

Reflections on the Lake and the Problem of Prison

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It was a warm July, late afternoon on the shores of Lake Michigan. We had just traveled, with the air conditioner blowing in our faces, 160 miles in a rental car across this mitten-shaped state to a small, sometimes-resort town called Sawyer. We, Peter and I, were crashing at a colleague's house before venturing to Chicago to talk with young folks about the problem of prison.

We walked in bathing suits with towels in hand to the beach. The sand was hot. The skies were blue. The big lake's waves were rolling into the sand--waves dusted with fierce white tips of force.

We ran into the water.

I run into the big lake as much as I can in the warmer months. When the overwhelming aspects of life come pounding down on me, I turn to the sand or the woods lining the beaches of Lake Michigan or the water itself in order to be washed in tranquility, in order to experience connection to that which is bigger than me, in order to be whole in my animal being. While riding my bicycle or walking through the woods, I get familiar with sumac, asparagus, white pines, tree frogs, trillium, wild blueberries, wood sorrel, maples, elms, grouse, deer pellets, sweet grass, and the list goes on and on.

It is a privilege I have to be able to connect to the land when I need it the most.

That summer day when we ran into the water and my friend and colleague said he had not been in the big lake since he was a kid and wow was it so awesome to be there now, my chest blossomed full with a distinct sadness and the profundity of being there with him as he experienced the lake for the first time in so many years.

A strong weight settled over my skin (really a physical sensation) and simultaneously my mind briefly flitted to the inside of cages. Cages that I have never physically lived in. But cages I know too much about. Because, regardless of never having lived in these cages, I have heard the sad and triumphant stories of people who do live in them day after day and year upon year.

And, I have walked through almost every prison in Michigan to provide programs of one kind or another (usually programs that give people tools to navigate the very political process of parole in the state of Michigan). I have looked into the eyes of thousands of young, old, white, black, Indigenous, Asian, Latina, Chicano

women and men living behind walls meant to cut people off from society and the ecosystems from which we come. I have witnessed the most absolute form of control and disconnection in the form of the modern day penitentiary.

So, my mind went there. I traveled to the inside of a prison—concrete, steel, razor wire, the sweet smell of talcum powder, the foul stank of human waste, the stripes of orange down blue threadbare uniforms, the gray and black of the officers' uniforms, the cacophony of too many voices in small spaces, the eerie quiet of an empty prison education building at night when all of the prisoners are back in their units. And then my head flitted to the inside of an administrative segregation cell. Small and stripped to the minimum necessities needed to live.

And in both kinds of cages: the general population units, barrack and cell style; and the administrative segregation cells, 10 by 10 with a cement bed and small mattress pad and maybe a narrow window—barred or not—with a toilet and prison mirror and small metal sink and the glare of florescent lights controlled by humans other than the people locked there, I saw the faces of so many men and women who I have worked with and grown to know and love throughout the years.

Then the sun brought me back to the cool water rushing over my legs. And, my mind shuffled through the images of prison realities drawn on my brain by the hundreds of letters, phone calls, and in-person connections back to the moment of the lake. Back to being next to Peter in the water.

In 2005, I received a letter from a man living in prison in Michigan. Little did I know that years later I would spend day after day, hour upon hour, working side by side with him on behalf of people living in prison in Michigan pushing for changes to a system that perpetuates violence, confusion, and the further repression of people who have often been forced to live on the fringes of society due to racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, and general disdain for poor people.

When that letter arrived in our office, Peter—the man next to me in the lake and next to me now—was living in an administrative segregation cell in a Michigan prison. He had almost done ten years in the hole when I first heard from him.

He ended up serving 14 years total in the Michigan Department of Corrections for an armed robbery conviction.

I've told the story of our meeting through this work many times. But I have never written down these reflections that surface every so often.

We might be swimming in a lake, sitting at our long table in the garage that is our office, driving to a hearing or meeting in Lansing, riding side by side on bicycles, sharing food and drink at a dinner party, presenting to a group of men in a prison,

getting ready to fall to sleep in a strange hotel room in Ionia, MI or some other small prison town in Michigan, and I will call up memories that are not my own, but have been shared by others about what it is like to live in prisons. About the problem of prison. My mind has grown another cove where other people's memories persist. They are partly mine, but mostly theirs.

When I am sitting next to Peter or out with him under the wide open sky free to move around and walk as far as we want or swim to the other side of the lake. I sometimes get struck, jaw slack struck, with the blunt force of what we allowed—we the public, the taxpayers—to happen to Peter for ten years. We paid for him to be holed up in a small room with little (except violent or controlled) human contact and to keep him utterly disconnected from the land and the ecosystem. We, the public, allowed him to live on 23 to 24 hour lock down in a cell, alone, for years on end.

And he is far from the only person we do this to. He survived. His mind intact. His dignity salvaged and strong.

When these mind flashes of the inside of the surreal world called prison come to me, I marvel at the tenacity of human beings. I ponder the power of resilience. I wonder at our complicity in the production of systems of control. I get angry at our willingness to disrupt connection and family and love with separation and the production of a mostly invisible class.

Sure there are movements afoot to tear down the prison industrial complex, to call attention to the problem of prison, to build different systems based on restoration and transformation versus this entrenched, deeply ineffective retributive paradigm that governs our attitudes and actions when it comes to harms done in communities. Many, many people are working to make the important connections concerning the current US penal system and the history of slavery and genocide in this country, to call the criminal justice system what it is: racist at the core.

However, I interact with the public often and see and hear the discourse around crime and punishment both in popular culture and the media. Often the views espoused in these genres of discourse are distorted, inaccurate, sensationalistic, and/or perpetuate the racism, classism and homophobia that helps to fuel the prison industrial complex. Many people never consider the people living behind the walls. Many people have never thought about prison at all until it touches their lives directly.

Many people do not think about how a repressive system does nothing to repair the harm that someone may have caused in his or her community (harm to another animal—human or non-human; destruction of this thing we humans call property).

In Michigan we warehouse 43,000 people. In the US there are more than 2.3 million people in jails and prisons.

There are great racial disparities among these populations. For instance in Michigan there are about 9.8 million people and over 14% of these people are African American. And, our prison population is 53% African American and 43% white and 3.2% "other," which constitutes indigenous people, people of Asian descent, Latinos, and so on.

Of the 43,000 people serving prison time in Michigan, over 5,000 people are doing life without the possibility of parole or life with the possibility of parole sentences. In the US there are 41,000 people--56% of whom are African American--doing life without the possibility of parole sentences.

I can spout about statistics and theory all day, but really this piece is about connectivity and disconnection. It is about being broken and then discovering wholeness. It is about deprivation and the human ability to hate and to love and then to linger somewhere in the in-between of those deep human emotions for most of the time. It is about disappearing people from society and the land from which we come.

When I think about living life behind the walls (or when I reflect on the people who live there through the eyes of their stories and work), I am compelled to share the conditions which humans are capable of creating.

Prisons are institutions with extra and extraneous rules and regulations. Prisons are both sterile and germ-laden. Prisons breed violence and climates ripe for abuse—staff abuse of the confined and prisoner-on-staff or prisoner-on-other-prisoner abuse. Prisons create and perpetuate a culture of sickness and disease. Prisons repress sexuality. Prisons perpetuate misogyny and rape culture. Prisons are overcrowded. Prisons disappear people even further by isolating and marginalizing some people in solitary confinement. Prisons have bad food (sodium-laden, soy-based, processed, chemical junk food; little access to fresh fruits and vegetables). Prisons pay the prisoner workers exceedingly low wages. Prisons function in clandestine ways even though taxpayers fund their very existence. Prisons do not provide all that much education and therapy. Prisons are about security and control, not about rehabilitation.

I do not want this to all seem sentimental or altruistic. I am far from it. I regularly work with people who have raped other humans. I work with people who have killed and/or seriously wounded other people. Just because someone is living inside a prison does not make the person a saint.

The system is wrong. It is flawed and rotten at the core.

What I marvel at, what lights a flame under my heart to keep me doing the work I do, is the fact that people who have done great harm in their communities of origin are able to rise above their previous circumstances, beliefs, and actions amidst insane obstacles (administrative segregation, harsh and violent prison conditions, lack of access to learning environments and tools, lack of access to the land—the woods, the sky, the water) and become people committed to doing the greatest good in their communities (whether that is within their prison community or, if/and when they come home, to the freer-world).

I am both mystified and moved by the men and women who have come home and have committed their lives to dealing with the very system that worked to crush their spirits.

Again, my heart it cinches, pulls, memorizes, reaches into, archives the moments, slips to the past that is not mine, as I stand in the rolling lake next to my friend, my colleague and take in where he has been, the road he walked, the cells he paced, the food he ate, the other men who mentored him, his parents who never ceased loving or supporting him for years on end, the visits difficult and non-contact in belly chains and cuffs on Peter's hands and legs and waist.... And then the water tells me where he is now.

Able to bathe in the sun, able to body surf the waves, able to work toward making something different than disconnection and disappearance.