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Chapter Twelve

Infinite Space and Common Ground

The Humble Wisdom of Scholar-Allies

Norman Conti and Elaine Frantz

We are "white" people who for several years have collaborated weekly with six African-American men serving life sentences to develop and implement strategies to enable reintegration by forging meaningful understandings and productive conversation between incarcerated and free Pittsburghers.[1] We have been constantly aware that we are not only developing strategies but modeling collaborative interaction between incarcerated people and those on the outside who would like to be allies to them. We have long struggled over the terms of our own collaboration, and have come to believe that setting the terms of collaboration is not just a bureaucratic problem to work through on our way to developing strategies for reintegration, but rather that developing functional terms of collaboration is the key to successful reintegration. We have gained hard-won insight that we hope may open further discussion with those engaged in similar projects and be of use to currently or recently incarcerated men and women and those who hope to be their allies.

Our think tank operates under the Inside-Out program, and our dynamics and approach are shaped by that program's philosophy. Inside-Out focusses on shifting the consciousness of each student from contentious to collaborative. Through the program, non-incarcerated (*outside*) members go through several scripted informal interactions within incarcerated *inside* members which evolve into issue-based discussions structured so as to encourage and reward mutual participation and mutual respect. That is, *inside* and *outside* members learn to converse in a structural position of equality, which is meant to destigmatize and individualize the parties: incarcerated men and women no longer appear as misfits and monsters, but as people with lives and fami-

lies beyond prison walls, while college students no longer seem the willfully blind children of privilege (Davis & Roswell, 2013).

Our group began with that structure and approach (all but one of us began this work participating in an Inside-Out class) and has developed it over the years for more long-term engagement which, by their nature, will have to be more loosely structured and less policed than interactions in the courses. In this longer term, higher stakes relationship, we have found that the racial assumptions and practices we might have been able to recognize and repress in shorter interactions tend to reemerge. Often, woven into the "explicit" business we are conducting is continued group sense-making (and un-making) in which we speak to the process of collaboration itself. While our prison group does not provide a representative sample of U.S. prisoners (the prisoners are all black and male, allowing us to elide issues faced by incarcerated women and non-black prisoners, and we are "white," so we have a different set of issues than might an ally of color), we have all been deeply moved by this process, which we believe models reintegration.

In addition to the powerful framework provided by Inside-Out, our understanding of the challenges faced by African American prisoners and their "white" allies in achieving meaningful integration is inspired by two thinkers: sociologist Erving Goffman, who decades ago theorized stigma and moral career, and Tony Gaskew, a scholar-activist who recently developed a "Humiliation to Humility" model for the identity self-transformation of incarcerated men and women.

STIGMA, MORAL CAREERS, AND HUMILITY

When we attempt to build and maintain a substantial collaboration, to "reintegrate" prisoners and allies into an egalitarian community, one of the key barriers we face is stigma. Stigma is a process "entirely contingent on access to social, economic, and political power that allows the identification of differentness, the construction of stereotypes, the separation of the labeled persons into distinctive categories, and the full execution of disapproval, rejection, and discrimination" (Link & Phelan, 2001, p. 367). Loury (2002) developed a conception of "racial stigma" that explains both the historic and present mistreatment of African Americans. Others have noted that stigmatic narratives are institutionalized within the social imagery that facilitates racism (Bloor, 1991, p. 5) and African Americans have to dismantle those belief systems within their own minds in order to establish positive identities (Howard, Flennaugh, & Terry, 2012, p. 93). Incarceration, of course, poses its own even stronger stigma, which, in our society, is closely interrelated with racial stigma.

Most unincarcerated people comfortably construct and maintain a racist belief system to which stigmatization is central. Some, however, either by choice or circumstance, have or develop personal ties to the stigmatized which force or enable them to identify with them. Goffman calls these *the wise*: "persons who are normal but whose special situation has made them intimately privy to the secret life of the stigmatized individual and sympathetic with it, and who find themselves accorded a measure of acceptance, a measure of courtesy membership in the clan" (1963, p. 28). Often, *wisdom* results from working and eventually identifying with and becoming conversant in the discourse of the stigmatized, thus allowing them to feel *normal* in their presence.

Failing to join in a common cultural stigmatization transforms the *normal's* identity. Goffman defines the process through which some *normal* become *wise* as a "moral career"—a series of changes "in the person's self and his framework of imagery for judging himself and others" (1961, p. 128). The *normals* who go through this process come to understand themselves, and gain the status of *the wise* through their apparent special knowledge of stigmatized people (1963, p. 28). Goffman cautions, however, that such well-meaning people "can in fact make both the stigmatized and the *normal* uncomfortable" by confronting them with seeming self-righteousness (1963, p. 30).

In *Rethinking Prison Reentry: Transforming Humiliation into Humility*, Tony Gaskew develops this idea in his critique of Inside-Out and its training program. As *normals* (in this case, "white" academics) enter into teaching roles, they often understand their work through the lens of their own moral growth and social capital, at the expense of focusing on the needs of the stigmatized population they are there to serve. Many people are fascinated by deviance and tend to impute to stigmatized people some special wisdom, so connection to those worlds offers us cache that can advance us in our social as well as professional lives. If hubris and opportunism drives us to position ourselves as experts or as moral examplars (i.e., using our connection to the stigmatized merely to elevate ourselves above other *normal*), we fall into the subcategory of *the hip*. Since *the hip* sees themselves as the heroes in a tale of intellectual or moral development, they must control the group's trajectory and meaning-making, interrupting the group's authentic conversation.

The self-focus of *the hip* shapes their expectations and behavior in interacting with *inside* students. Lacking a substantial and intentional orientation to the experience or contribution of *inside* students, such white would-be allies prevent the authentic voicing of "the multiple narratives of the collective lived black American experience" (Gaskew, 2014, p. 151). Too often, such encounters stink of "academicians hiding behind white privilege" (Gaskew, 2014, p. 154).

> [White allies] subconsciously bring with them the pedagogical baggage of white privilege, playing the social "messiah" for everything that is wrong regarding incarcerated black men, the criminal justice system, and their relationship with the black American experience. Contributing to a modern day "white man's burden"—the urge of white Americans to "educate and civilize" incarcerated black students became an unwavering perceptual reality and one that I did not want to perpetuate. The quagmire becomes, "How can a white scholar who has never lived the collective black American experience become the *pedagogical authentic voice* of a post-secondary education experience or offer any advice of critical substance directed to incarcerated black student, without bringing with them the *socially constructed lie*, of four hundred years of white privilege?" (Gaskew, 2014, pp. 152–53)

Our path through Gaskew's quagmire is illuminated by an inversion of his Humiliation to Humility Perspective (HHP). According to Gaskew, in order to regain agency and authority in relationships with non-stigmatized people, incarcerated black Americans must move from "humiliation" to "humility." That is, they must consciously reject the structural denigration of their identity, and therefore, their worlds, and come to understand themselves as equally capable participants in meaning-making as their non-stigmatized peers.

Because of the dialogical relationship between the humiliation of African American men within our criminal justice system and the hubris of white *messiahs* seeking to educate and civilize them, *outside* members in conversation with *inside* members should go through a parallel process. We should contemplate and acknowledge that "a white scholar who has never lived the collective black American experience" *will* carry "the socially constructed lie, of four hundred years of white privilege," into our attempts at critical race activism. And we must further acknowledge that this devalues and corrupts our meaning-making, which can only be redeemed to the extent that our stigmatized colleagues are willing to authentically and critically engage and rework it in collaboration with us. Just as incarcerated individuals must move from humiliation to humility, so "white" allies must move from hubris to humility.

As Gaskew points out, the Inside/Out program itself is vulnerable to this privileging of whiteness: It constructs a carefully regulated egalitarian discursive space, but sets up (usually white) teachers, structurally positioned as though above and outside the process, to police the space. A better model, and one that our own think tank has found ourselves stumbling toward, is one in which the *outside* member is always in a state of radical interactive community-building and meaning-making with the *inside* members. Rather than *hip*, such a white ally is *humble* in Tony Gaskew's sense. If we approach our experiences with the stigmatized with humility, seeking to learn and work together as allies in the struggle for social justice, and acknowledging that we may not be most fit to understand where that struggle should go, then we rise

to the level of *the humble*. This approach is fundamentally collaborative: *The humble* see themselves as one of many equal voices living the experiences with allies rather than imposing their own narrative on the situation.

NOTHING IS GOOD OR BAD, BUT THINKING MAKES IT SO

Our attempt to be white allies without falling into the traps of self-importance or *hip* identity began with a series of Inside-Out courses offered behind the walls of State Correctional Institution Pittsburgh. The classes attracted 15 incarcerated men (i.e., *inside* students) selected to spend two semesters studying criminal justice, philosophy, and sociology with university undergraduates (i.e., *outside* students). The following summer, we formed an Inside-Out think tank at the prison. Each of our incarcerated partners has been convicted of murder. The oldest two have been incarcerated since the 1970s and the youngest for a decade. While all of them passionately hope for eventual parole or commutation, none has concrete grounds to expect ever to be released from prison. Nevertheless, they see one of their major functions (both as individual older, more experienced men living in the prison and as group members) as helping other incarcerated men to prepare to readjust to life outside prison. That the process of collaboration has never been easy is illustrated by the fact that over the years we have lost nine of these members, in part through disagreements that we failed to resolve. Yet the work continued.

The challenge of collaboration was present from the start: inspired by the work of groups like *Shakespeare Behind Bars* and *Prison Performing Arts*, the first author wanted to call our group the *Elsinore Think Tank*. Illustrating the folly of revenge, *Hamlet* seemed to resonate for a group focused on restorative justice. However, in an early meeting, Malakki, one of our *inside* members, objected, pointing out that *Hamlet* is an artifact of European culture and Elsinore was a castle, while most of our group is of African descent and—at least for him—the prison is nothing like a castle. Malakki offered suggestions for alternative names including "The Bennu" (i.e., a predecessor to the phoenix from Egyptian mythology). After some negotiation, we settled on *Elsinore Bennu Think Tank* (EBTT), as an intercontinental resolution. These early discussions were crucial in establishing our working relationship. We all had a stake in this group: whatever we built, we were going to build together.

As "white" allies coming from the privileged world of higher education, we saw our goal in creating the think tank as ethical and other-directed: we wanted to work with these men to establish a more sustainable model of civic engagement, but our incarcerated colleagues were keenly aware of all of our personal stakes in the project. Faruq, a member, describes himself as moti-

vated by "the self-righteousness of proving *them* wrong, smirking while showing that *ah ha* look, I am more than you thought I am a decent human being worthy of consideration and capable of change and improvement" (private correspondence). Or, as Oscar put it, "The EBTT allows me to become human, Even if only on Fridays" (private correspondence).

As Malakki (a member), explains:

> A life sentence in the state of Pennsylvania means a social death. Because we have been found guilty of taking another life, we have lost the right to have a social life. But we still live. We breathe and love and hate and have OK days and better days. So my questions are: Is life without parole enough of a punishment? And should there be a more just sentence? . . . Now there is one thing I want you to consider: the power of human endurance. The victims' loved ones must carve a new meaning of life from what's left behind. Many refuse to let the perpetrator win. Physical death can cause the emotional death of others, so those that stand strong in defense of their dignity should be commended.
>
> But, we, the doomed, also endure. There are those of us that accept the call to darkness and inevitably flash and tumble into the jaws of oblivion. When this happens, we lose the few pieces of us that still keep us loosely defined as part of humanity and become the ultimate human hyenas. Others fight back. Incarcerated men who share our agenda use meager scraps of self-determination sewn together with shreds of dignity and inflated with hints of hope to float above the depths of the living dead.
>
> . . . It was wrong for me to take another's life and in my opinion, I deserve to suffer a social death. But what if I can stop the same anti-social, venal, monster that enticed me to a bad decision from possessing someone else? Shouldn't part of my sentence be to stand in defense against what I've done and act against it ever happening again?
>
> The inmates we mentor here have already committed crimes, and our goal is to prevent more damage to the social structure once they leave. But what if people like us serve as "medics" to the dispossessed *before* another trial, hospital visit, or funeral? Think about it? We can't just continue to follow the status quo and assume that handcuffs cure criminal hearts and continue to let the violent, greedy, and pushy cycle through the steps of their damage plan. For the Elsinore-Bennu, our resurrection comes at a cost, and our role in this think tank is our best attempt at restorative justice. That's what [Elsinore-Bennu] means to us.

These *inside* members illustrate what is at the heart of our alliance: in engaging in collaborative restorative justice, each member transforms him or herself. *Inside* members gain voice, agency, and effectiveness. They hunger for authorship and authority. For them, the very existence of the think tank, and its ability to move our ideas into the public discourse, is an end it itself. Making meaning remakes men, and remade men restore a broken outside society.

But how are *outside* members remade? As privileged white *normals*, we have the opposite problem from the *inside* members: our positions within a respected university allow us to take our voice for granted. We expect to be invited to weigh in on important social issues, and are accustomed to being listened to. Our danger is the constant urge to offer answers even when we have none. The group does not give us a rare opportunity to speak, but simultaneously gives us knowledge and reminds us to question the notion that we alone have something to say. Working with men whose daily experience of incarceration will not allow them to forget the consequences of crime and injustice perpetually re-centers us in our efforts to do more and make something better. The challenge, however, is to recognize that we will only satisfy our needs if we satisfy theirs: we will only have content to the extent that they have voice. As Khalifa, a member of our group, has written, we together aim to "establish a sincere vanguard for social justice through dialogue, research, and active partnerships" (Khalifa, Restorative Justice, 2016).

Our meetings have changed substantially due to the response of *inside* members, who have over time become more than willing to question our motivations, criticize the tone, content, or organization of the meeting, and simply exit with their feet when things are not going in a way that works for them. Over the years, after much of this trial, error, dissent, and critique, we have developed a system that empowers *inside* members as collaborators and discourages *outside* members from falling into ego traps. First, we put in the time. Collaboration is hard work: we meet for two always-intense hours every week. And we bring our authentic and vulnerable selves to the table. Both *inside* and *outside* members spend time at each meeting sharing information not only about our achievements and pleasures, but about our anxieties, shortcomings, and failures. *Inside* members then can take the role of consoling, encouraging, giving advice, and sharing victories.

Second, the meetings are generally unstructured, to allow for the group to find its own shape. Group members claim space within the meeting by raising their voices. Some bring writings to read aloud—they signal that they want to read them by pulling them out and placing them on the table. Often they simply jump in. Frequently, a group member will raise a concern about what we are or are not talking about in the meeting, and ask that we go in a different direction. From time to time, the group has asked one of its *inside* members, Fly, a particularly organized and pragmatic man, to serve as a timekeeper and agenda enforcer. The most productive, intellectually generative times in the group have often been when the group took off in a direction the *outside* members did not expect.

Third, to enable the *inside* members' authentic contributions, both of us had to change or let go of some of our own priorities. Collaboration is slow, so projects do not always move at the pace that would best fit the pace of our

professional requirements. We have an "open floor" ethic of conversation: we do not take turns and we do not strive to allow each person equal time to speak. Rather, each person, once s/he gains the floor, speaks as long as he/she has something to say. At first, this could feel uncomfortable, as some men would speak at considerable length. But soon we noticed other *inside* members were having no problem patiently following long monologues: we realized that this structure of conversation was natural within the context of the prison, where time for discussion was abundant, and where men had things they were deeply committed to fully expressing. Key to the process of moving from "humiliated" to "humble" is to claim, and exercise, the right to speak, and to keep speaking.

Fourth, we learned to follow the lead of the *inside* members in determining who spoke when, as often happened, multiple people were angling to jump in. There are a few group members who are particularly charismatic, and oriented toward community-building. Shawn, in particular, will often intervene on behalf of both *inside* and *outside* members who seem to want to speak, pointing or gesturing toward them. Some members are more readily listened to than others, and sometimes tensions between members of the think tank will cause certain people's words to be more and others less welcome. *Outside* members have learned to use our own positions as equal individuals in the group to try to smooth over these (as *inside* members have done for *outside* members when we experienced tensions among ourselves), but we also respect that these structures and priorities are serving functions important to their internal culture, and individual personality needs that we do not always understand.

Fifth, we also work to remain cognizant of what *inside* members cannot or will not say. As men under the direct physical control of the prison system, and who live their daily lives among their fellow prisoners, they must be constantly aware of how their speech and meaning-making in the group impacts their relationship with fellow prisoners and also with prison guards and administrators. Tuned in to the power structures under which they live, they are best equipped to determine which battles are, and which are not worth fighting, to locate moments of structural opportunity for change, and to knowingly shake their heads when a given idea is simply not going to work. A guard is usually present to monitor our meetings. But we also recognize that they cannot, will not, and should not always entirely trust us as well-meaning allies with our own limitations, weaknesses, and failures of vision. Not infrequently, an *inside* member will announce that he chooses not to talk about something, or, less explicitly, will be obviously navigating around a subject he does not consider useful, or safe, to discuss. Part of their claim of agency is determining where, and where not, to collaborate.

Sixth, we humbly accept the fact that the men frequently kindly but firmly reject our ideas: initially, Norm wanted the men to become "convict crimi-

nologists" and document their personal transitions from the culture of street crime to their roles as incarcerated activists. However, he was unable to effectively organize the project or make it seem meaningful to the men, so they chose to pass on the opportunity. Elaine wanted the group to work on a history-themed project, but the men declined. *Outside* members acknowledge that we have interests and priorities of our own. We bring up, and *inside* members ask us, how the work we are doing in prison meets our own professional and personal agendas. We note when we have won grants or gained advantages or publicity due to our work with them, and are painfully conscious of the injustice in the fact that we have so many privileges and advantages that we cannot share with them. And all of us acknowledge one another as flawed individuals with whom we are in solidarity. We have a culture of teasing, in which all of us, inside and out, have particular quirks and shortcomings that other members nudge us about, but in a way that acknowledges our solidarity, interdependence, and common humanity.

The culture we have built is not perfect: we have lost members, had conflicts, missed opportunities. But we believe that it works remarkably well. And it works as it does only because the *outside* members are comfortable radically sharing control over both meaning-making and group priorities and *inside* members are willing to risk authentically investing themselves in the collaboration. Were *outside* members committed to the promotion of their own *hip* agendas or *inside* members unwilling to take the chance of investing in the group in the hope that their voice would be heard, the group would have failed.

Upon reading an earlier draft of this chapter, a few of our *inside* members took serious issue with our using the term "deviants" and asked if that is how we saw them. We explained that it was a term of art in sociology, and talked about its use in the field. They countered that, nevertheless, in using that label on them, we were defining them in a degrading way that would, in some way, adhere. The hour-long discussion that followed fundamentally called into question whether the project of making them subjects of academic inquiry served their ends, or only our own professional goals. In the end, the term "deviants" went.

BOUND IN A NUTSHELL

In conclusion, we reflect back on the initial naming of our group as part of our ongoing transition into "the humble wise." This early moment in our alliance illustrates how "white" allies may enter into a relationship with an incarcerated group and discard the stigmatic narrative imposed by the larger society, and seek to replace it with one of his/her own creation. Yet the process can still be problematic. The privileged intellectuals are imagining

themselves as reverse-engineering the Stanford Prison Experiment in order to turn a prison into a university. While this is an admirable goal, it is hubris that places them in the starring role in a production imposed upon the other actors.

Hamlet argues that Denmark, and by extension the world, is a prison. A friend challenges him on this by arguing that he is more a prisoner to his own ambition than to Denmark. Hamlet replies that he could be "bound in a nutshell and still count [him]self king of infinite space" if it weren't for the bad dreams. We were discussing this line as a potential title for an edited volume we are building, when Malakki asked us if we understood how all space could be infinite. He explained that if you tried to move from wherever you were to the nearest wall in increments that were 50% of the total distance between you and the wall (i.e., half way at a time), you would never get there. Since we were a group of *white free* and *black incarcerated* sharing a dialogic space within a prison, there was a pause as we absorbed this idea. In that space, we could not help but recognize how solidly this idea holds for people living beyond the prison as well. If we imagine the chasm of race as a socially constructed barrier between human beings, it is easy to understand how even with perpetual fifty-percent closures along a more level playing field, when we are bound by the concept of race we can never fully join with one another. In all truth, the only way to shatter our socio-biological illusions and achieve meaningful unity is for people to abandon hubris and embrace the hard work of collaboration.

NOTE

1. We also work with Remi Annunziato, Maggie McGannon, and Steven Stept. Prison officials and guards are also necessary collaborators in this process, both in bureaucratically enabling it to go forward and in creating a safe atmosphere in which it could occur. We put "white" in quotation marks to point to the constructed nature of whiteness. Our African-American group members strongly prefer that the term "African American" not be put in quotation marks, as they feel that their racial reality is concrete indeed.

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