INSIDE WORDS:
How to Teach Writing in Prison

"I died in 1960 from a prison sentence and poetry brought me back to life."
—Etheridge Knight

1. Follow the rules of the institution.

Before each weekly workshop session, store your valuables and any unauthorized items in the locker provided. Remove any metal objects, including your belt and wristwatch, before passing through the metal detector. If female, remember not to wear inappropriate clothing: short shorts, short skirts, revealing tops, etc. Do not wear clothing that is too ostentatious, i.e., clothing that implies you might be wealthy. Do not wear long necklaces, lanyards, or other objects that could be used to injure you. No electronic devices—cell phones, cameras, recorders of any kind—are permitted. Make sure to bring two forms of ID, one to exchange for a locker key, another to exchange for a visitor pass from the corrections officer (CO) behind a thick plate of bulletproof glass.

Before you enter the prison interior, a CO may or may not ask to inspect your notebook. Every corrections officer is different, displaying varying degrees of allegiance to the rules. For example, even though you've regularly arrived with stapled pages—copies of poems you intend to hand out, or samples of the students' work you've typed up—the CO might ask you to remove all the staples. While you pry the little metal pieces from the paper with your fingers, this more cautious CO will explain that an inmate could use a staple as a weapon.

2. Always be a little afraid.

When your CO escort arrives, follow him through the sally port, an enclosed space between two heavy doors, both of which can never be opened at the same time. Try not to jump out of your skin when the second door slams shut with a loud clang. As you follow the escort up a set of stairs and down a long antiseptic hallway, you might make small talk, but don't mention that the place seems quiet today. "We don't like to use that word in here," he'll say with a frown. "It's bad luck."

He may then ask what you do here, and when you tell him you teach a writing workshop he'll say, "You volunteer for that? *Why*?" From the way he says this, you know you won't be able to convince him, in the few moments you have, that a writing class can change people's lives, so simply tell him that you find the class interesting. He will then make it clear that he does not find the men he guards at all interesting, and that if you spent enough time with them, like he has, you'd recognize that they're all "playing games." This will remind you of the warning given at orientation that inmates are "keen judges of character and superb con artists." That, and the constant threat of physical harm—COs are outnumbered and, in some cases, out-weaponed—would eventually grow calluses on anyone's empathy. So just nod and acknowledge that your escort is probably right.

Follow him past the kitchen area, where the smell of fried food greases the air, and down another long hallway. On the right, through several large plate glass windows, you'll see a group of men assembled in the library for the workshop. They're all dressed in identical uniforms, tan tops and trousers that resemble hospital scrubs. Some of the men will see you and wave hello. Many will sit chatting in the chairs that have been arranged in a semicircle. A few will sit quietly, alone with their thoughts.

Make sure to thank your escort before you enter the library. You will not be guarded for the next few hours, and, even though you may come to believe that your status as a volunteer teacher grants you some protection, you want to be on good terms with the COs. From here on in, the only security between you and a group of convicted felons will be a librarian wearing a body alarm—a red buttoned device on his belt that, when pressed, alerts the officers to come to your aid. So say thanks, and as you enter the library, remember this other bit of advice from orientation: in case of a violent or potentially violent situation, stand with your back against the nearest wall. And: in case of a hostage situation, remain calm and do what is asked of you.

3. Expect the unexpected.

Upon your arrival, Mark A. will open the locked door. Mark is a bit disheveled in the way of artists and writers, which is what he is when he's not performing the dry duties of a prison librarian. Observe him closely. Under Mark the library is an oasis where inmates quench their thirst for knowledge, creativity, and intellectual stimulation, and he will show you how to treat even the most disreputable people humanely without coddling them.

Depending on how long it has taken you to get through the security gauntlet, it might now be anywhere from 8:30 to 8:45 a.m. The workshop will typically get started around nine. For the next fifteen minutes or so, inmates will straggle into the library and sign in. They must be on an official list for the class, and if the COs in charge of letting them out of their cells are not in a generous mood, some men may run late or not show up at all. Other inmates may arrive late because they first need to visit the nurse's office, where they receive their daily meds. A number of inmates may miss the workshop altogether because of a lockdown in one or more cell blocks. Perhaps one of them was stabbed in the eye in the cafeteria this morning because he took too

many containers of milk, which means all the inmates from cell block E will not be in the workshop today.

Every week, it seems, there will be an inmate who just doesn't want to rise from his bunk, even to experience the relative freedom of the library.

The good news is that most of these guys will want to be here. The workshop is not mandatory, and no credit is given aside from a certificate that may help a little in a probation hearing. (If a "playing games" inmate is there just for this certificate—if he has no interest in writing but just wants the little gold star on his record—it will become very clear very fast: "Do I get a certificate for this?" will be his first question. "When do I get my certificate?" will be his last. In between, he'll do very little writing.) The men will have been vetted by Mark, who gets to know them during their weekly visits to the library, chats with them about books and other topics, and susses out who might be interested in writing. Which doesn't mean that a lot of guys won't drop out along the way during the eight-session term. On the first day, thirty-five inmates might show up. By the eighth session, there may be eight or ten remaining. Some will disappear because they can't take the heat. Some—including your favorites—will be transferred to other facilities, often without warning. *Poof*, they're gone.

4. Always work within the boundaries of your specified assignment.

After you've volunteered here for a while—maybe a few months, or at least long enough to demonstrate that this is not a lark, that you actually give a damn—some of the men will greet you warmly and shake your hand as they enter the library. They'll ask you how you're doing, and when you return the question, they'll shrug and say they're hanging in there. If Mr. K., a twenty-nine-year-old inmate who looks twenty-one, remarks, "It must be nice to be free," tell

him that it *is* nice, and that when he gets out—in seven years—he needs to *stay* out. He will nod and say, "Oh, I'm never coming back *here*."

Always refer to the inmates as "Mr. So-and-So." It shows you respect them, and respect is currency in this place. By the same token, introduce yourself to them as "Mr. Belden." (By the way, never use an inmate's full name in a published essay. If a crime victim sees an assailant's name in a publication, the Department of Corrections may come under fire.)

As you work the room, some inmates might ask you about your new Nikes. "Where'd you get those, Mr. B.? How much did you pay?" When you tell them you got the shoes at Kohl's, for about fifty bucks, they'll say, "Damn! Those cost $70 in the commissary." Shoes, the rare article of clothing that is not uniform in this place, take on even greater meaning than they do on the outside. But because the inmates must purchase them—with money earned from their low-paying prison jobs—not everyone can get the kicks they'd prefer. Some guys wear deluxe basketball shoes, as white as paper because of the lack of exposure to the elements. Some guys wear modest sneakers, some wear thick leather work boots, and some wear espadrilles. You'll see at least one inmate in bedroom slippers. Family members and friends used to be allowed to send shoes in the mail, but not anymore. "The state don't make any money on the markup," the inmates will explain.

Right about now, as you continue to exchange pleasantries with the men, you might be tempted to ask a particular inmate why he's here. Some of these guys are so intelligent, and seem so reasonable, you can't imagine them committing a felony. But just as you're not to volunteer personal information about yourself, you must not inquire of anyone else's personal information, no matter how curious you may be. When someone blurts out details of his case during conversation—and it will happen—you'll see how it can color your perceptions. That sensitive,

intelligent fellow who does yoga was convicted of murdering a woman? He disposed of her body in the wilds of Vermont? He will spend the rest of his days in prison? This toxic knowledge will now be in the air every time you speak with him.

5. Establish a routine.

At nine o'clock or so, the men will take their seats facing a podium that is actually a stand for a large dictionary, and that must be propped up on an overturned cardboard box to reach the necessary height. Occasionally, someone will ask to make an announcement. For example, Mr. J. might broadcast that someone has stolen the library tape dispenser. "Please return it," he'll say. "Mr. A. has done so much for all of us. Stealing library property may endanger programs like this one. Thank you very much." Or maybe Mr. W. will want to apologize to the group for some previous bad behavior, and thank you for providing him an opportunity to be creative. (Don't be too shocked, though, when you're told the following week that he is in segregation—solitary confinement—for fighting.)

At this point, you should say a few words about the previous week's assignment, ask if there were any problems, and answer whatever questions they might have. Point of view is a common issue. "What's the difference between first and third person?" "If I have a character that says to another guy, 'I hate you,' does that make it first person because I used the word 'I'?" That kind of thing. Be patient. Acknowledge that writing is hard. If you have an anecdote about how hard writing is, share it. Remember E. B. White: "Writing is hard work and bad for the health."

Once these issues are resolved, step aside and ask who wants to share his work. Unlike in most workshops, someone will always be eager to go first. There is no shortage of extroverts in

prison. But someone else will always need coaxing. It will feel exceedingly strange to try to talk a murderer into doing something he doesn't want to do. He may glare menacingly as you encourage him to share. He will then sigh, grumble, walk purposely slowly to the podium. He will rush the words, stop every other line, stare at the paper in his hands. Next week he might do the same thing, but the following week he'll walk a little quicker to the podium and read more smoothly. By the end of the term, he may be one of the guys who wants to go first.

There will always be someone who has not done the assignment, either because he was too busy dealing with legal issues (filing motions, meeting with lawyers, etc.) or because he just never got around to it. Sometimes the technical elements of the assignment will be too perplexing ("Iambic *what*?"), but once in a while the assignment might prove too challenging for more personal reasons. For example, if you ask the men to write a story about themselves accomplishing a goal after being released from prison, one of your students might confess that, because he's been sentenced to 130 years, he simply could not bring himself to write about freedom. This will be one of those assignments that make you wonder if you've screwed up. It'll happen more than once. If you ask the inmates in December to write a Christmas story, one of your best, most talented students may refuse to write anything because it makes him miss his family too much. If you have them write a detailed description of waking up in their cells, a few inmates might balk at first, and one man may raise his hand and ask if you've ever been in prison. "What you're asking us to do is no joke," he'll say. "You could never know what it feels like to wake up in a six-by-nine unless you've done it yourself."

But in all these cases the inmates will return the following week with amazing pieces full of startling details and sensory observations. The Christmas stories will turn out to be moving and generous:

> As you peered toward the staircase, you got a quick glimpse of a shadow downstairs in the living room, where a majestic Christmas tree stood. Could it be? Was he really there? … You peeked your head around the corner, and to your astonishment and disappointment, Santa was nowhere to be found, but under the tree, wrapping a present, was your mother.

The after-prison assignment will produce stories about success, romance, and family reunion:

> He pulls up to his babymother's house and sees his son sitting on his bike in the front and talking to his cousins and uncles that are his age. He gets out of the car and smiles to himself as he reads his son's lips: "Is that my daddy?" He closes the car door and his heart softens as his son jumps off his bike and runs toward him and says, "What up, Dad?"
> "Everything, baby boy. Everything."

The prison cell exercise will inspire powerful, heartbreaking howls of pain:

> One day I looked back and my youth was gone. What I have lost along the way has been scattered from prison cell to prison cell … all over America, pieces of my soul I will never get back. A living death, when I look around my cell, I see nothing but a coffin.

For every one inmate who cannot bring himself to confront his feelings of loss and pain and fear, there will be several who jump in and produce stories that inspire and entertain.

6. Establish clear boundaries.

Invariably, an inmate will ignore the "no profanity/no sex/no violence in your writing" rule that you and Mark established on day one. This means you'll have to shut down the inmate reading his story about a man who fantasizes about killing his girlfriend while they have sex on a beach, even though it's actually the best-written story of the week. Then expect the following:

"But it ain't creative writing if we can't write whatever the [profanity] we want!"

"We're just trying to speak the [profanity] truth!"

"This is [profanity] censorship!"

If you're lucky, one of the veterans of the workshop will pipe up at this point to defend the rule. "I used to think that way," he might say, "but remember: this is a 'creative' writing

class, and sometimes you need to find more creative ways to express yourself." Thank him, and go on to say that we've all heard those four-letter words, there's nothing surprising about them anymore, so let's try something different. Ask them to make you see something old in a new and startling way. If that doesn't work, just say, "Them's the rules," and move on.

7. Motivate your students to develop self-esteem.

After an inmate has read his nonprofane work, open up the room for comments. Though the quality of the writing will vary wildly—some inmates will have read a lot of books and absorbed the basics of storytelling; many will have written stories, poems, lyrics, and even novels on their own; others will be barely literate—be very clear that you're looking for positive criticism. These are not professional writers; they are not MFA students hoping to *become* professionals. They are, for the most part, newcomers to this process. Bottom line: You want them to come back next week.

Thankfully, it's very rare for an inmate to openly diss someone's work. Mostly what they'll say is that they liked it, that they could relate to it, that it spoke the truth, etc. Try to get them past these generalities. Try to get them to go deeper: What did they like about it? What do they remember from the piece, and why? Talk a lot about the importance of details, metaphor, point of view (again). At some point, especially if they've written about their real-life experiences, the conversation may turn into a rap session about growing up in the 'hood, or the indignities of prison life. Give them a while before you steer them back to the writing. Let them make the connection that their work has made them see their lives differently, perhaps more clearly, with a little bit of distance. Wait for that moment—and it will come, not every week, but regularly—when an inmate remarks, with an appreciative grin, "Man, I never thought I'd be able

to do this kind of thing." Soak this up, then rein them in by asking something technical: "Can anyone tell me what tense that story was in?"

8. Appreciate what you've got.

The workshop will run until eleven, a solid two hours. Occasionally the inmates may appear to actually learn something technical about writing. They might see how the appropriate metaphor can deepen the meaning of a description, or how writing in third person can achieve the distance necessary to tell a story effectively. If you're lucky, they will learn something less tangible but more important. These are men with few choices in their lives, and here is an opportunity to choose what to say and how to say it. Where they once employed intimidation and violence to express themselves, they can now choose to use language, rhyme, metaphor. In an environment where vulnerability is not only discouraged but dangerous, they can safely open themselves up without fear of judgment. Just as some may find freedom through reading books, they can find it by writing.

Before the workshop ends, explain, as clearly as possible, next week's assignment. Give handouts if possible, with specific suggestions for how to complete the assignment. If it is based on an existing poem or prose piece, include it with the handout. Gauge their enthusiasm, or lack thereof, and note which assignments appear to inspire them. Follow a "heavy" exercise—one that touches on deep feelings—with something silly ("Choose a superpower and write a story about it.")

If an inmate offers his hand before signing out and leaving the library, shake it. If he thanks you for coming, tell him he's very welcome. Make sure to mention that you'll be back, because not everyone does come back.

And when Mark escorts you downstairs, through the sally port and metal detector, and after you've retrieved your wallet and keys and cell phone, and you walk out the door into the late morning air, make sure to take note of how nice it is to be free.

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