) Jail until it closed down in 2014, and also worked at the Salvation Army Hope Shelter for homeless men. He has represented Friends on the Church Council for Justice and Corrections, the Ontario Multifaith Council for Spiritual and Religious Care, and the Alternatives to Violence Project. Currently he has also been serving as a volunteer spiritual care provider at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health in Toronto. He is the author of a Pendle Hill Pamphlet (No. 342) entitled *Beyond the Bars: a Quaker Primer for Prison Visitors* and numerous essays on poetry, spirituality and pastoral care.

Publication Acknowledgements

Cover photo by Keith R. Maddock.

Layout of pamphlet for e-book publication by Anne Trudell.

This pamphlet is the eighth in the Canadian Quaker Learning Series, published by Canadian Yearly Meeting through its Publications and Communications Committee. The Canadian Quaker Learning Series offers a medium through which Friends may share knowledge and insights on spiritual life, faith and witness from their own experience or that of others. Suggestions for a manuscript or topics for future presentation may be sent to the editorial board at cqp-clerk@quaker.ca.