be, happening), we should acknowledge upfront the way the best prisons are actually run, and create sentencing practices that provide support and scope for meaningful action.

Postscript

I can't help but hear the lament of penitentiary-advocate George Washington Smith, when he confronted the actual horrors of solitary confinement and understood how his imagined heaven had created a hell: “the kind accents of mercy were never heard; the mild tones of persuasion, the language of earnest expostulation.”91 Like his vision of prison as a garden of calm, safe communion with God, the ideal I seek requires a form of love that cannot be institutionalized by rule. Perhaps my hoping for a “college in prison” ideal is as foolish as Smith’s assumption that solitary confinement as penitence could be institutionalized without the horrors of “the hole.” Perhaps “sentencing as service” cannot be other than another round of slavery, another iteration of the violence of Foucauldian discipline. Perhaps it is always the case that what is intended as a reform becomes a new form of oppression. And then the new form of oppression must be reformed again. We are human, living in time from memory to expectation, and therefore we must approach any attempt at atonement (whether individual or institutional) with humility, acknowledging that we will fail and must continue to try and to try again. We will never get it right, but maybe the fact that we keep trying is itself a form of compassion for suffering that helps keep institutions human, and, one hopes, humane.

91. Smith, A Defence of the System of Solitary Confinement, 36.