Light from the Darkness

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Over the years, I have become increasingly struck by the way in which certain prisoners achieve genuine spiritual development. This applies to both the Death Row prisoners and the prisoners in this country with whom I have come into contact over the past twelve or so years. This process of light coming out of the darkness seems to me to go to the very core of the teachings of the world's great faiths.

The first time that the notion of light coming out of the darkness was really borne in upon me was in November 1988, when I met Leo Edwards on Death Row in Mississippi. In the course of our hour-long meeting he suddenly said to me: "You know, I thank God for being here." I thought I had misheard, but he explained that his seven years on Death Row had been the first period of real stability in his life, and that it had, in his words, brought him "an appreciation of life and of love that he had never had before." Six months later he was dead. Many other prisoners, in both the US and this country, have told me too that they are grateful to have been imprisoned.

The idea that humanity, compassion and insight could come out of intense suffering marked the commencement of my involvement with prisoners. In 1987, I happened to see the BBC documentary *Fourteen Days in May*, about the execution of a young black man in Mississippi. At 10 pm, two hours before the execution, a middle-aged black man said through the bars of his cell and with tears in his eyes, "All of us here are dying tonight, a part of us. The world thinks of us as vicious and cruel, but this is worse than anything anyone could ever do."

It was that same man, Sam Johnson, who could write about having to "reach up to touch bottom" but had not lost his faith in God, and who said that after initially being full of hatred and anger at what had happened to him, "it dawned upon me that I had to stop thinking about all I had lost and start thinking about what I could gain, even from the worst of situations a person could be in."

Many correspondents in LifeLines [*see* "About the Author" (inside back cover) - *Ed.*] marvel at how much the

dregs of society with whom they correspond so often seem to give them far more than they feel they are able to give the prisoner. Many correspondents see prisoners grow and change over time, discovering strengths and depths they never knew they had. And not infrequently they see prisoners discover a totally new religious faith in their lives.

I can think of a number of men who grew enormously in stature, and were respected by other prisoners and guards alike, and whose execution was regarded as a shocking travesty by all concerned. One example is Jonathan Nobles, executed in 1998 at the age of 37. A former drug addict with a terrible childhood history of sexual abuse and suicide attempts – the first at the age of five – he came across to his pen pal, Pam Thomas, at the start of the correspondence as a violent and angry man. Over the nine years, he began to display intense remorse and to open up. He converted to Roman Catholicism.

> He had reached out way beyond me and my small imagination, to communicate with people all over: from prisoners on Death Row, to a bishop in northern Texas, to Steve (whom he had helped to rehabilitate from a heroin addiction – Jonathan from inside the prison, and Steve from the outside), to the victim's mother to whom he was trying to bring peace. He had turned the tragedy of his life into a triumph from his small cell on Death Row.

At Jonathan's funeral, Bishop Carmody spoke of Jonathan's extraordinary spiritual growth and his transformation from the angry, frightened sinner who had arrived on Death Row to becoming a third-order Dominican. He said how much the other clergy had learned from him, and also said that when it came to his turn to die, he hoped he could do half as well as Jonathan.

Unquestionably the most striking instance of a profound religious experience on Death Row I have come across

concerns Mike Lambrix in Florida. Before he was sentenced to death at the age of 23 (in 1983), Mike was a fairground operator who had left school at 15. After we had been corresponding for about five years, Mike wrote that he had had a vision of all-encompassing light on the morning of the day in 1988 when he thought he was going to be executed. It was also the one thing he wanted to talk about most when we met in June 1999. He said that "the light was outside me, but it was also inside me. It was a light, and yet again it wasn't a light; I could see it and yet I couldn't see it," (the guards watching over him in the same cell didn't notice anything). The word Mike kept using over and over again to describe the experience was "tranquillity." And a sense of oneness.

In his letter, he wrote how:

> For me that's the day God died for me ... prior to that throughout my entire life I always felt a personal interconnection with God, even when I turned my back on Him. But not after that experience ... Our 'personal' God is a reflection of our spiritual selfishness and as long as we want to possess it then we are limited in our growth and perception of collectiveness.
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> Suffice to say that I reached a point of absolute bottom. My faith in God had even reached a point of abandonment. Maybe I'll never really fully understand that unique experience. But to this day I remain completely convinced that it was of spiritual origin. And that it wasn't simply the perception of a light, but a spiritual entity that had *substance* to it, as defined by what I *felt*. That microsecond – or perhaps momentary eternity (as seemingly conflicting as that might sound) of absolute tranquillity simply was not something I generated. To this day, I cannot find words to describe it. And I really can't imagine ever finding appropriate words. What I felt in that instant was more than mere tranquillity – it was more like

> having an absolute knowledge of God Himself, far beyond the faith that we so desperately cling to.
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> It's not about a condemned man facing imminent execution, but of God's love so all-consuming that he remains present even among the lowest of the low... Consistently, it has always been only when man has been beaten or broken that God has found it possible to use him. And I truly was beaten and broken, and abandoned beyond comprehension.

During the five years in which I was Quaker Prison Minister at Littlehey Prison in Cambridgeshire, I came across a number of instances bearing an unmistakable resemblance to these experiences on Death Row. One day, a Turkish-Cypriot called Erkan – brought up as a Moslem – came to our Quaker Meeting. He told us how when he had been first imprisoned on remand for drug trafficking, he found himself in his cell in black despair. It was the lowest point of his life. Suddenly, he felt a sense of light, like two great beams in his chest. He said the light was "inside me, but also outside me." He felt a pervasive sense of total certainty that all would be well. That feeling never left him, and was what gave him the strength to cope with the prison experience. (Erkan joined the Society of Friends, has since been released, has a job and continues to draw great strength from that moment.)

Another prisoner, David, also had an experience of being enveloped in light, except that for him, the experience was to begin with one filled with awe and even fear. Gradually, however, this changed into a benign sense; and again, it was a critical turning point in his life. Afterwards he wanted to shout out in the corridors what had happened to him, but somehow refrained!

A similar example was that of Albert "Racehoss" Sample, who served 17 years in a Texas jail for armed robbery. His mother was a prostitute, and was run out of town by the Ku Klux Klan when Racehoss was six. He didn't see her again until he was ten. He slept under pool tables and was befriended by an alcoholic.

Toward the end of his sentence, he was thrown into a punishment cell. In those days that meant a cup of water and half a piece of bread a day. The prisoner generally spent five days in solitary.

As he sat down on the concrete slab he put his face in his hands and, for the first time in prison, wept. He could feel the tears bouncing off the concrete floor onto his feet. "God," he said, "help me." Suddenly, within his palms, the dark cell became as bright as day, and he felt a sense of love such as he had never felt before. The experience changed his life.

Long spells of imprisonment either destroy a person's sense of self and equilibrium or force them to go deep inside themselves. The chaplain at Littlehey, Richard Bunyan, would often remark on the disproportionate number of lifers who attended our Quaker meetings. For some, as with Erkan and David, the experience was involuntary, a kind of visitation; but for others it was something they had worked on hard and consciously, within a Christian framework.

Take Pat. At Littlehey Prison he had come across some other prisoners who radiated something special. They included serious offenders who had been inside for many years. They could not really explain what had happened to them, but said they had been touched by the "Holy Spirit." Normally he would have scoffed, but these were people he respected and liked.

One evening he called them together. "Lads," he said, "I don't know what this Holy Spirit thing is, but I am going to be praying between 8 and 9 in my cell this evening. Will you all pray for me too?" They said they would.

Pat prayed between 8 and 9. Nothing happened. A little after 9 p.m. he gave up, and decided to round off with a spot of meditation, which he had been practising. He gave the lotus position his best shot and centred down. Then, to his astonishment, he felt a sensation whereby all the disturbance and darkness lifted out of his body, to be replaced by a wonderful sense of bliss and calm. This lasted for about two hours.

Discussing this some time later, Pat spoke of the intertwining of dark and light and about accepting ourselves and our weaknesses, about the importance of small gestures of kindness, about the good that Jesus saw in the publicans and harlots. Above all, he spoke of what Jesus could mean in someone's life: not a saviour wiping away sins, not some outside prop, but a living inner force, the embodiment of the inward light.

Pat's experience was set in the framework of Christianity. In any British prison library one finds the same books of remarkable conversions – *Prison to Praise* by Merlin Carothers, *Breakout* by Fred Lemon, *Holes in Time* by Frank Constantino, *Full Pardon* by the former IRA terrorist Billy McFetridge. The most famous is probably the case of Charles Coulson, the former special assistant to President Nixon. In *Born Again* and *Life Sentence* Coulson compellingly sets out his religious journey after being a political hit-man.

Prisoners' conversions to Christianity run the full span from overwhelming, unsought, mystical and life-changing experiences to conversions of convenience, in which prisoners try to better their lot by claiming that they have seen the light. It is not, however, for us to stand in judgment on people's experiences, particularly when some – like Coulson's – are so patently genuine. Nor should we be cynical when people turn to literalist interpretations of Christianity in order to make sense of their experiences; we all need a frame of reference, and some have more need for structure and a definite framework than others.

Frank Constantino was a gangster in the 1960s with a record of appalling violence stopping just short of murder. The turning point for this hard-headed, cynical man came in a prison chaplain's office: a "great kind of peace and quiet was beginning to pour down around my shoulders and surround me and I knew I was face to face with God, even if I didn't understand Him and couldn't see Him." On release from prison he became an ordained minister and full-time prison evangelist.

Or Christianity may provide a framework, a way in. James Maudsley, released from prison in Burma in late 2000, spoke of his experience as follows on Radio 4:

> I was given a Bible. I was so thirsty for reading material that I read it from cover to cover. It gave me immense strength – it struck me this is truth, this is absolute truth. We're told in the Bible not to fear man, not to fear what man can do to you; fear God, not man. And somehow it worked. I experienced then the very real feeling of overwhelming love, like a bubbling up with joy, that you're completely secure. It was odd – I'd gone from hell to heaven in this prison cell. Even things like food and clothes and how hard's your bed – they just don't matter. It was a joy to breathe, it was a joy to wake up.

In 1998 in Dublin I met an Irish nurse, Monica Hall, who had been imprisoned 10 years before on a trumped-up charge in Saudi Arabia and faced possible execution. She writes:

> I had been in prison four months, when, very early one November morning I was scrubbing our walking area. Something caught my attention and I looked up. Suddenly I was rooted to the spot as I watched the first fingers of light slowly creep up the prison wall. Transfixed, I watched, as a new day dawned with absolute precision. The ordinary had become the extraordinary, what I had always taken for granted now left me in stunned silence.
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> The moment I realised I had found that elusive quality I had searched fourteen and a half years and four continents for, came when about ten months in prison. It was before noon, I was alone in the room I shared with 13 others and it was *hot*.

> Sitting cross-legged on the ground by my bunk I thought about what I could call my own at that moment. The clothes I wore were not mine, it seemed I had no control over any aspect of my life... At the bottom of my bed was a plastic container, which held my few precious books and booklets that had come from home. Looking at them, I realised they were all I could call my own at that moment. As that awareness dawned, a tremendous surge of liberation welled within me, tears poured down my face, and I knew – though I had to be publicly stripped of everything first – at last I had found what I had been hankering after for so long. I wanted to shout from the mosque minarets, 'I've found it, I've found it, the Pearl of Great Price... it was here, within me all the time!'

Another example of a person discovering an inner serenity at the lowest point in their life is Oscar Wilde. In *De Profundis* he writes:

> I bore up against everything with some stubbornness of will and much rebellion of nature till I had absolutely nothing left in the world but Cyril. I had lost my name, my position, my happiness, my freedom, my wealth. I was left a prisoner and a pauper. But I still had one beautiful thing left, my own eldest son. Suddenly he was taken away from me by the law. It was a blow so appalling that I did not know what to do, so I flung myself on my knees, and bowed my head, and wept and said "The body of a child is as the body of the Lord: I am not worthy of either." That moment seemed to save me. I saw then that the only thing for me was to accept everything. Since then – curious as it will no doubt sound to you – I have been happier.

> It was of course my soul in its ultimate essence that I had reached. In many ways I had been its enemy, but I had found it waiting as a friend.[1]

People can have life-changing religious experiences in all sorts of extreme circumstances – even concentration camps. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, whose experiences in a Nazi concentration camp were to have such a profound effect on liberal Protestant theology, returned over and over again to the verse in Jeremiah 45: "For behold I am bringing evil upon all flesh, says the Lord; but I will give you your life as a prize of war in all places to which you may go." "It is only then," Bonhoeffer writes, "that we feel how closely our lives are bound up with other people's, and in fact how the centre of our own lives is outside ourselves and how little we are separate entities." In autumn 1944 he writes, "It is only by living completely in this world that one learns to have faith... In so doing we throw ourselves completely into the arms of God, taking seriously, not our own sufferings but those of God in the world." Living in imprisonment he had, as Heinrich Ott puts it, "that quite palpable sense of solidarity with men outside."[2]

Another famous account of life in a concentration camp – this time by a survivor – is that of Viktor Frankl. He writes, "In spite of all the enforced physical and mental primitiveness of the life in a concentration camp, it was possible for spiritual life to deepen. Sensitive people... were able to retreat from their terrible surroundings to a life of inner riches and spiritual freedom."[3]

In an astonishingly moving passage, Frankl writes how they were digging a trench in the grey dawn.

> In a last violent protest against the hopelessness of imminent death, I sensed my spirit piercing through the enveloping gloom. I felt it transcend that hopeless, meaningless world, and from somewhere I heard a victorious "Yes" in answer to my question of the existence of an ultimate purpose. At

> that moment a light was lit in a distant farmhouse, which stood on the horizon as if painted there, in the midst of the miserable grey of a dawning morning in Bavaria. "*Et lux in tenebris lucet*"

– and the light shineth in the darkness. He strongly feels the presence of his beloved wife, then, unknown to Frankl, already dead; "she was *there*. Then, at that very moment, a bird flew down silently and perched just in front of me, on the heap of soil which I had dug up from the ditch, and looked steadily at me."[4]

Another remarkable story of a concentration camp survivor is that of the Frenchman Jacques Lusseyran, blinded by an accident at the age of eight. Far from experiencing the accident as a disaster, Lesseyran developed a kind of inner sight which was a great joy. "I began ... looking from an inner place to one further within. I felt indescribable relief, and happiness so great it almost made me laugh.

"I was not light myself, I knew that, but I bathed in it as an element which blindness had suddenly brought much closer. I could feel light rising, spreading, resting on objects, giving them form, then leaving them."[5]

Even when incarcerated in Buchenwald (for working in the resistance) at the age of 20, "I was never entirely bereft of joy. Joy I found even in strange byways, in the midst of fear itself."[6] In 1944, he developed pleurisy, dysentery and an infection in both ears, and was left to die. And yet he is able to say that in the face of death, "I had never lived so fully before. Life had become a substance within me. It broke into my cage, pushed by a force a thousand times stronger than I. It came towards me like a shimmering wave, like the caress of light. It touched me and filled me to overflowing. I let myself float upon it."[7]

Out of this, he writes, "I could try to show other people how to go about holding on to life. I'd turn towards them the flow of light and joy which had grown so abundant in me. From that time on they stopped stealing my bread or my

soup. Often my comrades would wake me up in the night and take me to comfort someone."[8]

Researchers at the Yale School of Medicine in the US "have been impressed by the number of prisoners of war of the Vietnam war who explicitly claimed that although their captivity was extraordinarily stressful – filled with torture, disease, malnutrition, and solitary confinement – they nevertheless... benefited from the captivity experience, seeing it as a growth experience."[9]

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What can we say about these experiences? First of all, I think we must accept them as real. They bear the unmistakable hallmarks of classical mystical experience, such as an inability to put things into words, and a sense of oneness and an ultimately benign universe. It is on such mystical experiences that all the world's great faiths are founded (however they may have been corrupted by followers since then).

Secondly, the prison experiences are born out of suffering. They happen when people are brought low; when the ego is, as it were, knocked aside, and the individuals in question achieve a direct, unbidden apprehension of something greater beyond themselves. This goes to the core of the teaching of the great faiths: that we must overcome our sense of identification with our false selves, to merge with the greater whole. It is noteworthy that the means of overcoming or taming the ego often involve self-denial, discipline, renunciation and self-mortification.

The great difference between the prison experience and that of "ordinary" mystics is, of course, that it is *involuntary*. The prisoner may be in a "cell," but not with the monastic intent of enlightenment and exploration of the divine will. One of the great difficulties with the spiritual quest in ordinary life is that it is, often, ultimately ego-driven – that is, it is the ego which is trying to achieve the illumination. The ego keeps asking "How am I doing? How close am I to God?

What else could I try?" – so that overcoming the ego to find the way to the whole is intensely difficult. Prison can, as it were, be a rather brutal short-cut to that state.

So there are great parallels between what can happen in prison and the essential teachings of the great religions. In that sense, we may also draw great comfort from the experiences that some people have in prison, for they bear out the truth of the core religious message in the most graphic and persuasive way, while also showing that such enlightenment is open not just to the saints of this world but to ordinary mortals with all sorts of failings – to us all.

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Endnotes:

1. Oscar Wilde, *The Soul of Man and Prison Writings*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 114.

2. Heinrich Ott, *Reality and Faith, the Theological Legacy of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (London, 1971), p. 18

3. Viktor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, (1972) p.55.

4. *Ibid.*, pp. 60-61

5. Jacques Lusseyran, *And There was Light* (Edinburgh, 1963), p. 10

6. *Ibid.*, p. 237.

7. *Ibid.*, pp. 220-221.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 222

9. W.H. Sledge, J.A. Boydstun and A.J. Rabe, "Self-concept Changes Related to War Captivity," *Arch. Gen. Psychiatry*, 37 (1980), pp. 430-443.

About the Author

Jan Arriens is a British Quaker of Dutch descent. After 10 years as a diplomat in the Australian Foreign Service, he has since been a self-employed translator. In 1988 he set up LifeLines, a UK-based organisation whose members correspond with prisoners on Death Row in the US. "Welcome to Hell" (edited letters from Death Row prisoners) was published by North-eastern University Press, Boston, in 1997. A children's story, "The Knight and the Candle Flame", was published by Sessions of York in 2000.

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