Let's Bridge The Divide And Create A Transformative Learning Experience

By: Lacino Hamilton

Much of the criticism pushing the national conversation concerning U.S. mass incarceration appears to come from upper-middle-class politicians, scholars, and media personalities. Most of whom have little or no direct contact with prisons or prisoners. This hardly represents healthy democratic impulses.

The message to the general public is that the perspectives, ideas and experiences of incarcerated people are inconsequential. The message to incarcerated people is to be obedient, but not to participate meaningfully in the public sphere. Therefore, national debates and dialogue surrounding mass incarceration further marginalizes incarcerated people.

How would the national dialogue sound if incarcerated people were included? In an honest way? How can all this talk about ending mass incarceration be serious if incarcerated people are excluded? Under what circumstances are incarcerated people ever adjudged worthy or deserving of association with others? And how can we be expected to develop these traits of "worthiness" under conditions which tend to perpetuate characteristics of unworthiness as described by the proponents of this position themselves?

Finding ways to include people on the inside in national debates and dialogue not only gives voice to a silenced population, but, makes room for fresh thinking on decarceration, and ultimately, the abolition of prisons. Thereby expanding the repertoire of possibilities in responding to what is generally understood as criminal activity.

Each one of us comes out of a particular context, influenced by the many elements in our background e.g., family, neighborhood, school, religious affiliation, years of life experiences, etc. And because of that each one of us possesses unique analyses, critiques and worldviews that assist in grasping the proverbial "big picture." One of many steps in the process of creating a society conducive to meeting the mutual needs of everyone.

In short, finding ways to include incarcerated people in national debates and dialogue is not just about changing policies, or building bridges that will make change happen. Its about creating a transformative learning experience. Allowing people on the outside access behind the walls to reconsider what they have learned about crime, justice and the people who constitute the mass in mass incarceration. While those on the inside are presented with an opportunity to place their life experiences in a larger framework.

Hopefully, educating ourselves and each other about mass incarceration and the possibilities of working together moves out into wider circles in our own lives and in the life of our society.

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Lacino Hamilton, 247310
Thumb Correctional Facility
3225 John Conley Dr.
Lapeer, MI 48446