

No Exit?

Two million people are in prison in the US. The majority of them are black. This is slavery in a new form, as is the scandalous quality of the educational resources meted out to the heirs of *Brown v. Board of Education*. The attack on freedom and the attack on literacy are, of course, related. Many thousands have gone the way of incarceration, and few have ever had the experience of a decent school.

Many, far too many, of our urban schools resemble prisons. Visit one of these schools and you will see how children's dreams are killed at an early age. Dreams are killed by educators who sometimes do not love the children they have promised to educate. Dreams are killed by an education-industrial complex that too often creates conditions that make such love almost impossible to imagine. Dreams are killed as an ever-more colorlined nation abandons the twin dreams of education and emancipation altogether.

Many, far too many, of these dreamless children find themselves leaving their loveless schools only to land in prison. Our failing schools, like our failing prisons, are overwhelmingly and unconscionably black. Failure of the school and failure of the prison together create the colorline. The new slavery—linked to the old by the colorline—is the product of this two-stranded failure.

Failing schools produce illiteracy just as surely as failing prisons produce recidivism. The failure of these institutions always seems to escape serious examination. In the antebellum South the dream of the literate slave was always emancipation just as the dream of the emancipated slave was always literacy. Reading and freedom have always been connected in the minds of former slaves and slavemasters in the US. Witness the trials and tribulations of Frederick Douglass. Our schools fail. Our prisons fail. The former produces illiteracy while the latter produces recidivism and both kill dreams of an emancipated future in the US. When institutions fail year after year we must reexamine what we mean by failure. When the reformers respond to this year's failure with last year's failed solutions we must reexamine what we mean by reform. These failed prisons, these failed schools, and all these failed, recycled reforms actually succeed in continuing the colorline's division of the US into two nations: black and white, separate and unequal. And there seems to be no exit from this cycle.

What is to be done?

Turn the prisons into schools.

We can begin by reforming the probation system. This is being done in Dorchester, Massachusetts. Since 1994, we have conducted a literature program for men and women who have been convicted in the Dorchester District Court for various offenses.

The Dorchester experiment is part of a statewide program called "Changing Lives Through Literacy," founded by English Professor Robert Waxler of the University of Massachusetts at Dartmouth and Judge Robert Kane '72.

by

Anthony Paul Farley

THE READING LIST

King James Version,
The Gospel According to Matthew

Frederick Douglass,
Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass

W. E. B. DuBois,
The Souls of Black Folk

Booker T. Washington,
Up from Slavery

Henry McGuckin,
Memoirs of a Wobbly

Dorothy Day,
From Union Square to Rome

Jeanne Wakatsuki-Houston,
A Farewell to Manzanar

Primo Levi,
Survival in Auschwitz

Elie Weisel,
Night

James Baldwin,
Notes of a Native Son

Malcolm X
(with Alex Haley),
The Autobiography of Malcolm X

Ray Bradbury,
The Martian Chronicles

Ursula K. LeGuin,
The Wind's Twelve Quarters

Derrick Bell,
Faces at the Bottom of the Well

Subcomandante Marcos of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation,
"Chiapas: The South-east in Two Winds"

The Dorchester players include Judges Sydney Hanlon and Thomas May; Probation Officers John Christopher, Deirdre Kennedy, Yvonne Nelson, John Owens, Theresa Owens, and James "Bobby" Spencer; along with English Professors Ann Murphy of Assumption College and Taylor Stochr of the University of Massachusetts at Boston, and myself. In addition, a number of Boston College Law School students like Gretchen Hunt '99 have distinguished themselves as program facilitators over the years.

The program has been an outstanding success.

Most of the participants experienced the program as the first time they ever read a book from cover to cover. Many have confessed to me their late realization that reading could be liberating and enjoyable. They speak of joy in discovering the pleasures of the written word and of anger that the doorway to the world's imagination, the book, was hidden from them in school. They look back in anger at the ways in which they both failed in school and were failed by their schools. They realize ways their schools succeeded in causing them to fail themselves. They realize, more importantly, that they can read and that they have ideas about great literature. And this causes them to look forward with hope.

At the end of each term we hold a graduation ceremony in the district court. The graduates invite their families and friends. Most years, one or more of the graduates gives a short valedictory speech to the audience. Each graduate is named in court and presented with a diploma. Afterwards, everyone joins the judges in chambers for tea.

A literature program is just the beginning. Dorchester is just the beginning. If a university-level literature course can be taught as probation, then anything can be taught anywhere. Probation offices all over the nation can be transformed into schools. Prisons too can be transformed, utterly, into places of elementary, secondary, and university education. And with success in the transformation of our failed prisons into successful schools must come success in our failed schools. Our schools have become prisons. Our prisons, all of them, must be transformed into schools. If this seems like a dream, it is no less real than the collective nightmare we have made of our schools and prisons. If this seems like a dream, it is no less real than the nightmare we will live if our nation remains half-slave and half-free. One program is not enough. All our prisons need to become schools. All our schools need to become limitless palaces worthy of the boundless imaginations of youth. To break the colorline, to save our bodies and souls from the nightmare to come, to renounce the past and create a decent society at long last, we must all join the liberation movement and fight for literacy and emancipation, as for bread and roses. Which side are you on? ■

Associate Professor Anthony Farley was an Assistant US Attorney for the District of Columbia before joining Boston College Law School in 1992.