

Another Country on the Other Side of Town

They had nothing in common, these rarefied students and hardened prisoners, except family, empathy, and a yearning to heal the world. By RAY WADDLE, MA'81

LAST SPRING SEMESTER I turned from the magnolias and iPods of campus and convened the Vanderbilt Divinity School writing seminar at a different venue altogether—a different country, the Riverbend maximum security men's prison across town.

Each Monday afternoon a dozen of us—divinity students and a few Vanderbilt students auditing the class—met at the prison's front entrance, as if to make a border crossing into another nation, the largely forgotten province of America's incarcerated. (Almost 700 are housed at Riverbend Maximum Security Institution; 2 million are now imprisoned in the United States, more than any other country.)

We were allowed to bring in no money, no food, no wallet or cell phone, only our books and notebooks for class. Courteous, ungrinning guards frisked us and dispatched us through airport-style security gates and razor-wire corridors. After making our way outside across a long treeless courtyard, we finally arrived at a generic classroom, where a half-dozen violent offenders and other inmates awaited us with smiles, handshakes and bear hugs.

I didn't know what to expect. The aim of this "Writing About Religion" seminar is to write about spiritual matters—personal faith or public controversy—with clarity, accuracy, fairness and verve. Normally, I teach only divinity students these things. This time Vanderbilt Divinity administrators asked me to do it at the prison, where the School has been nurturing a formal presence, holding a

course each semester there in order to give ministers-in-training a vivid idea of modern criminal justice and empathy with the voiceless incarcerated.

I was eager to begin, but questions lingered: Would it be possible to conduct a writing class of such disparate demographics? Would the prisoners know how to write? Could our discussions of prison life and spirituality, here on the grounds of a state prison, be candid?

As it turned out, my anxious questions were beside the point. Other answers, other questions, prevailed.

Arranging our chairs in a circle, we sat each week in a mixed arrangement of prisoners and grad students, never one group divided from the other. The prisoners, I quickly realized, were attentive, serious, and conscientious about completing the weekly writing and reading assignments. I was regularly accosted by inmates giving me anguished explanations about why their work should have been better that week.

They were always the guys dressed in jail-house denim shirts and jeans, but this sartorial detail lost its stigmatizing power at the first session. For a couple of hours a week, we were all writing colleagues, wrestling with words to get elusive thoughts down right. My job was to urge everyone to look at writing as a way to become accountable for their own beliefs. I invited them to write in order to confront their own dreads and hopes and tell stories no one had heard before. I dared them to attempt to get their work published.

Each week brought revelations.

One prisoner, Al, who'd been locked up 25 years, said he does a lot of spiritual writing to



help inmates break the cycle of bitterness and self-defeat. Rahim, a prisoner for 15 years, had journeyed from Christianity through Islam to his current eclectic reverence for life. He wanted to improve his self-expression so he could become perhaps the nation's first hip-hop prison minister. Inmate Ed, editor of the *Maximum Times* prison newspaper, wanted to improve his editing skills and the conciseness of his writing.

Another, Fred, had been on death row for seven years, but his sentence was recently reduced to a life term. He stoically said he had lots to express: "I feel good about life because there is a God."

All these guys had received permission from the warden to attend these classes. They had demonstrated trustworthiness; most had jobs on the grounds of the prison itself.

My challenge every week was to find an issue that sparked conversation between wearied prisoners and privileged graduate students of religion. This got easier as everyone got to know each other: Pre-class greetings and post-

continued on page 83

VJournal *continued from page 9*

class farewells were free-for-alls of socializing and friendships in the making.

Sometimes the prisoners wanted to talk about the stresses of their world behind bars. Other times they were eager to leave their inmate identities behind for a while and just be students. Discussion centered on the weekly reading assigned—essays on sainthood or religious violence—or a sample of their own writing to share with the class. Once class time got started, someone would usually speak from the heart and silence the room.

One week I assigned them all to write a “This I Believe” essay of personal belief and submit it to National Public Radio. One divinity student wrote about confronting his fears and discovering trust in God. Another wrote about the strong example of her mother as a mentor. But the essay I chose to read to the class was by inmate Tom, a gruff (in truth, he was suffering chronic back pain) prison veteran who’d been incarcerated more than three decades.

Surprising everyone, he wrote a piece about the healing power of touch. This was surely not the easiest subject to write about in the macho, posturing culture of a men’s prison. But he was undeterred. He declared he learned the power of touch from his mother, who “had an enormous capacity to communicate love, empathy, trust, encouragement and support with only a touch of her soft hands and an embrace of her arms.”

He concluded: “I am an equal opportunity practitioner to both genders and to all ages, races, nationalities and religious faiths. Despite an occasional crude comment from a stranger that something must be wrong with me for exhibiting such an unmasculine practice, I am unashamed and unrepentant. I believe we are on this earth to hold and comfort one another, to love and respect each other as brothers and sisters of the same Creator.

“One way I manifest God’s light in me is to express it with the power of touch, a physical gesture that says, ‘I understand,’ ‘I care,’ ‘I love,’ and ‘You are not alone.’ If I can continue this spiritual practice in a crowded Southern prison for more than 30 years, it can succeed anywhere.”

I read the essay aloud and noticed tears in the eyes of some divinity students. Suddenly, this Riverbend inmate was a fellow human

being, a man with a family past, with a core of empathy, a yearning to heal his world. We all made Tom promise he would submit his essay to NPR. I hope the nation gets to hear his voice someday.

I get two questions from outsiders about this unusual class. First, did the prisoners pay for their textbooks? No. They don’t have the money. It’s up to the teacher to purchase the books or get a discount from the publisher. In my case, a generous friend came forward as a benefactor, writing a check to cover the cost of two dozen texts as well as some writing reference books for the bedraggled prison library.

The second question is always nervously posed: Was there a guard in the room in case of “trouble”? No, a guard was stationed down the hall, never in class. I never gave the matter thought. I was too busy running a class of serious writers.

But we visitors were all aware that these prisoners were convicted of awful crimes. Over the course of the semester, some prisoners disclosed details from time to time. Others did not. We learned that one was convicted of multiple sexual abuse, another had killed two people, and others were sentenced to long terms for rape, armed robbery or homicide.

The emotions of a prison visit are complicated, I admit. I don’t minimize the violence the inmates did to their victims and the victims’ families. I won’t sentimentalize their own current states of reform, impressive though they are. But any visitor is confronted with a soul-searching question: Are these prisoners real human beings or not? Will I equate them with their crimes—that is, with the worst thing they’ve ever done—or are they something more than that?

Society doesn’t want to deal with the question. The prevailing national philosophy of incarceration is one of revenge, not rehabilitation. Maximize the sentences, lock them up, and forget this “silent nation growing inside us,” as writer E.L. Doctorow describes our burgeoning, costly prison population.

But for several weeks this year, I saw a different side to the darkness, a room full of prisoners in conversation with free-worlders, all writers, all equals in their effort to come to terms with their experiences and re-imagine old questions of faith and truth.

These students often invoked the example

Vanderbilt Holdings *continued from page 23*

The Mann Papers paint a detailed picture of both the painstaking organizational skills and big-picture vision required of a modern director. He or she must manage an unpredictable team of actors and crew, vet the script, tell a compelling visual story, and stay on schedule and budget.

With the Delbert Mann collection, students encounter the work of one of Hollywood’s beloved directors, one of the nice guys in a tough business who, according to admirers, made his family (four children) a priority and stayed in touch with Nashville friends across the decades.

“I’m a lucky man,” he declares. “I have been able to spend my life doing what I love to do the most.”

And he’s sharing it with his alma mater.

of Jesus. In the New Testament, oddly, criminal-justice issues keep turning up in the gospel story. John the Baptist went to jail. So did Paul. Jesus began his ministry with words from Isaiah, proclaiming “release to the captives.” And he was ensnared as a criminal in his last days. Some argue that those final hours on the cross with two other condemned men constituted the faith’s first church service.

Jesus also said, Visit the prisoners. He didn’t theorize about policies of incarceration. He said visit them.

Meeting for class on Monday after Easter, we learned from the Riverbend guys that they were refused all visitors at Easter this year because of a sudden lock-down by the prison. This was traumatic to the prisoners who depend on that vital family circle outside the walls. One prisoner in the class said he was gratified that his “Vanderbilt family” was there that night after the unnerving snafu of the day before.

At that moment I knew for sure that these Vanderbilt-Riverbend classes are something more than seminars and adventures in learning. They’re experiments in mutual respect across the difficult politics of race, class and fear in a nation determined to build bigger prisons every day.

Ray Waddle, MA’81, is a Nashville-based writer and the author of Against the Grain: Unconventional Wisdom from Ecclesiastes.