

Chapter 3

Dismantling Cultural Walls: Peace Through Stories, Ritual, Community, and Action

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ABSTRACT

Stories are powerful means of building relationships among people. When human beings feel connected, community is formed. The author, an Assistant Professor of Theology, examines the potential for dismantling cultural walls through her theology course, Faith Behind Bars, via letter-writing as sources of transformative narratives, circles as means of critical reflection, and community-building as a key predecessor to activism. Stories, rituals within peace circles, and the strength of kinship bind learners in the class to one another and community members in shared comprehension of injustices and the desire to change systems. It is a spirit of compassion and investment in relationships that spurs people to act as peacebuilders, both independently and collectively. Experiences, connection, and knowledge all contribute to a responsive and practical theology that is relevant and contributes to building peace and nurturing justice.

CREATING COMMUNITY WITHIN AND BEYOND THE CLASSROOM

To arrive at functional and healthy community, the first task becomes naming the barriers and walls which divide individuals and groups, both physically and metaphorically. Undesirable narratives centered on fear and difference are dominant at this time in history, and arguably they always have been, but over time the person or people to be feared or excluded has changed. In the United States, African Americans and Native Americans have carried this cross of being demonized far longer and more deeply than most others. They have been seen as ‘savages,’ ‘animals,’ subhuman. More recently, Mexicans and Mexican Americans have been categorized as ‘rapists’ and ‘drug lords’ while Muslims, en masse, were saddled with the label of ‘terrorist,’ before but particularly after the events of 9/11. These ethnic and religious communities have been painted as dangerous to the physical well-being of presumably law-abiding,

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white people, and a threat to the latter's way of life. Particularly painful depictions of whole groups of people have endured because of racism, a structure which deems who will have, who will lead and who will become whole...and who will not.

In an effort to dismantle walls which are inherently racist and manage to 'other' vast portions of U.S. populations, a course was created at Lewis University in Romeoville, Illinois near Chicago to challenge presumptions about people who are imprisoned and build bridges of kinship between college students and incarcerated persons. Viewing this class as a case study, the power of story, engagement with circles, and participation in the dynamism of community building are proposed as means of stimulating action toward justice and peacebuilding.

Through weekly correspondence, interface with religious, historical, and sociological texts, attention to narratives of those intimately tied to the prison system, and ongoing critical reflection, students are invited to modify the lenses through which they view people who are 'locked up' and the systems which confine them. In this manner, bridges of kinship are formed which have the potential to grow attitudes and behaviors rooted in mercy and just action.

Practicing Faithful Justice: Faith Behind Bars is a theology course in which students employ praxis through authentic stories, reflective ritual, and strategic community-building which collectively inspire them to take steps toward confronting the injustices inherent in the U.S. and Illinois prison systems. In this course, students and prisoners exchange life *stories* via correspondence, a unique but powerful form of community engaged learning. The human reality that the letters reveal is transformative for both students and prisoners in numerous ways. Additionally, students enrich their knowledge and experience through narratives of people outside of prison walls who have been connected to the prison system through previous incarceration, legal defense and activism on behalf of prisoners, or personal association with someone behind bars.

Throughout the semester, students participate in *peace circles*, rooted in indigenous rituals, which deepen reflection about engagement with people behind bars and grow relationships among course participants. Through course discussions, readings, speakers, and reflective circles, students gain an enhanced understanding of Catholic social teaching, the history of U.S. prisons, related sociological issues, and inconsistencies between political rhetoric and the efficacy of incarceration. Unlike many university classrooms, this course invites students, instructor, and prisoners (from afar) to *form community*, for it is through relationships that people are inspired to grow compassion and work for change. Community fosters a sense of agency. One response to learning in this course is that students connect with legislators through advocacy letters. Political leaders need to be nudged to promote common sense reforms for the common good. This act of civic engagement extends individual and political consciousness of human interdependence.

WALLS BETWEEN US

There is nothing vague or illusory about the very real walls and divisions highlighted and discussed in the theology course *Practicing Faithful Justice: Faith Behind Bars*. Just down the road from Lewis University where it is offered, a massive collection of brick structures surrounded by coils of razor wire house prisoners in a system with bars, locks, and iron restraints. The physical structure literally walls off some people in society from others, purportedly to protect the community from dangerous criminals. But prisons and jails also divide families and mete out punishment, much of it degrading and demoralizing.

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