

Metanoia

I watched Richard Robles, sitting just outside his cell, create a lush, stately oak tree using watercolors and a small, inexpensive brush. I could see the details of each leaf. Yet Richie has been nowhere near a tree for fifty years. The closest tree is far beyond Attica's massive concrete wall, in a world inaccessible to Richie. The last time Richard enjoyed freedom, the Beatles were on tour in the U.S., and LBJ was in the White House.

I struggled to reconcile the artistic, sensitive Richie with the deranged killer portrayed in New York City newspapers during the Sixties. While he sat at a brown Formica table, Richie's belly hung over his green sweatpants, his swollen ankles mottled by blue and purple veins. At seventy years of age, his health was frail. Brown plastic bags of medications littered his prison cell.

For about a year, Richie and I were neighbors, our cells separated by just six feet. We shared our frustrations over Attica's inanity. The parole board wants prisoners to take drug abuse and anti-violence programs before granting them freedom. Yet Attica's waiting lists for those programs hold over two thousand names. Some men have been incarcerated for more than twenty years before getting the opportunity to take State mandated programs.

Rehabilitation is not a prison priority. Even though drug use contributed to my crime, I was incarcerated for eight years before being granted the opportunity to participate in a State drug program. Further, reentry to society is hampered by the inadequate preparation that inmates receive to succeed outside of prison. Richard Robles's vocational training is for a computer program that no longer exists. I've received no vocational training whatsoever. In a world that communicates at the speed of light using email, texting, and Skype, I toil at a typewriter.

Yet, I strive for self-improvement. For nearly four years, I've worked toward a two-year degree in a college program. Em-

bracing change, I attend Alternatives to Violence Project workshops and meditation sessions. I sit cross-legged on moldering black mats in an antiquated classroom where the ceiling tiles dangle precariously and the chalkboard is speckled from years of use, and disuse. In a futile search for recent works, I visit the prison library. The newspapers are weeks old. The Dewey decimal card catalogue collects dust. When I arrive at the school building that houses the library, most of the classrooms are dark; the desks are vacant.

Achieving an education in prison can be a lengthy, frustrating process. The waiting lists for vocational and GED programs hold many names. New York State no longer funds higher education for prisoners. Richie Robles was among the last of the students to participate in the Inmate Higher Education Program (IHEP) before Governor Pataki terminated its funding. Now, prison college programs are privately funded by compassionate philanthropists. As a result, there exist only a handful of such programs. A very small percentage of New York's prisoners are enrolled. At Attica, less than two percent of the population is working toward a college degree. Self-improvement in prison is a challenge.

Yet prisoners are not unique in their struggle for change. Human nature resists that which is new or different. Change is uncomfortable, stressful and difficult to achieve. A genuine transformation -- a change in behavior, attitude and thinking -- is hard won, and can require many years of hard work and dedication. The slightest change in my daily routine can throw me off balance. I may logically know how to handle a sudden complication, but emotionally, I resist. Change causes me anxiety.

As I watched Richie Robles patiently create a sylvan scene with watercolors, I had no doubt that he has undergone a transformation. Bald, overweight, and infirm, he is no longer the out-of-control heroin junkie who murdered two women during a drug-crazed binge. After fifty years in prison, he is a college graduate who worked in Attica's vocational shop making memorial plaques for Corrections Officers who have died. After a reli-

gious epiphany, Richie converted to Quakerism and attends prison Quaker meetings every Friday night. He mentors young men who have just arrived in prison, and teaches them artistic skills. When I was taking a college art class, he helped me with a charcoal and pencil portrait, patiently demonstrating the technique of *chiaroscuro*.

When I had nothing to read because the prison library was inaccessible (closed nights and weekends), Richie lent me books. I read about meditation, Buddhism, the Quakers, and Viktor Frankl's theory of logotherapy -- finding meaning in life. Richie's books inspired me to write an essay about prison rehabilitation and transformation: 'The Phoenix.' I entered the piece in a writing contest. Although I lost, the contest sponsors liked my essay and printed it in a collection of prison writing called 'The Hard Journey Home.'

In Man's Search For Meaning, Viktor Frankl wrote that prisoners need a reason to get up in the morning, that such purpose provides the motivation, the will, to survive prison, to overcome the daily suffering and humiliation. For some prisoners, a religious awakening, perhaps an epiphany, is the beginning of their transformation, and serves as motivation to overcome faults, failures and foibles. Writing is my *raison d'etre*.

Every Sunday, Attica's cavernous chapel teems with men attending Protestant services, trying to overcome their vices, to do better. Long lines of men form, waiting silently in pairs like Franciscan monks in the sepulchral corridor outside the chapel. Choir voices, backed by guitars and keyboards, infuse the prison with hymns and praises. Attica's charismatic Reverend Tomlinson, gifted with an amazing memory, welcomes each man by name. Many are drawn by the Reverend's energetic, powerful sermons. Some seek compassionate camaraderie. All leave motivated, and elevated, by his religious teaching.

Protestants, Catholics, Muslims and Buddhists -- all are enlightened and inspired by the hero's journey, by those who endured, overcame, and were transformed. Jesus suffered, was cru-

cified and then ascended. Muhammad received Allah's words at Mount Hira, and with the help of scribes, set them down in the Koran, transforming Muhammad into a prophet. Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha, gave up his worldly possessions the day he left his father's palace. Travelling barefoot, he experienced hunger, exhaustion and emaciation. Yet his suffering brought him enlightenment. His transformation serves to educate and inspire millions. In prisons all across the United States, men attend meditation classes and aspire to rise above suffering, learn empathy and compassion.

As I get ready to take a shower on a sweltering August day, a loud, clanging bell sounds to indicate a fight has erupted. In the recreation yard outside my window, officers shout over the loudspeakers, "Get on the ground, face down. Everybody, get on the ground, now." My gate slams shut. Realizing that I will not get a shower, my empathy, my compassion, falter. Two men, unable to resolve their differences except by punching each other in the face, have affected the entire prison. All programs, classes and movement stops, except for officers running through the corridors in response to the fight. Most of the prison is now angry.

While men pride themselves on their intellects, their ability to think reasonably, the reality is that we are governed by our emotions. When provoked, irritated, or angry, clear thinking subsides. Reactions rule. And often, mistakes are made. Many crimes are the result of hot tempers, jealousy, or intoxication -- chemicals creating temporary moods and emotions. Violent crimes are often committed by people like Richard Robles who by nature are not violent. For a moment, emotions induce behavior that is out of their norm. Yet that change in behavior can have consequences that last years, perhaps forever. Assaults, rapes, homicides -- most are committed by those who are not in their normal state of mind: those who are angry, drunk, high, or all three.

However, a single act often serves to define a person for years, perhaps the rest of one's life. An argument that turns violent, and results in a fight, or a homicide, spawns a murderer. It is difficult, perhaps impossible, to ever leave behind that judgment, that label. Parole boards deny prisoners release due to "the nature of the crime," the reason cited every time the parole board refuses to release Richard Robles. Society turns its back on a convicted murderer, determining he or she to be unfit to return to a community -- incapable of change, a permanent pariah.

It is easy, convenient, to give up in despair and permanently separate from society those who have committed heinous crimes. But how do we rationalize Christian ideals of compassion, empathy and forgiveness, with retribution? It takes courage to look into the eyes of a criminal, of a murderer. It takes bravery to offer them a helping hand. Jesus addressed that dilemma by stressing the importance of not forgetting those in prison, by showing them love. In Matthew 25, he says, "When I was in prison, you visited me."

Prisoners are human beings who have made mistakes -- failures in judgments, moral lapses, bad decisions. Prisoners are capable of change -- rehabilitation, education and enlightenment. However, support for such opportunities is sadly lacking in most prisons. Confusing punishment with vengeance, society refuses to offer higher education to those who are incarcerated. Billions of dollars go toward maintaining security, which is important and critical. But little money is provided for rehabilitative programs. Attica employs 585 Corrections Officers, but only one Counselor for the Alcohol & Substance Abuse Treatment program. In view of the fact that eighty percent of crimes involve the use of alcohol or drugs, such a lack of drug treatment programs is myopic. Fights take place at Attica nearly every day. Yet as I write this essay, just one classroom, with seats for merely fifteen men, is the only anti-violence program in session at Attica. Over 900 prisoners languish on the waiting list for the DOCCS Aggression Replacement Training program. How can rehabilitation take place when those yearning

for change, for education, have few if any opportunities to participate in programs, to find seats in classrooms.

Fortunately, compassionate volunteers from neighboring communities come to Attica on a regular basis to help prisoners embrace transformation and adapt to change. At night, Attica's chapel often resounds with music as Protestant volunteers lead men in hymns and chorals. Catholic priests teach Bible classes where men read holy scripture and reflect upon passages and verses. Quakers hold Friends Meetings where men share frustrations, hopes and goals.

Although I remain a Catholic, I attend lectures on Buddhist philosophy, Protestant services and Quaker meetings as a guest -- a traveler seeking alms and enlightenment. I learned the history of Sufism, and the derivation of the expression "whirling dervish." I listened as a Zen Buddhist priest explored acceptance, and suffering. While counting breaths, I meditated, letting anguish and hostility escape through the steel casement windows and be absorbed by fat clouds reflecting a tangerine sunset. Mesmerized, I listened as a Quaker hospice nurse explained her work, comforting the dying, holding their hands as they left this world. I wondered if I could ever exhibit such compassion, such courage.

I witnessed another form of compassion as Richard Robles patiently explained watercolor techniques to a fellow inmate struggling with paper and brush. He demonstrated how to hold the brush, mix the paint, and the importance of blending before the watercolors dry. As he did so, the coarse white paper before him was transformed into a vibrant autumn scene. Red maple tree leaves illuminated a hillside. The azure water of a tranquil lake beckoned. Richie's hands, mottled with age spots, moved with confidence. Were those wrinkled, aging hands still capable of violence? I struggled to square Richie's pacific demeanor with the details of a heinous murder. Who is Richard Robles today?

Such a question -- about one's identity and immanent nature -- was addressed by an English teacher during one of Attica's col-

lege classes. Professor Gosselin explored existentialism, asking "Is one defined by one's actions and attitude today, or by the shocking details of a violent crime committed twenty years ago?" Humans are capable of change, but how does one prove a moral transformation? Is it a change in attitude and beliefs? Or does it require a rewiring of axons, dendrites and synapses as described by brain plasticity?

Parole boards seek to determine change by assessing a criminal's societal attitudes, level of empathy, and propensity to recidivate. They also place great importance on taking responsibility for one's actions, one's crime, and choosing the right path. Even within maximum security prisons, inmates enjoy certain freedoms and choice. Viktor Frankl wrote about the freedom to choose one's attitude, regardless of circumstance or situation. Although prisons grant inmates few rights, there exists the right to follow one's religion of choice, as long as one does not annoy the administration, or the guards. Practicing religion in prison is not easy, often requiring much time, patience, paperwork and hoop jumping. Parole boards look closely at one's participation in religious and volunteer programs. But does a man's presence in a chapel, his attention to scripture, and his participation in religious rites, constitute proof of transformation? What does his submission to doctrine -- Judaism, Christianity or Islam -- mean?

Even within religious tenets, there is freedom of choice. The Bible's one thousand pages contain many events, parables and admonitions. Yet its teachings are not immutable. Translations and interpretations offer perspectives and views that vary among religious scholars, leaders and laics. The Bible's views on the roles of women are now seen as archaic. Jesus offered advice and held views that, up until his existence, were contrary to commonly held interpretations of the Old Testament. Jesus, Cain and Barabbas all enjoyed freedom of choice. Yet their decisions, their paths, resulted in consequences, and suffering. The freedom to choose one's goals and destiny gives meaning to life and

fulfills an essential goal: self-realization. Such success can be higher education, enlightenment, or simply surviving incarceration and ultimately winning freedom.

I found that I had much freedom in prison -- the freedom to choose my attitude, my direction, and my goals. I pursued higher education, translation skills, and program facilitation. I also felt that I had to do something about the ubiquitous violence at Attica, so I attended Alternatives to Violence Project workshops, and after five years of participation, became an AVP facilitator. And while I retain the freedom to choose my attitude daily, realizing that ability has been a struggle involving many years, and much frustration.

My enlightenment came about simply by practicing mindfulness -- being open to others' ideas, perspectives and opinions. With Richie's encouragement, I learned about Quakers' values and beliefs. I explored Buddhist philosophy, the way of life promoted by the Buddha. I discovered the power of my mind to govern my thoughts. Before coming to prison, I had believed that I commanded my mind, determining my thoughts. But I was wrong. I wasn't driving the bus. I was merely a passenger who had boarded with no idea of the route or where it would take me, unable to stop the bus and disembark.

Frustrated by my lack of direction, I shut off the banal babel that emanated from my rickety black and white television. Instead, every night I read -- works by the Dalai Lama, Eckhart Tolle and Joseph Campbell. I came to realize that I had far greater power over my life, my destiny and my state of mind than I had ever conceived. By taking control of my situation and embracing change from within, I saw a glimmer of peace. I forgave myself for being me -- a flawed, struggling man who had made many mistakes. Yet I confronted daily the challenge of making real change.

We are all on the same path to enlightenment. Some have taken a wrong turn, a detour, or a longer route. The road is arduous. Dante Alighieri reflected that in the middle of his

life's journey, he found himself within "a dark wood where the straight way was lost." At some point, that happens to most, if not all of us. For some, that dark wood is prison.

I wonder if Richard Robles will emerge from that dark wood, whether he will ever leave prison. He certainly has undergone a change through rehabilitation. He discovered his artistic abilities in prison, and produces serene, realistic watercolors. He has amassed college and vocational certificates, attesting to his education. Despite the dearth of computers and software at Attica, he became proficient in Photoshop through the vocational program printshop. Having overcome his addiction, he now enjoys fifty years of sobriety. Even with his bags of medications, his heart problems, gout, and difficulty walking, he regularly goes to Cephas and Quaker meetings where he shares his story, and enlightens other prisoners.

Yet many prisoners, despite their efforts at rehabilitation and change, have no idea when or even if they will leave prison. Parole boards deny men their release due to the nature of their crimes, something no amount of time in prison will ever change. Richard Robles has been denied parole fifteen times. I was convicted of a heinous crime that caused the death of a beautiful young woman. When I see a parole board in 2022, despite achieving sobriety, a college degree, facilitating volunteer programs, and lecturing Catholic Mass for many years, it is unlikely that a parole board will look favorably on my release. With over two million men and women in prisons and jails, the distinction of the United States as the world's leader in mass incarceration, and national recidivism rates of sixty percent, our carceral system is an abject failure. If twenty-five or fifty years of incarceration cannot result in a man's rehabilitation -- his transformation -- then our prison philosophy is a steel and concrete catastrophe, badly in need of revision and reform. It too needs transformation, a change in thinking.