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Releasing Liberation: Teaching and Learning in a Women's Prison

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Releasing Liberation: Teaching and Learning in a Women's Prison

It was our first day of class and our excitement vibrated in those cement, starch white walls. My excitement vibrated because it was the first class I was teaching in a Certificate of Theological Studies program. My students' excitement came from the fact that it was Friday, which meant they had gotten ready to attend "college" that day. Them in their khaki pants and white shirt, me in my black dress pants and "teacher" shirt: one of my students would later tell me I dressed too old and should add more colors into my wardrobe, and I did. I won't lie: I was thankful for the wall of windows so that I could enjoy sunlight on the Fridays I was there for the entire day. I imagine this excitement manifests with any teacher meeting students who are just as excited about the topic of the class as they are.

Given this special issue's focus on *Navigating Barriers and Offering Alternative Education Opportunities*, I am sure you can imagine that these classes took place outside of a traditional educational setting; one where master's-level students had the opportunity to be in a community with a diverse, intergenerational group of women. After an hour's drive from Atlanta, leaving my cell phone in the car, triple-checking that I had my license, taking my shoes off, handing over my license, walking through the metal detector, getting buzzed in twice, and walking across the facilities, I reached the education building of Lee Arrendale State Women's Prison. This wasn't my first time at a prison. I had visited family in prison in North Carolina prior to teaching, and I had also volunteered in the chaplaincy department of Lee Arrendale. As a volunteer, I had met Kelly Gissendaner, a graduate of the Theological Studies' certificate program, and the only woman on death row in Georgia.

As a first-year seminarian, the opportunity to teach in the Certificate of Theological Studies (CTS) immediately caught my attention. I understood aspects of the systemic nature of mass incarceration. I'd had family members who had been in prison. Yet, I knew this was an opportunity to learn more. This opportunity taught me so much. However, this singular opportunity is not only a talking point to discuss in order to highlight another accomplishment; rather, it transformed how I think about the justice system and how this system affects those within it, as well as the family and communities left behind. When there are less resources and course materials must be approved by prison staff in advance, time together with students becomes more intentional and learning is shaped by what each of us brings into the present moment. The women sitting in the certificate classes brought many different backgrounds, hurts, successes, and barriers with them, but on these Fridays it was our collective love for learning that brought us together. Entering others' lives in this way is more than a line on my CV; it shifted how I show up in a community with others and how I continue to think about teaching.

The Certificate of Theological Studies program was founded in 2009 by Emory University professor Dr. Elizabeth Bounds. The program has two goals:

1. To prepare incarcerated women to serve as leaders and to develop their critical academic skills through a yearlong program of quality theological education.

2. To provide seminary and doctoral students at the four ATA [Atlanta Theological Association] schools with fulfilling teaching opportunities and formative experiences for ministry and discernment. (2020)

Dr. Bounds, an Associate Professor of Christian Ethics, focuses her scholarship on the “moral and theological responses to conflict and violence, whether in the U.S. prison system, ordinary congregational life, or post-conflict situations such as Liberia” (2020). Getting to know Dr. Bounds, learning about her commitment to the women of Lee Arrendale, and taking her Restorative Justice course has made a profound impact on how I engage my work as an educational scholar. Teaching, researching, and writing provides opportunities for restorative praxis. Uncovering ethical/theological/educational ills that have not been critically examined and then to interrogate policies, history, and moral implications in meaningful ways provides scholars like myself a practical approach to restorative justice through critical analysis.

Although teaching women in a prison is considered a non-traditional setting, for individuals who lack the opportunity to engage critically or ask questions of Christianity, a theological school may also be a non-traditional setting in which to have conversations about critical pedagogy and ethics. The opportunities in the class to discuss economic, social, and political topics from an ethical and theoretical lens, matched with real community organizing made for educational and personal growth that transformed me into a more socially conscious and justice-oriented community member. Reading Dr. Traci C. West’s book, *Disruptive Christian Ethics: When Racism and Women’s Lives Matter* (2006), where she examines sexual violence, welfare reform, and white superiority from a Christian theological lens changed how I began to engage in theological conversation. I started to understand that a lack of critical awareness and analysis of the harm caused by Christianity perpetuates harm to communities and particularly to women. West also explores how the Bible, worship, leadership, politics, and the economy have historically been used to tear down and shame women and communities. I realized I carried values and ideology rooted in my Christian faith that I had not critically examined. I began to understand my faith, or at least how I understood it to this point, was the cause of my own shame and guilt. It would be unjust to know the intersections from the stories of the women at Lee Arrendale and then to not connect what I am reading in class, including the real effects on the lives of the women, their families, and their communities.

I taught three classes over the last two years of my three-year Master’s of Divinity program. The first class I taught focused on spiritual practices. We explored words like *discernment*, *vocation*, and *ministry*, and we had class time devoted to meditation, journaling, and “centering prayer” (another form of meditation). Student assignments included reading 25-35 pages a week, creating a written devotion, and writing a final paper. We discussed mindfulness, leadership, and how the women were involved in their community at Lee Arrendale. We wrestled with what it meant to be mindful and search for silence in prison, as well as how they thought of their ministry, which involved expanding how ministry is generally defined as being a pastor.

During this first course, I was also taking a directed reading course with two other Emory students who were also teaching at Lee Arrendale. We read *The New Jim Crow* (Alexander, 2011), which provided a deeper understanding of the history and on-going effects of mass incarceration, and *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 2000), which facilitated personal reflections on how teaching and education is a liberatory practice. I also participated in my first

demonstration, a die-in, held outside our university's chapel. During this die-in over 200 students, staff, and faculty and myself laid in the brick walkway. This act was to disrupt the heavy flow of traffic in this campus location. I can still feel the cold brick on my body and hear the laments of my classmates crying out to God and those within ear range, asking how long they must see Black women, Black boys, Black girls, and Black men that look like them gunned down in the streets. I laid there with my sign reading "#BlackLivesMatter" and "#ThisIsWhatTheologyLooksLike," and the next day I got up and faced the women at Lee Arrendale. It was during this time that I began learning more about the broken criminal justice system; the policies and practices that lead to mass incarceration, how Black and Brown communities were disproportionately affected by tough crime laws and war on drug policies. I became familiar with the work of Bryan Stevenson at the Equal Justice Initiative. I learned the name of Kalief Browder, who at age 16 was sent to Rikers Island where he spent two of his three years there in solitary confinement. I learned of his story and the pain of false imprisonment, but I also learned of his death by suicide and how those three years at Rikers denied him of a long life. I learned more about the death penalty, a topic I had never really stopped to think about, but when you meet someone on death row and hold a vigil outside the prison on the night the state executes them, how do you not think about it?

I had read and learned a lot about the disenfranchisement of Black and Brown bodies in the United States, but as I taught the women in Lee Arrendale I learned more about the deep injustices that are foundational to the United States. I was getting to the roots. I taught that first class during my third semester of seminary. Four months after finishing my first class I returned to teach a course I titled "Restoration through Reframing." This title reflected the reframing I was experiencing in my own life. I learned more about myself, because while I was teaching my first course at the prison, I also spent the semester in weekly therapy sessions, a socially engaged Buddhism course, and mindful meditation sessions hosted by a student group at Emory. All of these provided deep restorative work that reframed how I thought, cared for myself, and cared for others through my community engagement. I was healing from a cloud of shame and guilt that—through a lot of anger, I realized—had manifested in churches through teaching and doctrine of my faith tradition. Teaching was a restorative practice for me. I had the opportunity to discuss my own learning process, as well as reframe damaging narratives and expectations of women that are often promoted in Christian theological doctrines and traditions.

I began my fourth semester of seminary in January 2015, and in April of that year, my second Lee Arrendale course began. During that semester I was reading Renita Weems, Kelly Brown Douglas, Shawn Copeland, and Emily Townes. All are Black Scholars who discuss the intersections of gender, race, class, Christian theology, the institution of the Christian church, and scriptures. I took these authors to my class at the prison. Students also read *The Book of Forgiving: The Fourfold Path for Healing Ourselves and Our World* by Desmond and Mpho Tutu (2014). This book resonated with me and my students so much. It was one that focused, not on the surface level, the rush to forgiveness that is sometimes pushed in Christian circles, but the pages filled with reflection and meaning on the work to find true forgiveness within ourselves: A forgiveness that is not equated with actions or words from an outside source; rather, a forgiveness that reaches within ourselves and sees that our trauma and pain are real, and acknowledges that the shame and guilt we carry because of that trauma and pain is okay to release when we are ready. We were asked to forgive those who had harmed us; not forget or forgive in a *selfless* manner, but to forgive in a way that set us free and helps us to heal. It is a

forgiveness that was not measured by whether others forgave us, but a forgiveness that was only for *us*. Important to this was the forgiveness we had to give ourselves. My class and I discussed this a lot together. I will never profess to know what it is like to be in their place, but they were honest about how they got to where they were and for most of them it weighed heavily on them. *The Book of Forgiving: The Fourfold Path for Healing Ourselves and Our World* (Tutu & Tutu, 2014) was well received, and one student would later create and lead small groups that centered on reading and discussing the book. That brought all of us so much joy. For many of us in that classroom, we had been living under a cloud of shame and guilt, yet we were finding our own way out, our own liberation, together.

The third and final class that I would teach at Lee Arrendale was “Exploring Feminist and Womanist Theology.” This was a survey course that exposed students to scholarship from womanist and feminist systematic theologians and Christian ethicists. We discussed scripture, structural sin, Christology, and hermeneutics from a womanist and feminist lens. In Christian tradition, doctrines and practices have been developed by men, the canon only written by men, and councils made of men who decided that only men would be shown as leaders in the canon. Yet, here we were, a group of women sitting in a prison classroom discussing scripture and Christian tradition as we read womanist and feminist scholars. This was not about Christian theology; this was about being set free from stories that are told about women in doctrine, tradition, and false truths. Stories that did not center women, and stories that many times picked apart the worst pieces of women. Stories that were dictated and passed around by misguided theologians, historians, pastors, lay people, deacons, family members, and community members. Sitting in this class together, we made the decision that we would tell our own stories; we decided that our voices mattered, together.

Theological education was important for me and I do not wish to say Christian theological education is for everyone. However, for those of us that profess Christianity as our faith, I do believe that deeper ethical consideration of the origins of the values we possess is necessary. In a country where legislation, economic decision-making, and family planning is based on Christian moral beliefs, I contend that it is critical for us to know the roots of the faith tradition, and to learn and live it out in a critical and just way. Not everyone in theological education is Christian, and not everyone in theological education wants to be a pastor. Theology for me is about utilizing a deeper philosophical and ethical lens to analyze social, economic, historical, and political topics that are often not discussed, or discussed from a surface-level viewpoint. My current research is conducted with epistemological and ontological implications at the core. Epistemology and ontology are terms I became familiar with and explored as a theology student. I center my questions on who decides what knowledge is considered important, what curriculum was decided as essential for Indigenous children, who dictates what values are important in education, and how “formal” education is decided. I think through the impacts of these epistemological questions, and how they impact the everyday lives of students who are not centered in these decisions.

It was also during my time in seminary that I learned about the incarceration epidemic for women and how incarceration of women has increased. A recent report from The Sentencing Project (Mauer, 2019) reports a 750 percent increase in the incarceration of women and girls from 1980 to 2017. I also talked with Georgia’s legislators about the Family Care Act (2017) and how their support of the act is to show support of rights for women that are often the caregivers

for their parents, immediate, and extended family. I spent three days in Washington, DC at the 2016 Spring Lobby Weekend hosted by the Friends Committee on National Legislation, discussing criminal justice reform with Georgia's representatives, and hearing from reformers and senators working on restorative justice initiatives. I worked with 9 to 5 Atlanta (2020), a community organization promoting justice for working women that includes bringing awareness to legislation that affects women. One national initiative promoted by 9 to 5 Atlanta was the Ban the Box campaign. Ban the Box began as a grassroots movement in 2004 and encouraged state and local governments to ban the question on employment applications asking candidates to discuss their criminal record. The omission of these yes or no boxes were a continued way to bring more justice for men and women who had been incarcerated. This continues to be important, as individuals who return to their communities face stigma and discrimination in housing, government benefits, and employment policies (Alexander, 2011). I walked the streets of South Carolina during the 2016 presidential debate to raise my voice for the Fight for \$15 (2012), a national movement to increase the minimum wage amount from \$7.25 to \$15 an hour. It was during this time that I stood on the Georgia capitol steps downtown to hold a vigil for those on death row, and where I took a group of high school students to hold a demonstration to educate the public about mass incarceration. It was also during this time that I stood outside of Jackson State Prison as Kelly Gissendaner, the first woman I met at Lee Arrendale, was executed by the state of Georgia. In Kelly's case a breakdown of justice was shown. She was convicted of conspiracy to commit murder though her then-boyfriend committed the murder. Although her journey was laced with resiliency and hope the state appeals her for clemency, yet her ex-boyfriend, because he took a plea deal first, was allowed to live with the opportunity for parole. This is not to oversimplify the judicial process; however, I cannot help but question the justice of the decision and system. These experiences have shaped me into the scholar I continue to be. It is important to note that being in a community with others comes with on-going education. Lending my voice is only one aspect of the process. I must continue to educate myself and reframe my own thinking and moral obligations. Education has always been a source of liberation for me. If I am not using my education, teaching, and learning to interrogate systems and foster liberation for others then my education has been in vain.

The act of learning deeply is liberating. Education for education's sake is not liberating, but when education transforms and heals us as we work in community and with communities, that is liberating. It is vitally important to have open, critical conversations within the walls of prisons. It is increasingly important within the current era, where prison administrations are banning books for fear that individuals will read them and revolt. Yes, knowledge has power and is liberating, but not all freedom manifests in a physical manner. Those making the decisions to remove certain books, I imagine, have never had the opportunity to think deeply about topics with supportive instructors. It is when I see pictures of graduations that have taken place in prisons that I am so moved. I have been to these graduations; the pride fills the room. It was these two experiences at Emory University and Lee Arrendale that led me to continue my studies in the PhD Social and Cultural Studies of Education program at Iowa State University. Being in an Education PhD program is not the beginning of my critical journey; rather the continuation. I would not be here without my theology background. I would not be here without the women from Lee Arrendale State Women's Prison. I wanted the opportunity to continue learning and to expand how pedagogy and critical theories can continue to liberate. For me, education occurs when we have the space to see ourselves reflected in stories, and to continue living out our truth

from a place of deep healing and understanding. I saw that at Lee Arrendale and I am forever grateful for that time.

I still do not know how to fully put into words all that I learned in that year and a half of teaching, but writing this is a beginning. Providing educational opportunities that challenge and liberate others is essential. This liberation is what teaching and learning mean to me. We as educators must provide spaces for truths to be realized and personal stories to be told and listened to. Our criminal justice system is broken, but those within the starch white walls behind the metal gates and barbed wire within the system are not broken. The women at Lee Arrendale and prisons across the country are vibrant teachers, learners, entrepreneurs, theologians, and educators that deserve our attention and expertise. They are my sisters and our neighbors. Our liberation is bound in their liberation.

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