

Guiding Rage Into Power

by Janis Daddona

“Us versus them” is not a paradigm that Jacques Verduin buys into. As the founder and director of the prison program Insight-Out, he believes that prison serves a purpose for people who cannot contain themselves when they act dangerously, but he has also learned that none of us is much different from the incarcerated. When a culture schizophrenically glorifies violence and discounts feelings, we project our own discomfort, fear, and rage onto others and must lock away the part of ourselves we don’t want to deal with. Paying a debt to society is one thing; being abandoned by it is quite another. “The Navajo have a way of describing someone who has committed a crime: he or she who acts as if they have no relatives,” he says.

Jacques is painfully aware of the ugly statistics: one in 107 Americans are in prison; one in eight black males between the ages of 18 and 35 will be behind bars, more than attend college; one in 28 children have an incarcerated parent. California spends \$10 billion on incarceration—more than on higher education, translating into \$60,000 annually to lock up one man. And within 18 months, 64% will be back behind the walls. “The system profits by its own failure,” Jacques remarks. What perpetuates a system so unforgiving and so ineffective?

For one thing, there is big money in the housing of prisoners, and a system well-represented by lobbyists manages to grow itself. But additionally, alienation from ourselves as well as each other is a huge part of the problem. When we are connected we are accountable, we care. We care when others hurt, and when we stop caring for each other, violence becomes “the tragic expression of an unmet need” as Marshall Rosenberg, Director of the Center for Non-Violent Communication, believes.

Thankfully Jacques has shown that the empowerment and transformation of prisoners is a big part of what prison reform looks like, and San Quentin State Prison has become a successful social experiment that is one of the best-kept secrets around. His programs, the Insight Prison Project and Insight-Out, are teaching prisoners to transform rage and pain into a positive force in the prison community as well as their own neighborhoods. In a year-long program participants make bonds with each other that transcend age, racial, economic, and gang differences. It takes time, but as group members get comfortable with the concept, they practice “sitting in the fire.” As Jacques explains “By sitting with their own primary pain—the pain that initiated them into a suppression of their feelings—and their secondary pain—the pain associated with hurting others—they find strength in the midst of their overwhelming emotions. They burn clean and leave only ashes. They accept responsibility for their feelings and for the suffering they caused. Once this happens, their stigma becomes a badge where they can give back to the places they took from. Such men often reach out to save troubled youth from the path they took. Others may be veterans who are among the band of brothers dealing with the trauma of war and systematized violence.

While we can take heart that many prisoners are released back to their communities,

there is a danger that can threaten them. Just as we project onto inmates the parts of ourselves we disown, so we can load them down with extremely high expectations to meet our need for a happy ending. Jacques explains, "A gap opens up between their external persona and their internal experience. So they need a support system to share their struggle of living up to these expectations. Shame runs deep in all of us. We all need a support system to help us connect with our wounded but more authentic self. Otherwise we can fall down a slippery slope of new age fascism that places tremendous emphasis on self-improvement. For the ex-offender that is a prime motivator for drug relapse or re-offending." He goes on to offer a more caring and grounded solution: "Rather than fix ourselves, which assumes something is wrong with us, let's accept and talk about our warts. By being vulnerable we take the power out of shame. That's where authenticity lies."

Sadly San Quentin is one of the few places where prison reform and prisoner rehabilitation is embraced. But Jacques is currently writing an updated workbook and plans training videos to take this work out to other places. In fact Bosnia is engaging him to help with their prison reform efforts. To learn more about his work, to volunteer, or to make a donation to support this training project, visit www.insight-out.org.

While the prison culture is bleak, Jacques remains optimistic. "I'm so excited about how downtown San Quentin can tell their story to the greater culture, how the monsters can begin to teach your children." As he believes all systems are interconnected, social justice and environmental justice, the individual and the community. In fact, connection is the way he sees all of us healing. When we are all relatives, no one suffers alone, and everyone's redemption is our own.