MAKING A DIFFERENCE

By

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Our Spanish 101 class had just ended. We put the desks and chairs back in their places and waited for the bell that would signal us to leave. As the minutes clicked by I knew something was wrong; the bell didn't sound. With darting eyes I peered out the small square window in the door and saw only one c.o. sitting at the end of the hall instead of the usual two.

It was now 9p.m. – fifteen minutes past the allotted time for our college class. Prison follows a strict time schedule, especially when it involves a college professor teaching inside. I saw that our Spanish professor, Mr. Reyes, was concerned. He had checked his watch four times in the past three minutes. He paced back and forth between the steel classroom door and the metal and plastic chairs where most of us sat waiting. Even when he stood still he looked awkward, shifting his small frame from one foot to another, staring down at his brown leather shoes. Most in the class were nervously quiet. Some read to pass the time while others just sat, idly waiting.

Prior to my incarceration I was a middle school teacher for ten years. Laboring in the fields of youth, nurturing the fallow ground of their minds in the study of history. I was never content as a teacher to just relay rote information. I strove to implant a love for learning and understanding in my charges that would grow into a life-long endeavor. For the past six years I've worked in the Academic Outreach Office of the prison, helping inmates to earn their GED. This caused me to view Mr. Reyes as a colleague. He looked liked he needed reassurance. Already standing, I approached him with a smile and tried to alleviate his anxiety.

"There was most likely another fight in the yard tonight," I said.

Tiny beads of sweat clung to his forehead.

"Standard procedure is to put everything on hold, no big deal," I said, waving my hand in the air.

The tension on his face eased enough to allow a faint smile to leek through.

"Oh, oh, I see, I see," he said nodding.

"Last night the c.o. in the guard tower shot tear gas into the yard – los hombres no de hado peleado," (the men wouldn't stop fighting) I finished in my limited Spanish.

"Si, si, thaaat's why the delay." Now his smile broadened across his small, roundish face.

For the next several minutes we discussed education, the economy, and prison protocol. We spoke mainly about education. He revealed that he had earned three separate degrees, two in linguistics and one in finance. I wondered what inspired him to teach this course inside a maximum security prison. Earlier in the semester I learned that the college had some difficulty in securing enough instructors willing to come inside the facility to teach.

As I described the students and subjects I had taught he listened with genuine interest. His dark eyes widened with excitement when I told him of a class trip I took some students and their parents on in 1997. All the anxiety had disappeared from his being. He even ventured to joke with us, "Hey fellas, I may have to do some time here." Everyone laughed. It relieved some of the tension.

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Yesterday began like any other day. Routines in prison offer no great variation, but provide some semblance of normalcy. I rose at my usual six a.m. I plugged a plastic

hot-pot into the wall socket to heat water for coffee. I made my bunk, crisply folding the sheet and blanket. At the small porcelain sink in the back part of my cell I splashed cool water on my stubbled face and ran wet fingers through my hair. It was still dark outside. Looking out the window bars I examined thick bands of violet that slowly bled through the black sky. As bubbles formed on the sides of the hot-pot I poured steaming water into a mug of instant coffee and creamer. I dressed and read part of Robert Kusson's Shadow Divers while I waited for the seven o'clock count bell to ring. As I read about the dangers of narcosis and the navigational difficulties that divers encounter on deep dives, the sounds of the morning routines in the other cells around me began. Like divers, we live in an environment that is flooded with potential danger. We exist within a place with a pressurized atmosphere, where one has to pay close attention to his surroundings. Prisoners call it "staying on point", walking circumspectly, both physically and mentally.

A ten-second bell announced morning count. Bells are the time-keepers of prison life, like a drummer in a band, any lull or rush through a fill will throw the other members out of synch. This bell told everyone to stand, turn your lights on, and be ready to tell the passing officer holding the clipboard your cell number and where you want to go.

"Eighteen, chow..program," I said.

The next bell at eight a.m. would tell us to be ready, the cell doors will soon open allowing us to walk to the mess hall. The yard bell usually rang at ten a.m. – those not in programs could make use of the recreation yard. Eleven o'clock chimed early return from work back to the block. Two quick, ominous rings meant trouble – there's a fight

somewhere. At times I feel like I've been transposed as a character into Edgar Allan Poe's "The Bells."

After I chugged down juice, milk, and toast in the mess hall I left for work in the Academic Outreach Office. I provide curriculum to the inmates who are unable to attend regular classes in the school due to disciplinary or other issues. The hours quickstepped by as I corrected, graded, and assigned work; chatted with civilians, drank more coffee, and listened to the latest tunes on the radio.

I completed work early and returned to the block at eleven a.m. I called my Uncle Gene collect (the only way we can) and talked for twenty minutes. Tomorrow he would leave on a flight to south Florida with some friends for some golf and leisure in Miami.

"Don't forget to pick up some extra scorecards for me," I reminded him before I said goodbye.

For years I gathered scorecards from courses I played, from the Carolinas to California. Now I rely on my uncle and brothers to add to my collections.

At 9:15 p.m., forty-five minutes before lock-in, the gallery was busy with activity. A group of four played pinochle near a window. Two waited in front of the shower room. A short line formed at the microwave to reheat leftovers. Standing at the open window I heard the c.o. in the tower shout over the p.a.,

"Get on the ground now!"

From the grilled hall windows I could see four inmates in the middle of the yard trading blows. A huge shape in a brown hoodie threw his opponent to the ground and stomped him again and again. Two bells tolled. Everyone on the gallery watched the fight. Then I heard the tower-guard yell,

"You wanna fight, you're gonna die,"

followed by a loud, hollow sound of a tear gas canister being fired. I saw it sail through the air as lime green smoke trailed the shell. It missed the brown hoodie by less than two feet and bounced along the grass baseball field. Those fighting slowly backed away from each other. A throng of twenty c.o.'s spilled out into the yard, batons drawn, moving eagerly toward the four.

"Lock it in, now," a c.o. shouted at us from the front of our gallery, ending our front row view of this spectacle.

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I described this fight to Mr. Reyes in detail.

"Not exactly what you're used to on a scenic campus?" I asked with a smile.

"No, no trouble like thaaat," he said shaking his head.

I enjoyed the way Mr. Reyes wove candid illustrations into his instruction of the Spanish language. Tonight he told us of a situation in Mexico that got him in hot water. While he stood in a long line at an outdoor tortilla stand in Mexico City he bumped into an already irritated man in front of him. The man began to berate him and got up in his face. Mr. Reyes gracefully apologized but made the dialectal mistake of addressing the man "tu" instead of the formal "usted." Irritation morphed into rage as the man cursed and pulled a pistol from underneath his shirt. A friend of the angry man yelled, "no, no," then grabbed his hand with the gun and held it high above his head while warning Mr. Reyes to run for his life.

These anecdotal diversions stirred the vast stores of memories that I had accumulated during my ten years of teaching. One in particular came to mind. A student

that I taught in the late 1990's had discovered I was in prison and wrote me a letter that encouraged me. He wrote of how he was choosing a career of becoming a teacher because of me. He related in his letter a funny story I had told the class. It was an anecdote about fishing with my brothers, how I hooked the biggest fish that day with no bait on my line, something about it relating to the importance of not giving up. Some of these memories I had begun to push away for the past few months. Seven years behind bars with ten more to go, ~~couple~~ coupled with the fact that state law prohibited me, a convicted felon, from teaching in a public school again, even though my crime had nothing to do with students or school, caused this retreat.

I rehearsed this memory to Mr. Reyes. He listened, intently nodding like a wise sage. When I finished he looked up toward the ceiling, as if receiving a revelation. He looked at me and said, "You made a difference in his life, something that directed his choice of career into teaching, which is wonderful."

Something in my peripheral caught my attention. A c.o. opened the door and poked his head inside.

"OK, let's go, all clear," he said in a voice void of any concern, as if it made no difference to him how long we had waited or what had transpired.

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The class filed into the hall, after a few more minutes of waiting we were allowed to return to our block. Everyone was locked-in their cells. I learned that there was another fight in the same yard, as I had predicted. I was told by those who witnessed it from the same spot on our gallery that this fight included over twenty people. There were some weapons used that resulted in everyone involved being placed into isolation. This

fight caused the entire facility to be totally shut down for five days. Every single cell and common area was thoroughly searched. All two-thousand-one-hundred-fifty inmates were put through metal detectors. Routines were broken. No movement whatsoever from our cells was permitted. Everyone was fed in their cell. C.O.'s passed out styrofoam trays of cold food from the mess hall. I returned most of them untouched. On the first night of the lock-down local television stations led their news broadcast with news of what happened, describing the fight. They unknowingly gave us a heads-up on how long the lockdown would last – five days, reporting that all cells would be searched for weapons and contraband.

This break in routine caused me to reflect on the conversation I had with Mr. Reyes. I remembered the words he said to me about making a difference in my student's lives. During the first two days of the shutdown I reread some of the old letters that I received from past students, along with those of family and friends. By the third day I could feel my spirit I had for teaching beginning to rekindle from its smoldering embers. On the fourth day I was awoke from a sound sleep by a tapping at my cell door. My watch told me it was just after five in the morning. The person tapping was a C.O.

"You've got an outside hospital trip, be ready by six," he said.

For me, the lockdown was over. I left the facility that morning, transported to the local community hospital by van. At eleven o'clock I was wheeled into an operating room to have surgery on my right ear. A perforation in the eardrum that I had for some twenty years was causing chronic infections over the past twelve months. The surgery took just under two hours. I awoke in a state of fentenyl bliss. Lying in the recovery room a few hours later I could see a school across the street. A few teachers stood at the front doors

while students filed out, waving to them as they passed by. I watched the procession from my third floor room for ten minutes. They're making a difference I thought. It brought back more cherished memories. For years I had greeted students arriving at school in this manner, saying good morning or shaking their hand. After school I coached Football with the same students.

The following morning I eagerly took my place at the window. At first I saw no one at the school, then someone inside the school propped open the doors. Three teachers emerged and took their places along the walkway. As if on cue, students began to arrive. The teachers greeted the ~~#~~them with a handshake as they entered the building. My eyes became wet with tears.

When I ~~#~~was returned to the prison that afternoon, things were back to normal, the lockdown had ended, routines were resumed. But the college classes were cancelled for the remainder of the week. I returned a changed man. I vowed that I would teach again. Perhaps in the field of adult

education or at a community center. I would make a difference again. Walking into our Spanish 101 class I shake hands with Mr. Reyes and instead of greeting him with my usual "Hola" or "Buenos tardes" I said with perfect ~~e~~elocution

"Muchas gracias, Sr. Reyes, Usted es un maestro muy bueno. Sus enseñanza y palabras inspiran." (Thank you very much Mr. Reyes, you are a very good teacher. Your teaching and words inspire)