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A STUDENT. NOT AN INMATE

When I think about what higher learning means to me, I cannot help but consider the experiences I have encountered throughout the 22 years I have been incarcerated. It is difficult to confine an educational experience within the space of a classroom when we learn about life ~~from more than our teachers:~~ it is even more difficult when my freedom and my humanity depend on an entire institution to lead and guide me in lessons they have taken an oath to mete out and expect me to emulate; worse still is when that institution contradicts itself and leaves my mind and my life to bear the burden of misdirection because it is I who am the offender and not them.

Before I continue I should say that I had no choice in the Department Of Corrections' philosophy:

#### MISSION STATEMENT

The Department Of Corrections shall strive to be a global leader in progressive correctional practices and partnered re-entry initiatives to support responsive evidence-based practices aligned to law abiding and accountable behaviors, safety and security shall be a priority component of this responsibility as it pertains to staff, victims, citizens and offenders.

#### VISION

Revictimization is reduced by providing offenders the tools and resources to make positive changes for a successful transition back into the community.

When there are man and women that are removed from society and placed in an institution that is charged with their correction, whatever name that that institution may operate under, it is first and foremost an educational institution where all staff members serve as educators that teach and exemplify responsible living. It is then more correct to refer to inmates as students and staff as teachers. This context is created by the fact that the Department Of Corrections expects me to learn under the care and treatment of those whose mission statement and vision has education as a priority.

I was 15 years old when I was sentenced to 45 years in the DOC. I was a teenager with a fifth grade education and no prior work experience when I was removed from society and placed in the custody of the DOC for rehabilitation. The expectations of guidance and education were forced upon me and I slowly gave into those expectations in every aspect of my life. I was, after all, a person who led a highly irresponsible life and had been committed for the purposes of correcting- except that they have failed me and society in that responsibility. I am 37 years old with a total of 22 years in prison and I cannot attribute any of my changes to the DOC's avowed 'responsive evidenced-based practices.'

I am here reminded of Justice Anthony Kennedy's statement:

When a juvenile commits a heinous crime, the State can exact forfeiture of some of the most basic liberties, but the state cannot extinguish his life and his potential to attain a mature understanding of his own humanity.

Although Justice Kennedy was referring to a United States Supreme Court decision that ruled it unconstitutional to sentence juveniles to death, his statement has profound implications for those charged with assisting me in attaining a mature understanding of my own humanity. But how this is to be accomplished is the pending and pressing question, as well as what a mature understanding of my own humanity actually means.

In order for me to attain a mature understanding of my own humanity some education on moral and intellectual development had to be available in the DOC. There was and still is not. I took it upon myself to begin reading and studying any information that would enlighten me on those subjects. I would gather as much information as I could, compared theories, sifted through many ideas until I began to gain clarity on my humanity. I discovered that identification and integration were key concepts in aiding my potential to become as humanly possible as anyone in the outside world. These concepts made me more intelligent and I consequently made better decisions.

The programs I attended did not provide me with the same clarity. One program would insist that drugs were my problem. Another program proposed that my anger was the source of my issues. Another would teach that circumstances dictated my outcome and yet another would claim that my values were at fault. There were, and still are, many programs that lack a central theme to allow information to be properly identified and integrated. This is hardly a proper method of teaching. The most essential concepts that have helped me learn and change are identifying information and integrating it into the rest of my knowledge and it is not even recognized as a tool by those in charge of rehabilitating me.

After serving 21 years in prison I decided to attend the SECOND CHANCE EDUCATIONAL ALLIANCE PROGRAM, I heard about how challenging the English literature and composition class was. What I found in that class was astounding. The teaching methods had a profound impact on me. In the course of four months I was engaged in a process of identification and integration that has been critical to my change process. To use some of Nathaniel Branden's words in his lectures on THE ROLE OF PHILOSOPHY: the class helped me explore the implications and applications of the material that I was reading; helped me organize my knowledge of the subject matter into an integrated structure so that I could see how the various concepts interrelate, what conclusions proceeded from what premises, and, what constituted the proof of the various principles. All of the was accomplished by requiring me to identify a central theme throughout each of the nine text that I read.

In comparison with the DOC, the class has greatly surpassed the DOC's attempts to educate me. By focusing on essentials, the class has provided me with critical thinking skills and tools that can be applied to other areas of my life that have nothing to do with literature. Furthermore, what is fascinating about the class is that it does not directly address criminal behavior, recidivism or rehabilitation, but the tools provide a means of applying the necessary principles to challenge my thoughts and change my behavior. While the class has implications for corrective measures, the DOC misses its mark even when it is directly aiming at rehabilitation. How can this be possible?

The answer is not complicated. The DOC does not yet have an educational system that uses basic principles of learning in their programming schemes. Identification and integration are key concepts in using information productively and efficiently and must be included in every aspect of teaching if the DOC is to give any substance to its mission statement and vision.

It has been very frustrating for me in realizing the inadequacy of the DOC to educate me as I continue to make a conscientious commitment to change. I have also found it disconcerting that all of the essential tools and principles that have aided me in my efforts to change were being taught consistently in an English literature and composition class but lacking in every single program I have attended in the DOC. Inconsistency and contradiction are antithetical to identification and integration. The DOC must acknowledge this along with the fact that it plays a significant role as an educator in its policies and practices that hinder learning. I look toward staff members as educators. This cannot be helped by me because my confinement has set them up as indicators of models of society, and it has been my failure to model appropriate behaviors that has led to my confinement. Here, being a teacher and student is not a matter of choice, it is a matter of heuristics. Inmates and staff affect one another in ways that either promotes or hinders learning but I pay the costlier price by being subjected to their power and custody when they fail me in exemplifying law-abiding behaviors.

It is profoundly demoralizing when teachers undermine the learning process through contradictory information. If I have identified and integrated that two plus two equals four, then I should not be punished for the answer. If I have identified and integrated that stealing is wrong, I should not have

to see students being fired and disciplined for stealing while teachers pilfer away with impunity. If I have identified that efficiency and integrity are essential for a good work ethic then I should not be resented or punished for working at my full potential. In whatever area learning is required, the teaching experience should allow for intellectual and moral development while simulating real-world conditions. Anything to the contrary will mislead me and set me up for failure when I am faced with opportunities and challenges when I am released.

Hence, since the DOC is really an educational department whose purpose and mission is to teach its students how to succeed in society, it must be obligated to emulate and coalesce with those whom specialize in higher education to guide and hone the DOC's initiatives. If the English class is representative of the teaching methods of higher learning educators, the DOC can use as many as are available to assist its students in learning how to use their minds effectively through a process of identification and integration. This shows a great respect for how the mind operates and is used effectively.

Dissemination of information serves little purpose without proper means of order and structure. The DOC needs to learn how to provide its students with a structured education to allow for proper assimilation. Its policy to flood institutions with as many programs as possible will continue to fall by the wayside no matter their intentions. A central theme must be included in each program and emphasized throughout so that a logical chain will help students identify most of the information, integrate it, and apply it when circumstances call for it. Again, to quote from Nathaniel Branden:

If a man simply memorizes conclusions which he doesn't authentically understand, he will not know how to use those ideas productively or creatively... He will not know how to think with the ideas if he doesn't understand the concepts that validate them...

If I had just received nine text books to read, write essays and engage in discussions during the English class, I would not have retained as much information. But the method of the class was structured, concise and practical. The course description outlined how thematic analysis would be used to guide me in my work and discussions. In addition, the learning outcomes were clearly explained in the following order:

- ° Recognize and incorporate basic grammar and syntax in writing
- ° Proofread and revise paragraphs
- ° Use prewriting techniques to fully develop ideas in writing
- ° Incorporate critical thinking in all steps of the writing process
- ° Increase confidence in ability to read, comprehend, and organize written information
- ° Analyze, evaluate, and synthesize several sources of information to produce well-supported, original work
- ° Identify and describe distinct characteristics of literary text
- ° Analyze literary works for their structure and meaning
- ° Understand, and appreciate, the distinction between, and role of, primary and secondary sources.

These learning outcomes demonstrate a profound respect for how the mind operates, while the DOC seems to be mostly concerned with behavior rather than with the mind. In order to deal with the former one has to deal with the latter first. One has to deal with ideas, values and beliefs. It is only through a method of critical thinking that ideas can be examined, challenged and replaced. The class consisted of such critical thinking.

I was instructed through an analysis and synthesis of the information, challenged on perspective, required to emphasize a central theme whereby connections could be made and was pressed to provide evidence for my arguments and ideas. These skills were further supplemented with a significant amount of assignments that gave me the opportunity to wrestle with many ideas that allowed me to make cogent and convincing arguments in my essays and debates. These tactics are similar to the ways in which I have been able to rid myself of toxic ideas and values, replacing them with positive ones that helped change my criminal behaviors and allow me to continue making progress.

Were the DOC to commit to the same methods of teaching they would actually begin to reinforce positive behaviors. However, as it stands, the DOC has its punishment system at a more sophisticated level than their educational and reward systems. If I commit some infraction I know perfectly well what will happen to me in terms of punishment. But this is not the case if I decide to do positive and productive things. I have already stated that the mission statement of the DOC makes it an educational system, so mere punishment will not provide its students with the tools and resources it promises.

When I made a commitment to change I did not attend every program available to me in order to be released from prison. In fact, I had made up my mind that I would serve a significant portion of my sentence, perhaps the entire 45 years. I attended those programs because I wanted to understand how to live a proper life. I was in search of premises rather than conclusions, of principles rather than rules. I wanted to know what was wrong with me and how to fix it. There was and is no program to educate me on such fundamental issues.



To learn is to undergo change; if change is what any educational system attempts to accomplish, then it cannot take for granted how knowledge is acquired. My ideas for change focus on providing structure, guidance and purpose to the minds of students, rather than just their bodies. This can only happen by employing methods of identification and integration. My teachers should not continue disseminating information for the sake of simply informing me. Information per se does not constitute knowledge. I need to conceptualize what is being taught in order to be productive with any information. If I am to learn, then my education should not be trivialized.

I am more a student than an inmate and I am trying to develop a mentality that will allow me to do much more than be set free and remain out of prison- I am trying attain a mature understanding of my own humanity. I have accepted this responsibility. Will my educators help me?