Is William Martinez Not Our Brother?

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CHAPTER FIVE

A Matter of Language

On April 5, 2006, I received an e-mail message from Maureen McGraw, Library director and our liaison at the Thumb Correctional Facility:

It is imperative that you meet with Connie Carriveau (Manager of Programs and Education), Deputy Will Riley and myself before the next theatre/creative writing class session.

The U of M students will not be allowed back into the facility until we have had an opportunity to discuss some issues of concern.

Please get back to me as promptly as possible. The next class session is Sunday.

I immediately messaged Paul Feigenbaum and Kristen Lindquist (the PCAP poetry workshop) and Mihal Ansik and Anna Paris (the 319 theater workshop), asking what it might be about. Their answers stumbled in: maybe it was this, maybe that, but really they had no idea. I thought of requesting a phone conversation: Lapeer is eighty minutes away and the trip would consume more than a half day of my overwhelming schedule. But the e-mail message was peremptory, I didn't know Deputy Riley personally, and my instincts told me to keep quiet and get out there.

The previous year the Michigan Department of Corrections had closed Michigan’s one private prison, the Wackenhut facility in Baldwin, located in Michigan’s poorest county, Lake County. Governor Engler had established what he called this “punk prison” for youth sentenced as adults, “young violent offenders.” The nonunionized, mostly white rural officers were afraid of the prisoners and would remain at a distance and write major disciplin-
ary tickets, contributing to the tension in a very charged prison. When the Baldwin prison closed, the youth were sent to a unit at the Thumb Facility. We had worked with this population at the Michigan Reformatory in 1997 and 1998, and in the fall of 2005 I asked Thumb's warden Millie Warren if she would like PCAP workshops for the youth. Committed to programs, and especially solicitous for these boys, she seized the opportunity.

I call them boys and youth. Yet I had visited the 319 workshop and had immediately felt the difference from the boys at Boysville, Calumet, and Maxey. The Thumb boys had some of the same energy and laughter, but were also older in some subtle sense. There was more tension in them and between them. They were both incarcerated youth and adult prisoners.

Two mornings later Maureen, Connie, and I sat at one end of a long conference table facing Will Riley. Riley, cordial, exuding power, firm, in his fifties, affirmed his liking for PCAP programs, which he had observed at other prisons. He wanted to describe the problems he was seeing so that we could continue at Thumb. He laid out the issues, and the issues were real. I told him we would adjust. Back home I messaged the facilitators to meet me on Saturday, letting them know “not to worry, we just need to get very clear and then go ahead with the really great work all of you are doing.”

They had in fact done nothing wrong. Kristen and Paul's writers had told them that having an officer in their small room limited the risks they could take with content. Kristen and Paul requested of Maureen that the officer sit outside in the hall. This made complete sense. Anna and Mihal, lively, spirited, bold women, coeval with the youth, led vigorous warm-ups, took friendly interest in each actor, and complimented them as they stepped up to take roles, invent plot, and move the play forward. They had split into subgroups, and although Mihal's group stifled itself and was often silly as it developed a plot related to Hurricane Katrina, this had not altered Mihal's posture.

But they had done wrong. The two youth who wished the officer away, Riley pointed out, wished to write poems with sexual language to provoke Kristen or poems that hinted their attraction to her. They would sit next to her, risk an “accidental” touch. It could escalate. The young men enjoyed watching Anna and Mihal jump about during the warm-ups. One altered his hairstyle, probably to get attention, and was pleased when Anna complimented him. The others noticed. In the unit, of course, they talked about the two women and argued over who was liked by whom. They might end
up fighting each other. It might play out, too, in the workshop and escalate, even with Maureen in the room and an officer not far away. Recently some of their peers, not from our workshops, had jumped a dividing fence and beaten badly two older prisoners from the general population.

It was difficult to explain how both sides were right, but the students accepted it and moved forward, adjusting their behavior. Anna addressed the issue at length in her final paper for 319, and I responded:

Right, it is very complex, very complicated, the fact that you and the prison are right about the guys. They are happy, they are enjoying the workshop, they are enjoying the chance to work with two energetic committed women coming in from outside. It may be giving them some tools and skills, something to work for. They are good guys, full of fun, wit, seriousness, potential. At the same time, they have committed violent crimes and whatever is behind those crimes hasn’t suddenly disappeared from their make-up, they haven’t necessarily gotten rid of the triggers that lead to that kind of behavior. They are not always like they are in the workshop. The prison officials observe what happens. They are with them twenty-four hours, they are trained, they understand what is going on sometimes better than we do, they know what can happen. They get nuances we don’t get. And, yes, the prison is oppressive, limiting, traumatizing, and the guys are hindered by that, hurt by it. And on and on and on. And, right, doing this work, you have to live with it, all sides of it. I like it that you are figuring this out and tough and wanting to continue. 

PRISON LANGUAGE

Prison is a place. Each of us has imagined it and been encouraged in our imagining by media representations. And it is real. Architecturally, it takes many shapes, although the prison building boom of the 1980s and 1990s brought many replications. Everywhere concertina wire, almost everywhere guard towers, everywhere a parking area with spaces designated according to the mostly military hierarchy of the prison and warnings: no alcohol, no photographs, no cell phones. In English 411, my film course on U.S. prisons, I require my students to go to the parking lot and lobby of a local prison or camp (there are twelve within forty-five minutes) and write reflections in their journals. Some have my first experience: in the lot I felt watched and
guilty, as if I had done something wrong or would make a mistake and be apprehended; I imagined and romanticized the women I saw yard-walking beyond the concertina wire.

Typically lobbies have a long front desk attended by an officer, a sign-in book, stapled pages of visiting rules, free lockers or lockers that swallow your quarters, ganged plastic chairs where you wait, family member or volunteer, until they are ready for you. Once there were prisoner-written newspapers, no more. It is a drab space. Photo portraits of the governor and the director of the Department of Corrections hang over the desk. Sometimes a prison artist, for pennies an hour, has painted a mural, usually a landscape. Sometimes along the wall, a glass case with prisoner crafts or drawings for sale. Sometimes T-shirts with slogans intended to be funny. Postings of union information, announcements of a facility picnic. Occasionally officers escort shackled prisoners in or out. In the early morning you may see released prisoners accompanied to waiting cars by apprehensive, excited and happy, or neutral family members.

You enter the security zone ("the bubble") through a door from the lobby, which opens, then closes behind you. You empty the few permitted items from your pockets and pass through the metal detector, which is sometimes very sensitive, sometimes not at all. A male or female officer, depending on your gender, shakes you down, passing their hands over your body, sometimes quickly and perfunctorily, sometimes thoroughly, rarely violating boundaries. It takes getting used to. If you have left something in your pocket, you return to your locker. If you have failed to remove some aspirin, it will be photographed and you will be ejected, perhaps forbidden to return; if it turns out to be a drug, you are likely to be prosecuted. You remove shoes and socks. The officer shakes them out. You show the bottom of your feet, stick out your tongue, lift your hair. The officer marks your hand with invisible ink, and you show it under ultraviolet light: no prisoner will take your clothes and get away with impersonating you. You receive your personal protection device (PPD—pull the pin and officers come running) and hook it on your belt. The officer skims through your notebook or pad, makes sure you have a see-through pen, shakes down your props and costumes. She returns your state ID. The door into the prison opens, then closes behind you. No two bubble doors may be open at the same time.

You pass the command center, pull the pin on your PPD (it registers on a monitor), the sergeant or lieutenant nods, enter the yard with your escort, an officer or special activities director, and head toward the edu-
cation building. If no escort is available, a yard officer “eyes” you (“does a visual”) to assure you are safe. Perhaps the yard is empty—it is count time or a higher-security prison where yard hours are few. Or it is full. Prisoners, in our first years dressed in their own clothes, now dressed in blue with an orange stripe, their number stenciled on the back shoulders, are on their way to chow, to work, to programs, they are on the phones, in the weight pit, playing basketball, throwing horseshoes, clustered, walking, curious about you, sometimes casting out a greeting or catcall. Officers stand alone or in pairs, greet each other, sometimes exchange greetings with prisoners or hurry them on, have a firm bearing that is not quite military.

Whether the authorities are casual and friendly, even happy to see you, or rigid and peremptory, they are in charge. They may greet you, accommodate you, smooth your way, chat with you, laugh with you. But they can choose to be cold and hostile, treat you with suspicion as a naive outsider who doesn’t understand prison and prisoners and who might mess things up, and you have no recourse. If there is a problem with the call-out for your workshop, if you have forgotten your ID, if you are wearing clothes you’ve worn many times before and suddenly there is a problem with them, they can call back to shift command or to the units and work it out or they can refuse to do so. They can enjoy your props and costumes or they can shake them down and eliminate one after another. When they escort you through the yard, they can enjoy learning about your workshop and praise what you are doing, or they can tell you the prisoners will manipulate you, that everyone in your workshop is a sex offender or violent, that the prisoners are scum, that you should not stand too close to them. It is their choice.

We watch the power dynamic between officers and prisoners. We see officers who are relaxed and good-natured, who josh with the prisoners, and who are liked, and this pleases us. We see the opposite, a nervous or hostile or distanced officer who sends a poet back because he is missing a button or has his shirt untucked or is thirty seconds late. And, whether friendly or not, it can always turn: it is at the officer’s pleasure. We see that something is always under negotiation, that relations are charged, that there is in fact danger, there is humiliation, a walking on eggshells, challenges and provocations, disciplinary tickets and reprisals in the air. Then we realize: although we are not incarcerated, it is not so different with us. Our presence and options depend on the benevolence or neutrality or hostility, on the mood of the officers, on what they imagine or choose to perceive: overfriendliness with prisoners, a touch, a note passed.
This is the language conveyed by the institution to free-world people who enter, and to the incarcerated.\textsuperscript{5} Prisons are complex worlds with rich and varied dimensions, yet the predominant communication is one of power, constraint, limitation, containment, an impulse to deny, take away, restrict. The predominant communication is not about creativity, enlarging personal capacity, growth.

To a great extent this communication is not only justified but justifiable. Prisons are volatile and need to be safe for everyone. Prisoners vastly outnumber officers on duty. Prisoners experience what for many is the trauma of having little control over their lives, the constant humiliation of being under the thumb of others. Most carry inside themselves the neglected, crowded, abusive, frustrated, destructive and self-destructive environments they were born into that by one path or another brought them to prison; the violence of their neighborhoods, the gang rivalries, the gunfights, the hurt bystanders and children; whatever triggers them; what has been done to them; what they have done to others; the children they miss even though they might have hurt them; the tensions and dangers of prison, hierarchies, power struggles; their malnourishment; and, for so many of them, their illiteracy. Romando Valerolo explains to my students over video\textsuperscript{6} that when he leaves his cell in the morning, he says good-bye to the photographs of his loved ones. He doesn’t know if he’ll see them again. In “I Remember . . .” George Hall writes about

\begin{quote}
the years of isolation . . .
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
F-Block in Marquette,
where once doors were literally welded shut . . .
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
and watching a man die
over three packs of cigarettes.
\end{quote}

He writes in “Taking,”

\begin{quote}
I will myself not to hate
into bitter oblivion
as little by little my keepers take
\end{quote}
more and more from me,
my self respect, my clothing,
all the small things of comfort,
and next my word processor, they say,
we are taking everything.

I wonder if they can see
what smolders darkly
inside my mind,
what force it takes
to will into myself docility,
not to react violently
to their intrusions.

I will myself not to hate
into bitter oblivion
not to strike blindly out
in helpless frustration
and thus to destroy
what little is left of me . . .
trying to hold onto
what little dignity
is left in me.

The Corrections Union newsletters I read on the wall inside the Huron Valley Women's Facility as we wait for our escort detail the latest fight between inmates, the latest stabbing of an officer, the latest hospitalization. Officers—who work in a military hierarchy; who, even with the best intentions, wear away in the face of provocations, in the face of having to deny and order and give pain; who often harden, become numb, and retaliate; who often have to put loyalty to fellow officers above fairness to a prisoner with a grievance; whose home lives are so often damaged by what happens at their workplace; who participate in the tension and latent and real violence of the prison—know that if they allow a prisoner to overstep a boundary, it can lead anywhere. Containment and constraint are necessary.

As we walk out of the parking lot into the lobby and come up to the desk, pass through the bubble and into the yard, what do the officers see?
UNIVERSITY LANGUAGE

We are very young and therefore unseasoned, susceptible.

Although at the beginning we may have some fear, we are also, as a rule, spirited and flamboyant. We laugh, often loudly. We chatter among ourselves, and it is usually obvious that we like each other. We have a rather intense, young energy. We walk with confidence. On the whole we come from privilege, unlike nearly every prisoner, unlike most officers. Most of us attended excellent high schools, had parents with high incomes who read to us as children and tutors, classes, and coaches to help us pass standardized tests, all factors in our test success. We may have held summer jobs, even working-class jobs, we might have part-time jobs now, but our need to work comes from our attending the nation’s most expensive public university. Most of us have traveled abroad. In our bodies, our words, our heads, a feeling of entitlement. One or another of us might talk about “my place” at the university as something due to us. For many of us it is a new and hard idea to think of William Martinez as our brother. Only recently have some of us realized that a commitment to social justice means radical reorientation.

We dress down, in willing compliance with prison and juvenile facility policy. We wear baggy clothes and avoid extravagant jewelry and makeup. We understand why this is important. Yet even dressing down we dress well. It is clear in our bearing that we are accustomed to dress well.

We touch. Many of us come from families and all of us come from a university youth culture that is physical: we hug, kiss, shake hands, place a hand on an arm or a shoulder for emphasis.

We are compassionate, altruistic. Most of us are women, too few are men. We may still be mired in problematic notions like “helping” and “reaching out.” We are optimistic, might be naive, might romanticize the boys and girls, the men and women, in our workshops. It is likely we won’t always be alert.

We have a political bent, are very aware of social injustice, of poverty, of the broad disparities in the United States and what groups are most affected. Most of us, some with ambivalence, find ourselves on the side of the incarcerated and their families, victims of a cruel deliberate policy of mass incarceration. We might be too ready to take in prisoner stories and respond by doing what we have been told not to do. We may scorn the custodians as keepers and oppressors of prisoners. It is all too possible that we
hold economically and culturally induced stereotypes of the human beings who have found jobs in prisons. We may see them as enemies.

We are creative. We have been to plays, concerts, galleries, and poetry slams. We are artists, actors, poets, dancers, or are in the process of becoming so. We believe in freedom of expression and in self-expression. Whatever our individual fears and constraints, we believe in improvisation, risk, vulnerability, the telling of our personal stories, in honesty and authenticity.

We believe in growth.

THERE YOU HAVE IT

On the whole PCAP believes in creativity and growth. On the whole the prison believes in containment and security, though those who either pay lip service to growth or genuinely believe in it make it possible for us to be there. And PCAP and the prison are both right: unless they are stifled, human beings have a propensity and a right to become more fully human, and prison is volatile and needs discipline, clear policies, strict demarcations. The question is how to accommodate the two languages.

TROUBLE

Like all volunteers and all correctional staff who enter prisons, we make mistakes and find ourselves in trouble. Although it is very rare that these things happen—and most of them have happened only once—English 310 and 319 students, Art and Design 310 students, and PCAP members have dressed inappropriately; carried out cards or notes or gifts from the incarcerated; been out of place; accepted love poems from the incarcerated; written to the incarcerated at their prison where they volunteer; spoken back to facility personnel; been consistently late for workshops; failed to respond to signs of sexual aggression; overseen (in a juvenile facility) the publication of an anthology with inappropriate material; forgotten where they are. Because 99.9 percent of the time we prevent such behavior, even when provoked or tempted, we have a great reputation and continue working in prisons and juvenile facilities after twenty years.

Still, now and then goodwill, goodness of heart, thinking the best, not wanting to tell, unseasoned instinct, bravado, rashness, stereotyping, admiring, loving, not wanting to be racist or classist, not wanting to leave one's
Politics at the door,\textsuperscript{12} failure to fully assimilate the complexity of the place and the complexity of the lives of those who work and who are incarcerated there—sometimes these things prevail.

Youth is not a matter of years. I have been out of place. When the women were moved from the Florence Crane Women’s to the Western Wayne Correctional Facility in 2000, lifers were sent to the Scott Correctional Facility and we lost Shar Wabindato, one of the Sisters Within Theater Troupe’s most influential members, initiator of dance, creator of deeply moral roles, a person of courage. Four plays later, in late 2002, I learned she had been transferred to Western Wayne, then saw her pass by the recreation room on her way to a visit. In my ninth year at Western Wayne, I was at ease and sure of myself. I went down the corridor, up the stairs, and greeted her as she passed from the prisoner waiting area into the visiting room. An officer standing by asked, “Who are you? What are you doing here?” When I tried to explain, she sent me back to the recreation room, then later came by, asked more questions, and wrote a violation report. It was helpful that we were in good standing at Western Wayne. I explained the circumstances to Assistant Deputy Warden Chapman and acknowledged that I had violated volunteer rules and apologized. He wrote me a gentle and supportive letter of reprimand. In another facility I might have been risking the workshop.

\textbf{Prevention}

\textit{Training}

Our training is more thorough than that of any other university group and is often more tough-minded and detailed than the orientations given by prison staff. Everything is at stake: safety, our reputation, our ability to continue in the facilities and thus opportunities for incarcerated youth and adults to have creative spaces where they can invent, find themselves, work together, and grow.

We worry that students from other programs, less trained and motivated by pass/fail grades and course requirements, will do something that will eliminate us all. Years ago, a Project Community student entered the bubble at Western Wayne with marijuana that (I assume) he had neglected to remove from his jacket. He was ejected and threatened with prosecution. In the following weeks prisoners leaving PCAP workshops received full-body searches, and performers in our Residential Treatment Program
theater troupe were not permitted to shake hands or stand close to outside guests. During the reception, at least ten officers (normally there would be at most two), arms folded, watched every interaction. I felt as if I had been transferred to some repressive foreign country.\textsuperscript{13}

In our training we \textit{stress} that facility rules and regulations be obeyed, no matter where our impulses, instincts, judgment, and compassion are leading us. We may be right in seeing particular regulations as oppressive, but we are not experts on security, not necessarily keen observers of behavior. We don't know what might happen when we or an incarcerated person takes a first step in the wrong direction. We are clear that when a youth sneaks a note into a facilitator's notebook, the facilitator must inform both me and the facility liaison immediately. We go carefully through procedures for handling any kind of inappropriate approach by an incarcerated youth or adult.\textsuperscript{14} We require everyone to read our in-house manual, which details our mistakes and their consequences, as well as instances when someone averted a mistake. The mistakes are heralded as "Warning Stories":

\textbf{WARNING STORY:} A 319 team with a great prison theater workshop felt uncomfortable with the behavior of one of the men—he always sat by them, sat close, the vibes were off—but he never did anything overt. \textit{So they didn't say anything in their journals or team meetings}. The night of the performance he brushed his hand slowly over the butt of one of the students. She reported it to Buzz the next day, but not that night to the special activities person. An investigation revealed that the prisoner was there for criminal sexual conduct, and he was sent north to another prison, losing some of his good time. The student was asked if she wanted to press charges for sexual assault, and she decided not to do so. If the team had mentioned their discomfort to Buzz, he would have told them what to do, and the incident would not have occurred. Staff at the prison were going to end our workshops there for a while (this is one of our best sites), but luckily the supervisor of the special activities director said he wanted to continue the programs. \textit{We almost lost that one}. \textbf{REMEMBER ALWAYS TALK IN GROUP AND TEAM MEETINGS ABOUT WHAT MAKES YOU UNCOMFORTABLE. YOU'LL GET EXCELLENT ADVICE AND BE SPARED SOMETHING LIKE THIS}. And if there is an incident, report it immediately that night at the facility. \textit{We can be in trouble if we don't do so.}

That some students go to their first several workshops super anxious—
because of the warnings—that they will make a wrong move, is not a problem. It is better than the opposite. We have told them that we consider them colleagues working in trying and confusing circumstances, that we know there are pitfalls, and that if something happens, there is no blame, only troubleshooting and problem-solving. We assure them that most of the incarcerated and most officers, counselors and staff, as long as we are honest, are also committed to solving and moving on.

Communication with the Facility

I usually make the first contact with the facility, with a counselor, teacher, program director, special activities director, assistant deputy warden for programs, deputy warden, or warden. My status is useful to PCAP. A professor at the University of Michigan, I am also known as the founder of PCAP, which has an excellent reputation. I listen to their program needs and make clear that our purpose is to serve facility goals, that we follow rules and regulations and compliment their tough-minded orientation with one of our own, that we provide weekly or biweekly supervision of our “volunteers,”15 and that we stay in very close touch with the liaison. While they don’t have the same status and authority, sophisticated and experienced PCAP members can easily make the contact as well. After the initial contact, I turn over relations with the new liaison to those who will actually be at the facility and am in reserve—again as a useful, experienced, professional figure—for any moments when a call from me might move things forward or solve problems. Sometimes the contact will want something written, as Christina Bates at the Gus Harrison Correctional Facility did for a poetry and a theater workshop in January 2006. In my reply, I cited our past years of workshops in the prisons, let her know about our strict training and adherence to facility regulations, and described the procedures we would follow and the skills the participants would gain. The poetry workshop “will meet for an hour or more once a week.”

The team will first ask the participants to talk about their experiences with poetry, what they wish to work on, the kind of content and form they are interested in, and their aspirations as writers. From then on the team will encourage individual growth in writing skills and handling of content. Within the workshop each week, the team will bring individual and group writing exercises, with sharing and discussion of each written work. They will also assign poems to be written during the week to be brought in and
read each week. We stress clear oral presentations, constructive feedback, and an atmosphere in which participants can write honestly. When the participants are ready, we hold a reading at the facility. This will probably take place at the end of April. Often we also put together an anthology of each poet’s best writing and make a copy for the facility library and two copies for the participants, so that they may send one home.

By participating in the workshop, participants gain skills in working together, in listening carefully and offering constructive feedback, in trusting their own stories and histories and imagination, in taking responsibility for their own work, and in speaking articulately before an audience. The attention and praise of the audience, as well as the week by week growth in their ability to write and share, add to each participant’s sense of his own possibilities.16

This professional, reassuring, listening beginning is followed by regular checking-in, seeking advice, and coming through. The liaison appreciates the respect and usually enjoys the energy and spirit of the PCAP people who come in. Thanks to this communication, he or she is comfortable dealing with difficulties, ready to communicate, and amenable to negotiation and healing when problems arise.

**Supervision**

The 310 and 319 students write about their workshops in weekly journals, which get long responses, and talk about their workshop in team meetings where their peers respond and advise. I am alert to the nuances and am able to detect developing problems. Every two weeks, at PCAP general meetings, consistent small groups—each with a mix of new members and experienced members—meet and provide the same service to each other. When something problematic does occur at a facility, I take the occasion to send out a reminder to everyone. And before a performance, knowing what can happen in the emotion of a reading or performance and the end of a workshop, we also send reminders, as well as instructions for non-PCAP outside guests about the dress and behavior expected of them.

**Troubleshooting**

When Erin Connelly and her partner Ari arrived in the Education Building at the Ryan Correctional Facility one evening in February 2002, prisoners were clustered around the desk where they checked in. Al, a member
of their theater workshop, was in a heated discussion with a young female officer who was new to the facility and to the job. Alone and scared about a possible escalation, she asked Ari and Erin to move aside and called for backup. A few days later our liaison, Pete Kerr, called to tell me about the report she filed. In an e-mail paraphrase I reported in turn to Erin and Ari:

There was an argument between a prisoner and an officer at the desk downstairs by the gym. The officer told Ari twice to back away from the desk and Ari didn't comply. He twice refused a direct order to move away, thus placing him in danger if the situation escalated. Afterwards he gave a high five to the prisoner and (Pete thinks it indicates this:) to a couple of others. It doesn't say that the high fives were congratulatory or complicit with the offending prisoner, but Pete says that is probably the meaning of putting that in the report. Ari interfered with custody staff.

I added that Pete had spoken for Ari, but Assistant Deputy Warden Scott Nobles had been “adamant—that's it!” Ari was terminated. We could appeal, but Pete didn't think we would get far.

I solicited reports from Erin and Ari. They had said nothing about high fives or not moving away from the desk. I asked for more feedback. I learned that at first Ari had no idea what the argument was about and complied with the officer’s request to leave the area by simply moving to the other side of the desk from Al. Later, when the backup had arrived and Al was removed, Ari heard that the choir group had been assigned to the chapel and stepped forward to inform the officer (“not in any aggressive manner”) that the theater workshop regularly met in the chapel. He said he had greeted the men as he always does, with a handshake, not a high five. In workshop mode, he clearly had not sensed the officer’s tension and continued to interact with the men as they came to the desk. In the workshop, when Al wanted to discuss his argument with the officer, Erin and Ari refused to talk about the matter, knowing better than to be involved in an altercation between a prisoner and staff.

What to do? According to Pete, Nobles was tough, strict on policy, sure of himself, and fair. He probably wouldn't bend. I wrote a diplomatic two-page letter, sharing Erin and Ari’s descriptions and suggesting that “we have a situation of confusion, not at all an incident of intentionally disobeying direct orders from an officer.” I cited Ari’s three years “of loyal volunteer work at the Ryan Facility” and his previous work at the Adrian Temporary
Correctional Facility, all of it with “no history of incidents or complaints.”

As our mission statement (approved by Deputy Director Dan Bolden) says, we train our volunteers to work with the utmost respect for everyone at the facility where they volunteer. That is the training [Ari] received and it has guided his behavior.

I “hoped,” since there had been no previous incident, that Deputy Nobles might see this as an inadvertent situation in which there was misunderstanding. If [Ari] could return, under probation, if that is best, I can guarantee that his incident-free record will continue and he will continue to provide the high quality volunteer work that Mr. Kerr has appreciated in him these several years.

I will follow this letter up with a call. I am very willing to come out and join you and [Ari] (he has volunteered to do this) in a discussion of what occurred, so that he might understand the corrections officer’s perspective in a situation that might have gotten out of control. If I can also be helpful in setting the terms of [Ari]’s return as a volunteer, I will be happy to do so.17

Nobles agreed to my offer to bring Ari in. With Pete present, he lectured Ari on the seriousness of the incident. Ari listened respectfully and took in the lesson. Even though the situation had been new to him, had he been more alert, he would have moved away from the desk area. We were able to negotiate between the two languages, recognize that the prison language must prevail, and gain Ari permission to continue with the workshop.

Generally I have been able to salvage such situations, but not always. Vanessa Mayesky and her partner Kristal, experienced PCAP members, had established a practice of asking in the bubble on the way out if they could carry out an item, putting the decision in the officer’s hands. However, they had not yet asked when an officer discovered in their prop bag two T-shirts, a handmade gift from a prisoner.18 I was able to reduce their termination to a two-month suspension. Unfortunately, Kristal was moving to North Carolina before they would be allowed to resume, and despite my offer to fly her back for the performance, the partners decided not to have the play, much to my regret.19

In other instances, wardens have been unable to reverse a punishment. Anna Clark and her partner brought a copy of a review of the annual exhi-
bition to show the Poets Corner. One of the poets scribbled a note asking Anna to bring in more copies. In the flurry of leaving, Anna and her partner swept the note with other writing props into their bag. On their way in a novice officer had not asked them for a list of props; now, on the way out, a second officer found the note and a bracelet, which she assumed was a gift from the note-writer. The mistake was obvious and we had a program-oriented warden, but her response to my careful, detailed letter was a denial.

But generally I find a way to negotiate between the two languages. What are the elements essential for successful troubleshooting?

A Strong Program

It is important to have done very good work from the beginning, to have a record of responsibility and success. This creates allies within the system who understand what the program does for the incarcerated. They can make a call, intervene, temper, and negotiate on your behalf. From nearly the beginning, we could call Bill Lovett in the Michigan Department of Corrections office and Wardens Luella Burke and Pam Withrow. Bill and Luella joined our first National Advisory Board and gave our annual meeting a tough-minded perspective.

Respect, perspective, and generosity. My first partner in the Sisters Within Theater Troupe, in 1990, saw officers as demons serving an evil system. When they gave her a hard time, she filed grievances, a practice that would have caused a disastrous rupture had she continued in the workshop. Approach the staff as professionals who understand, as many of them do, the reasons for policies and who know the violence latent in prisons. Approach them as professionals who may be flexible and open to discussion, as many of them are. If they are complicit in the normalcy of mass incarceration—which means they are more like the rest of us than we like to think—they may still be professionals, trying to do their work well. It is within their workplace that we have to be strategic in order to keep doing what is so valuable to the men and women caught there.

Gather the full story and all perspectives. Then present a version that is neither belligerent nor arrogant, that both recognizes the system language and conveys the language of the outsider. Admit error. Listen very carefully, nod, and maneuver on behalf of the prisoners and PCAP members and students. Apologize, guarantee it won’t happen again, compromise—which can mean agreeing not to shake hands with prisoners, agreeing to have an
officer in the room or to be on probation or undergo suspension—so that in the end the butterfly can avoid the boot and soar, so that resistance to prison conditions and mass incarceration can continue through the exploration of creativity, voice, collaborative work, and celebration.

Recognize the enemy. One night in September 2007, I dreamed of a spirited rabbit, much like my daughter’s childhood rabbit Timothy who would circle our feet in enthusiastic figure eights. Whoever we were in the dream, we loved this rabbit, because he represented our whimsical fun and our creativity. One evening, I opened a refrigerator and found that someone who hated us had put the rabbit inside, where it was freezing, barely still alive. I took it out and began to nourish it back to health.

The enemy is the one who, for whatever reason, cannot help but freeze the rabbit or stomp the butterfly. Such enemies may work in prisons, as elsewhere; some may even be drawn to prison work.22 I have moments when I am like them.23 I don’t know if they are evil. They may be like the death camp commandants who, George Steiner tells us, could “read Goethe and Rilke in the evening . . . play Bach and Schubert, and go to [their] day’s work at Auschwitz in the morning.”24 But, like those commandants, their work is evil. Their every decision, every word, represents a commitment to limit, clamp down, say no, damage the body, soul, and spirit of others. Elie Wiesel urges us to hate that thing in them that tempts them to destroy others.25 There is reason to avoid thinking in terms of “enemies”, but those under the boot experience enmity. As Lorna Dee Cervantes writes to “the young white man who asked me how I, an intelligent, well-read person could believe in the war between races,”

I believe in revolution
Because everywhere the crosses are burning,
sharp-shooting goose-steppers round every corner,
there are snipers in the schools . . .
(I know you don’t believe this.
You think this is nothing
but faddish exaggeration. But they
are not shooting at you.)

I’m marked by the color of my skin.
The bullets are discrete and designed to kill slowly.
They are aiming at my children.
These are facts.
Let me show you my wounds: my stumbling mind, my “excuse me” tongue, and this nagging preoccupation with the feeling of not being good enough.

These bullets bury deeper than logic.
Racism is not intellectual.
I can not reason these scars away.

Outside my door
there is a real enemy
who hates me.

The rabbit freezers may destroy because they understand from others that that is their job. They may destroy out of theory: prisoners are scum, are dangerous, must be strictly controlled, the goal of prisons is to confine. They may have a vision of good and evil or a personal experience that makes them need always to retaliate, to bully, to get back, to tighten down inside themselves and give nothing. The effect is the same. People whose lives have been punishment from the start continue to be punished and alienated, prone to numbing, acquiescence, anger, and destruction or self-destruction. Many of the incarcerated are resistant and creative, but many succumb.

The enemy identified, what do we do? We continue to communicate with respect. We recognize that somewhere in most people is something that appreciates the dance of the spirit, the laughter and games of children, the new growth of their lawn after a good rain, the blessings at the heart of their faith. And so we seek the language, the entrance, that will get to that spot and enable an opening, a compromise.

That’s first. It isn’t always possible. And so we have to be strategic, find a way around them. The deputy warden at the Western Wayne Correctional Facility did all he could to thwart our work. We had a rich collection of videos of our plays; he forbade further taping. He stalled approving our scenarios and passing them on to his superior, remaining silent or making irrelevant excuses. He lied. And so we phoned the regional office, the regional administrator phoned the warden, and the scenario moved for-
ward. When next the regional administrator and the warden told us to go through channels and he again stalled our next scenario, we phoned the warden on our Advisory Board, she spoke with the warden, the scenario moved forward.

This is very sensitive. It is dangerous to step outside the chain of command on which the volunteer is next link up from the prisoner. It has to be worth it. It has to be important enough. And sometimes it is. In the early days, when we had less understanding, I once went over the head of a warden to the Michigan Department of Corrections deputy director for programs and won, but the undying hostility of the warden later cost us losses. When in 1999 Dan Bolden closed our workshops and we went outside the system to get them back, he never forgave me, but PCAP survived.

THE TWO LANGUAGES

The enemy of the incarcerated also lurks in us, not only when we come abusively—to study the criminal mind, to enhance our resume, to get a grade, to be cool, to feel good about ourselves—but also when we are careless, immature, disrespectful, unprofessional, treating our enemy with hostility, our friends with disregard. So much is at stake that we must merge the two languages. We must be constantly alert at the same time that we are at our most relaxed and creative.

WHAT WE DEFEND

I believe almost everyone who works or lives in a prison hits moments when they are terribly hurt by what they see and experience, when the concertina wire rips at them and the walls turn steel cold, when they become worn and can’t see their way out. And then:

Eric Shieh, a highly talented student from the School of Music, began in a youth facility in English 310, then, in PCAP, initiated a music workshop at the Parr Highway Correctional Facility. On December 4, 2003, he sent Professor Betty Ann Younker, myself, and some of his friends a message:

Just wanted to drop an e-mail and let you know this evening in Adrian was one of those life-defining moments in my career as an educator. Basically, about half an hour into the workshop, nothing was going right in generating
this piece of music, we had hit a wall—and I did a big teacher no-no—and sat down and admitted I had no idea where to go with the project.

Then one of the guys asked if he could suggest something. Then another. That’s when everybody started talking, arguing, and making suggestions. Pretty soon, we were trying out ideas and started moving forward again on the project—only this time everyone was on the same page. Afterwards a lot of people said to Suzanne and myself they felt today we had laid a foundation and they could see where we were headed. I myself felt I came to understand music and where it comes from at a much closer level.

It’s funny—I had been trying so hard to make sure there wasn’t a dull moment, and though all the musical ideas had come from within the group, I had kind of been talking over the silences and leading the generation of the piece. I realized when Suzanne and I finally shut up that much of the workshop had been a guessing game of where Suzanne and I were “going”—and thus some people were confused about what had been going on. In a sense, we had been silencing them. How easy it was to fall back on and get forced into this kind of work! But once we stood back and showed we had no more idea than they—well they took charge. “I feel you’ve been trying to orchestrate this thing” said one of the guys to me in the middle of the discussion. “We should be doing it.” How embarrassing. And how right. I’m just glad these people were free enough to say that, and I had the opportunity to be showed that.

In a way, learning begins where the teaching ends.29

In 1999 Tracy Neal wrote in the autobiographical statement she submitted with her art for the Fourth Annual Exhibition of Art by Michigan Prisoners,

I have beaded, painted, and glued with sadness and anger hovering all around me . . .

Sometimes while I worked on “One Long Journey,” I felt as if I were in a trance or somewhere else. One day I was working so diligently that I didn’t hear the officer gruff my name over the loud speaker. When someone tapped me on the shoulder to get my attention, I felt as if I were being placed back inside of myself after standing on top of a mountain. I was gon’.

This project means so very much to me. It means so much because it is me. I have taken handfuls of my soul and shown you what it looks like and feels like. Can you feel me? “One Long Journey” represents how I have
taken it upon myself to rise from rock bottom. It represents each and every woman that has been incarcerated, that is incarcerated, and will be incarcerated. It’s not just about Tracy Neal. It’s about a young woman, an old woman, a black woman, a white woman, a red woman, a brown woman. It’s about a human being. It’s about human beings. IT’S ABOUT HUMAN BEINGS. IT’S ABOUT HUMAN BEINGS. IT’S ABOUT HUMAN BEINGS.

We placed her statement on the gallery wall.