

Reflections On My Day in a Prison by Marilyn Kendrix

On November 6, 2012, my Institute of Sacred Music colloquium partner, Amanda and I attended a three-hour music class at a Massachusetts state prison. The class was part of Boston University's Prison Education program and the student inmates were taking it as an elective in a General Studies Bachelor's degree program. Amanda and I had sought an invitation to accompany the two regular professors, Andre De Quadros and Jamie Hillman into the prison that day and were approved to enter as guest instructors.

Driving up to the prison on a crisp, clear day in November, I was surprised that I did not feel any real apprehension. My partner, Amanda had just admitted to me that she was feeling a little frightened about what was coming and I realized in that moment that I was not feeling any fear myself. While I had never been inside a prison before and had only what I had seen in the movies to inform me about what I might expect, I had assumed that the majority of the inmates would be young black men and somehow, that assumption, I believe, created the calm that I was feeling. After all, I reasoned, in a society where too many young black men are imprisoned for relatively minor offenses, any one of these prisoners could be my son. Once inside the prison lobby, however my calm feelings fled, as we were confronted with what seemed to be unreasonable prison guards, using the power they had to clearly demonstrate to us who was in charge. Still I was not frightened, only very annoyed in a situation where I understood that showing annoyance would only make things worse.

Being required to remove stud earrings and leave them, along with gloves and scarf in a small locker felt like the beginning of a dehumanization process that seemed to me to be a part of the prison ethos. This coupled with the requirement to leave the photographs that my partner had brought to share with the class resulted in a delay of about 35 minutes making us significantly late to the music class we were scheduled to attend. Our lateness meant that we missed an opportunity to be introduced to each of the students, as the class was underway when we arrived. If stepping into the prison had seemed like a dehumanizing experience, stepping into

the classroom seemed so very familiar. Inside a building that is only used for education, the classroom seemed like any other classroom one might find in a university, albeit one without any electronic equipment available. We joined the circle of men, who were engaged in singing together when we arrived. I was immediately struck with how normal all these men appeared. Young and middle aged, mostly white with a few Asians and Hispanics sprinkled among them, the demographic in the room immediately complicated my expectation around what the population inside the prison walls would look like. Indeed, there were only three African American students in the room. I am curious about the demographics of the entire prison and whether this voluntary educational program accurately reflects the prison population at large.

My surprise about who was in the room was immediately exceeded by what was going on. All of the students were engaged, singing in a group in full voice. Obviously curious about us upon our entrance, they seemed happy to wait until later in the class period to hear a little about Amanda and me. We joined the circle and sang along as Andre and Jamie lead the singing, often in a call and response format. I was curious to see how they would respond when Andre asked us to hold hands in order to facilitate the physical experience of the musical beat. Much to my surprise, there did not seem to be any discomfort or reluctance to hold hands. We continued to sing, being led by Andre, but in a way in which leadership seemed almost like a suggestion. It was obvious that the participants were having fun and that this singing was for them an opportunity to tap into some inner realm where the individual meets the collective, to create music together.

While singing in a circle in this way was a group project that required us to work together, Andre's next instruction created an intimate experience within the group work. We were asked to pair up and with one person facing into the circle and the other member of the pair facing out, we were asked to look at one another, paying attention not only to one's own singing but also to the singing of the other person. I was paired with a large [REDACTED] man with clear blue eyes and as we sang, we held each other's eyes in a way that felt like a getting to know someone without actually trading stories at all. I had no idea why this man might be in prison

and in that moment, it did not seem to matter at all. I was sharing a moment with another human being and it felt to me like a sacred moment in which forgiveness and understanding was possible. As we were asked to sing a round, the inner circle and the outer circle starting at a different time, the experience changed into mutual delight, as we were both amused by our inability to stay on our own parts. I know that I failed at being able to sing my part while watching him sing his and I know he struggled too, resulting in both of us smiling at our own failure. Somehow, joining with him in that failure seemed to connect us even more than did singing together successfully.

The trust in the room was obvious in the singing, holding hands and rhythmically moving together but it was not until Andre instructed the group to write a second stanza of a song that we had learned together that another level of trust was made obvious to me. Suggesting to us that the song was telling a story, Andre asked each of us to write the next part of the story in a second stanza. Each of these men did indeed write a second verse and when they took turns singing their original verses, it became even more evident that there was trust among this group of people. The words written by quite a few of these men often did not maintain the appropriate A-B-A-B rhyming structure, they often failed at keeping to the meter and much of the singing was off key yet they sang their songs. Each person was afforded a level of attentive respect during his rendition that felt like an atmosphere of mutual support that I did not expect to find behind prison walls. Even more than that, though, were the heartfelt words, words that evoked longing and loneliness, missing loved ones and hopefulness for a happy ending. These men were willing, inside this classroom, to unashamedly share a piece of themselves with one another. I was impressed with the culture that had been created in this group and have rarely experienced such trust and support in a normal college classroom.

Since leaving the prison that day, I have looked back on this experience and one image that has come to me concerning that time is the idea of Sabbath. Sabbath, in the Christian understanding of the term, refers to a respite, a time of rest from the normal exigencies of life. This classroom, this 3-hour music class seemed to me to be a time when these prisoners were provided with Sabbath. If their normal

existence was one of mind deadening routine, this class provided surprise. If their lives were filled with sadness, this class provided joy. If their time outside the education building was devoid of spirit-filled human contact, this class created a structure where such sharing of mutual humanity could happen naturally. If one's idea of prison is a place of unrelenting punishment, this class did not live up to that prison ethos. But, if prison is meant to help broken lives find ways to live toward healing, this class certainly contributed to that.

Marilyn Kendrix completed her undergraduate studies at Spelman College in Atlanta, Georgia. Going on to a career in the business world, Marilyn earned both an MBA and Master's of Industrial/Organizational Psychology from the University of New Haven. She is currently a Master of Divinity candidate at Yale University.