

Unjailing the Spirit  
A Sermon Offered at  
Countryside Church Unitarian Universalist  
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A friend of mine spent years as a social worker with women in the prison system in Georgia. It wasn't easy work and, although the women she worked with were behind bars, she always seemed to bring her work home with her – their stories and their suffering. Eventually, she wanted to leave the job, but it took her years to really look for other work and feel okay about leaving those women behind, because their stories so haunted her. Then, recently, someone I know went to prison and that has been on my mind.

Prisons have been around for a long time – perhaps as long as there have been human beings, I don't know. I do know that there are all kinds of prisons. There are prisons of concrete, bars, razor-wire, and guards; there are prisons of poverty and powerlessness – and there are prisons of the mind – built strong by expectation, habit, and fear.

As a faith community grounded in the freedom of the spirit, our pursuit of freedom invites us to understand and explore the many prisons that can detain us on our path. As we explore, we may be drawn to changing the conditions for those in prison – but, just as much, a clear look at prison – the idea and the reality – can help us to better understand ourselves and just may offer us a key to freedom.

I've talked before about the stunning growth of the prison industrial complex. You're all capable of getting the statistics for yourselves. I will say that with 2.2 million people in our nation's prisons or jails, we are the world leader in incarceration – a number that has increased 500% over the last 30 years. And I believe that rather than a justice system, we have an injustice system. One that privileges the wealthy, the educated, and the white. A system in which we charge and convict more than twice the number of people of color than the number of white folk. A system which serves, particularly, to warehouse men of color.

The so-called war on drugs has always been a war on the poor – more punishing to those who can't call an attorney right away or at all. The use of mandatory minimums, rather than discouraging drug or alcohol use has been great for the fast-growing for-profit prison industry. We generously line the pockets of people whose bottom line depends upon our providing an endless supply of non-violent offenders and paying the industrialists to store them for us.

We know from places like McHenry County jail and the prison tents of Sherriff Arpaio in Arizona, that we also use prisons to hold people whose citizenship or visa status is in question, who lack proper documentation for being in the United States. People are stopped for a broken taillight and jailed when it's discovered that their papers are out of order. Businesses are raided to find the undocumented, to be jailed for indeterminate lengths of time, awaiting trial, if they can get one.

Our prisons are like the overgrown subconscious of our social mind. There we try to hide away the people who represent American's challenges, symptoms of the problems we fail to face and address as society. And when the prison gates open

to release them, we let them know that we've given up on them. We make sure that their record follows them, preventing them from finding much good work, good housing, from making a fresh start. We tell them that we'll never trust them and that they'll be doing time for the rest of their lives.

And yet, and this is what I really want to talk with you about, and yet, in the frozen wasteland that is prison, there are flowers that bloom and souls that, in spite of a tortured past, the presence of gnawing guilt, even facing a rough future – break free from their small containers and grow great, true, brave, and beautiful. We concentrate poison in prisons – like a toxic stone soup made of bitterness, anger, shame, powerlessness, abuse, pain, guilt, and fear. And yet there are people who find a medicine for the spirit despite prison and burst, not the concrete walls, but the walls of limited thinking. Prisons are saturated with noise – but there's also a deafening silence – not a genuine quiet and not the silence of the church or a even a tomb – but the silence of neglect – of being unheard (as well as unseen) as a person. But every so often a loving soul shatters that terrible silence with real peace.

Some years ago I learned of a man who since then became embroiled in some controversy – but it doesn't change either the spirit or the fruit of the projects that he created with his wife, Sita. He died in a motorcycle accident in 2012 and his name was Bo Lozoff. Back in the early 70's he began the Prison Ashram Program and the Human Kindness foundation. He began writing to folks in prison and through visits to prisons, and he shared his own training and experience in yoga, meditation, and Buddhism. Lozoff had a way of writing to prisoners that combined tenderness and harsh honesty. Thousands of his books were given to prisons and saved many lives.

In one exchange he heard from a man named Mike, whose nick-name, the name by which he called himself and signed his letter, was Scum.

He wrote: "They keep trying to provoke me into reverting back to my old ways, my violent ways, and it's really hard for me sometimes. I chose the path of meditation and yoga to overcome my violent nature, for I realized (some what late) that violence doesn't solve anything. I am serving fifty five years in prison for killing a man in a bar fight. I'm sure you know how rough it can be for someone who tries to be gentle in prison. So many people mistake gentleness for weakness. I do my best to return their animosity with love, but man, it's really hard, you know?... I meditate and pray twice each day.. to erase prejudice and ignorance from the universe, to bring all of us closer together, that we may live in peace and harmony... Love, Scum. Dear Scum, hang in there, bro; you're fighting in the biggest gang war of all. You said you've asked God for help in overcoming your violent nature. ...you have to try to understand that the whole environment you're complaining about is the help that God has sent you. ...if you can learn to rise above the anger and violence in the middle of where you are, is there any place on Earth you'd ever get back into it? Maybe it's time you let go of the nickname "scum" and begin to see that you're really not the same person who earned that name.

Bo and Sita infiltrated prisons with love and challenge – tolerating no self pity or BS and, through letters and loyalty many a soul saved him or herself.

A few years ago I saw a film called the Dhamma Brothers, about a pair of Buddhist meditators who came to the Donaldson Correctional facility, in Alabama,

one of the most dangerous prisons in the country in the late 1990's. They led an intensive retreat: more than 100 hours of silent meditation for a group of inmates. These tough men expressed anxiety about being in such deep silence – alone with their thoughts, regrets, crimes, and their own traumas. I was struck by the power of that deep, attentive silence on these men. It tormented them. Ultimately, it freed them so that they could embrace their lives – most of which will be lived in prison – and live fully – as S wrote to Bo. “I refuse to escape. I refuse to simply endure. I’m alive, and I plan to make the most of life. I’ve finally learned that when all the choices of life seem to be out of reach, I can still choose how I will respond. That choice can’t be taken away.”

There is a tendency to see people who have served time as bad people, perhaps irreparably broken and lost. Some may be. But watching these people – thrown away – the real prison they inhabited was the accumulated horror of their lives – their early suffering, their early despair, series of bad choices, history of anger, the explosions of murderous violence that had brought them to prison – it was apparent that they sat in prison wishing that they could rewrite the past to avoid having both experienced and caused suffering they, to avoid taking their own suffering and visiting it again and again upon others.

It’s not only Buddhism that helps heal and restore those serving time. I point to the Shakespeare Prison Project – which I heard of some years ago and which seems to have spread around the world. If you put inmates to work on Hamlet, Macbeth, A Midsummer’s Night’s Dream or a number of the bard’s other plays of deep human insight – like any one, but a really bored teenager – they see themselves in it. They come face to face with their own pain, failures, loss, and even hope.

Fleet Maull, who was released in 1999, wrote in his book *Dharma in Hell*, about his own practice of meditation in prison. “Charnel grounds are Indian and Tibetan cemeteries for the poor where traditionally yogis have gone to meditate on death and impermanence. The dead are taken to charnel grounds and left in the open air to decompose. One reason I’m drawn to these charnel-ground-like practices is that they accentuate what we all deal with day-in and day-out in our lives. In this type of practice I am able to bring mindfulness and awareness to the suffering of the world and bear witness to it. We all experience charnel grounds in our lives. Especially between our ears, where the “rush hour”-like traffic of discursive thinking, conflicting emotions, raging desires and aversions is perhaps the ultimate charnel ground....”

It is amazing that, in the midst of the ugliness and violence of prison, people can manage to unearth their long lost souls – repair their tormented humanity and embrace life again – even if that life is on death row. But, of course, life is a whole piece – smooth and rough – beauty and horror. While our society may wish that we could lock away all our unsolved mysteries, our violence, our failures, our shadows and our nightmares – in fact it is the nature of shadows that they cannot be separated from us, and the nightmares that we try to deny and forget always find a way to recur and reappear. I am reminded of the people who are portrayed as hoarders – who experience some traumatic loss and then try to fill the hole of that loss with mere objects, just stuff, until the stuff itself is destroyed and there is no room for them – only for the garbage that has taken over.

Our personal prisons are created by the unacknowledged, unhealed things that silently and secretly rule our lives. Like the person who deprived of any power as a child who feels a need to control as much as possible as an adult, or the person, abused by a parent who carries anger over it but has pushed away the memory of the source – of their pain and anger and later lashes out – perhaps murderously later in life. The harder we try to escape it – the more it catches up with us.

So often a person lives in a long prison of pain and anger that, finally, almost inevitably, leads to an actual prison. Jarvis Jay Masters writes beautifully of his childhood -- a horrendous history of neglect, hunger, abuse, separation that he tints with lyrical memories. But, as he finds himself on death row at San Quentin, it is clear that his prison started early in life and following until it overtook him.

In prison, if the right person, the right resources, and the moment all come together, if you choose, you can discover yourself and welcome yourself home – like a long lost child. The Reverend Hosea Ballou, early 19<sup>th</sup> century Universalist preacher who asked “do you love your child because your child is washed and clean or do you wash and clean your child because you love your child?”

This charnel ground practice – the healing of incarcerated souls – is profoundly Universalist in spirit – extending the power of love particularly to those whom love has forsaken. It’s what we each need, each one of you here, it’s what you need and deserve – to experience the power of love and compassion – not for your goodness, smartness, or so called success – but for your brokenness, your stumbling, poor choices, failures, and even wrong-doing; for the potent seeds of transformation we all carry, and for no other reason than that power of love is the tree of life.

It ought to be easier to heal our souls here, outside of the concrete prison. I mean – prison is no retreat center. And yet out here – we can more easily distract ourselves. But – don’t we all have a right to the tree of life – don’t we all have a right to love? Is there a one of us who does not long for acceptance – not just from others based on what they think we are like – but from ourselves – we who know just how flawed we are. Doesn’t every one of us long for freedom – not only from prison walls and physical containment – but from everything that holds us back when we long to sing, speak, change, and stretch our wings.

Out here perhaps we can learn from these many incarcerated teachers. And what they tell us is that in order to find freedom – we have to see, know and understand the prison in which we live – not the concrete walls and bars – but the old beliefs, the self-judgment, patterns, and habits that trap our spirits, limit our choices, silence us and hold us back. When we are able to turn and face these interior realities – the bars on our nature – we can begin to break free. When we turn and face the sorrow, the suffering, the fear, and the pain that gave birth to those bars and walls – when we can sit with them without turning away – as these imprisoned teachers learned to sit with theirs, to extend, as it you might say, our arms and embrace them with compassion – the compulsions and behaviours that arose from them can begin to fall away. Like the often beaten child who grows up to become the violent bullying adult, the child who was often shamed who becomes the adult who shames others. We all have our histories of being judged, shamed, hurt, belittled. I still am not sure why I needed to sleep with a night light for so many years, but at a certain point I stopped judging my fear and shaming my need for a

nightlight. I embraced the frightened part of myself that emerged at night, defended it with warmth and my fear began to dissolve. Then I was authentic, whole, and free.

When we dedicate our children in Unitarian Universalist congregations, we bless them and give them a rose with the thorns removed, as symbol of our tender care for and protection of them. But when they reach adulthood, when they join our congregations we give them roses with thorns on them – as marks of our faith in their ability to live life fully. It is only when we are able to pick up life – thorns and all – truth and all – when we lift up our heart and embrace it acknowledging our pain and history that we become more fully, freely, authentically ourselves – that we gain the capacity to experience, express and increase joy. Not mere enjoyment or tepid pleasure – but the quality of true happiness – or even gratitude – or joy in simply being – that can pulse within us – no matter what we face.

We all yearn for that embrace of our full selves – it takes place here, now if you want it – if you choose it – if you unlock the gates on your heart and embrace your own being and all those around us. We all spring free – reborn into wholeness, strength, and joy.