

# Second Chances

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**Abstract:** This brief essay recounts the author's stint teaching social work courses in a prison. It also describes some of his reflections on that experience.

**Keywords:** prison, incarceration, social work, teaching, second chance

*I enter the medium security prison in which I am to teach a social work course for the first time on a hot summer day in 2015. The formalities confirm my stereotypical expectations: Showing identification, taking off my belt in order to pass the metal detector, having my bag searched, getting my hand stamped. Then: an inmate-driven van transports me to the education building. Other inmates dressed in green (Why green? Wouldn't they be hard to spot if they were to escape into the fields surrounding the facility?) make their way from one building to another. Mostly, they are men of color.*

While prisons seem orderly and regimented in their physical manifestation, I have always thought of the process of imprisonment as an arbitrary one. As a teenager growing up in The Netherlands, I would pass the regional “house of detention,” located behind tall brick walls in the downtown area I traversed on my way to school. Pondering its foreboding look, I would ask myself how it could be the fate of some people to be removed from society, if temporarily, by imprisonment—to be deprived of having breakfast with their kids, of taking the bus to work, of washing dishes after dinner, of saying good night to their spouse or partner. Yes, maybe the people behind those walls had done “bad things,” but how could those actions be evaluated so as to lead to one's isolation from domestic and civic life? I knew, of course, about laws and courts, and about abstract notions of punishment and rehabilitation. But incarceration remained an arbitrary and unsettling phenomenon to me.

I believe that, if probed, many of us have a sense of unease when thinking about prisons, unease mixed with curiosity about life behind bars, about an alternate world to which we send those who transgress the social norms, an alternate world which we try to imagine in Hollywood productions and reality shows. Here are two unsettling questions to consider: If imprisonment is a reasonable, instead of arbitrary, measure, then why is the incarceration rate in the United States ten times that in the Netherlands? And if, on the other hand, it is arbitrary, are those inside the walls essentially no different from those on the outside?

*The room in which I will teach is hot. There is no air conditioning. Two big fans, spinning at top speed, whirl a noisy welcome. Unlike my well-equipped college classroom, there is no computer console or pull-down screen to show my tidy Powerpoint slides. The available whiteboard appears to have seen better days. The inmates file in. Mostly, they are men of color.*

Since that first day, I have taught two courses within the prison. The one thing that never failed to amaze me was the high-spiritedness among the students as they came through the door. They would be laughing, joking, high-fiving, and fist-bumping. Their booming voices would fill the

room: “How are you, Professor? How was your week? What are we gonna do today?” But when the banter subsided they would get serious, sometimes after one of the older students hushed a more rambunctious inmate. Then they were ready to listen, ask questions, discuss arguments. After a while I learned some of the reasons behind their energetic and animated demeanor. Class was not just a break from the monotony, it was also a time to escape the stigma of being a convict, to try on a new identity in the presence of like-minded peers, to envision a second chance, like when they practiced their social work interviewing skills.

*The students have been paired up and are acting out the roles of client and interviewer. They are doing a great job as “social workers.” They explain confidentiality and its limits. They maintain appropriate eye contact and use minimal encouragers to prompt the interview along. They employ a mix of open- and close-ended questions and demonstrate empathic responding. They show specific interviewing strategies like reflecting, clarifying, and summarizing. They engage their “client” in collaboratively setting the agenda for a subsequent meeting. Great stuff! I can see any one of them working with troubled kids, substance abusers, homeless folks. But they do even better acting out the “client”—troubled, addicted, homeless. They take it over the top, occasionally giving the “worker” a hard time, using street lingo and mannerisms, being bad-assed, almost making the “client” into a caricature. The students who are looking on seem to recognize these caricatures. They laugh and give props to both actors after each role play. It feels like a celebration, as if they are saying goodbye to part of their past, with some fondness, but also with an understanding of its obsolescence. They are ready for a second chance.*

It did not always work smoothly, of course. A student missed class because of the death of a loved one on the outside. “He is mourning”, his classmates told me. Other students, especially those with children, were clearly affected when we discussed risk factors for youth growing up in adversity. All of them, at one point or another, seemed to relate class content to their own life, as if it accounted for the path they had been on. Maybe such insights were also the reason for the role that religion (Christianity and Islam) seemed to play for several of the inmates. College courses and faith were used to help explain the arbitrary nature of life—maybe I could learn from that.

Alas, incarceration still seems an arbitrary phenomenon to me, to the extent that it is based on an individual and subjective judgement. It is not random though. A random process denotes the lack of a discernable pattern. Such is not the case here. Race clearly is a factor. However, I learned something else about incarceration, or rather about people who are incarcerated. I learned about the power of second chances. In truth, I wondered how realistic my students' dreams of a second chance were. Some of them still have years to go in their sentence. Once released, all of them will face a difficult transition to a rapidly changing world of social media, same-sex marriage, and Trump politics. Some of them will, by necessity, move back into the hood, trying to go straight amidst old temptations. Others will encounter discrimination in housing and employment. Under those conditions, how many will have the time and the resources and the energy to continue their schooling?

I think the students were aware of the obstacles that would await them well past my final exams.

For example, during the class role plays, one of them had named the imaginary counseling program for which he worked “Against All Odds.” However, my students seemed to find in that dream of second chances the inspiration to keep going, to take one course after another, to study, and to support each other. If those guys could believe in second chances and work as hard as they did on their redemption, in spite of the barbed wire and the quadruple gates and the barriers still to come, should not I be able to negotiate the arbitrary ups and downs of a much more privileged existence with the same belief and the same determination? And wouldn’t my second chances (and maybe third and fourth chances) similarly allow me to live a more intentional life?

*It has been the last class of the fall semester. The students say goodbye and thank me. Their animated discussions continue as they walk out into the night. The holidays are upon us. I can’t imagine what that is like in this place. But at least I can imagine what it is like to move on.*

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