

Liberated Intellectuals: Placing the Prisons back Inside their Walls

“As I walked out the door toward the gate that would lead to my freedom, I knew if I didn’t leave my bitterness and hatred behind, I’d still be in prison.”

Nelson Mandela

Progress toward a more just world should involve the removal of barriers to improvement for all people who are trying to better themselves, regardless of background. The inability of some people to self-disclose their problems, perhaps who they are or who they were, inhibits the necessary pathway to elucidate more fully who they will become. We all have aspects about ourselves we wish could hide and others we do hide, to varying consequences. There can be no justice, without change, and no change without honesty, and no honesty if the practice of honesty carries penalties. All too often, mistakes are made or circumstances in life nudge individuals down paths later regretted. I know if I do not leave my negativity behind, as Nelson Mandela posits, then I would still be incarcerated. Furthermore, if I cannot be honest about how the carceral system impacted my life, I would still be imprisoned as well. Living a double life, both in academia and without, is just as ruinous as being bitter—and the fear of being outed for my history, is enough to make me still feel like I am in bondage and weighs heavily on my day-to-day life. I know others who think and feel the same, including nearly everyone who is formerly incarcerated.

This ethical dilemma our society faces is whether we will discontinue the perpetuity of holding former criminals guilty after having served their sentences. By removing this governmental mandate to carry the mark of criminal forever, we can begin ending further discrimination leading to dispossession of opportunity. The alternative to this progress is instead for our communities, businesses, and schools to continue regressing, acting as axillaries to the prison system by holding these criminal histories over other heads, thus perpetuating their stigmatization, and creating the feedback loop into criminality. Progress means being free of our pasts which we have paid for, and in this essay, specifically free of the American carceral system which we paid through. This system represents the most powerful, bloated, and codified engine for oppression around the world. It operationalizes across all intersections, yet nonetheless society acquiesces to its mores written in legalese, despite society supposedly fighting for the rights of these oppressed communities affected by it. The carceral system incarcerates an overwhelmingly select few groups which often overlap with one another, ethnically, regionally, and socioeconomically. And as we sit here to deliberate and write essays, speaking of moving forward and progressing, crafting persuasive abstractions toward justice on paper, I cannot help but feel we are almost certainly practicing mere rhetoric and heady, academic trifles if the prison archipelago is consigned to another discussion for yet another day.

I entered academia later in life not for a degree or job, but because I aspire to serve others through knowledge. The ways in which I serve toward a more just world will reflect the challenges I have overcome. The supposed mission of academia is to enlighten higher-education

and the workforce by diversifying its constituency—bringing power to those traditionally without it and to those who have had it stolen away. As I overlap with often unseen groups, I appreciate and support this goal. I am an avid researcher enlivened by evolution and ecology’s intersecting frontiers and in the future, I will pursue a PhD in Ecology and Evolutionary Biology. Though I have this valuable goal, I have faced adversity throughout my life and in academia. The most difficult obstacle I must surpass regularly is my being a formerly incarcerated person. This problem is made more troubling due to its doubled edged nature. Being formerly incarcerated is debilitating when it is known and debilitating when it is not known. We suffer alone or, when we are outed, suffer surrounded. Often in academia, it is forced to be known, and then we are left at the mercy of faceless institutions and imperfect presumptions of individuals.

During my adolescence, negative circumstances, including poverty and instability, created unfavorable outcomes. In my young adulthood these outcomes manifested in nonviolent felonies, and I endured incarcerations. My story in the greater purview of society is not unique. My background is uncommon in academia—especially STEM—and my past sets me at distinct disadvantage. I am allowed to and will apply for Governor’s pardons in December of 2022. I have already successfully published research and am acknowledged in other scholars’ work. Each success stands in contrast to prior homelessness, felonies, and upbringing. I am involved in research and the Ronald E. McNair Scholars. My progress towards the myriad of academic accomplishments serves a double function of guiding me toward my future while freeing me of my past. This past relates to several inequalities which I will address in life, with my ability to do so made fortunate by my progress in university. I have one more task to wrestle with as I become an intellectual. Through being formerly incarcerated, I feel I must address my history, so I can openly serve others, thus embracing a unified path which allows me to serve myself.

In my university there is a theme called the Wisconsin Idea which can be described as using the colleges to impact the nonacademic community. The Wisconsin Idea, in part, aims to help the marginalized and disadvantaged. It aims for and hits this mark from time to time, depending on which organizations and which communities are being incorporated. Former inmates are often ignored by society and by the Wisconsin Idea even though prisons generate inequality across all intersections with copious collateral effects. Wisconsin’s incarceration rate is *five times higher* than the next leading *NATO country* and its prisons are at 113% capacity as of September 2021.¹ The prison population highlights the disparity of ethnic and socioeconomic groups. In Wisconsin, Black people make up 6% of the population, but are 42% of the prison population—America’s largest carceral race discrepancy. Likewise, Wisconsin Blacks and Native Americans are more likely to receive prison sentences than White counterparts.² Criminal justice disproportionately preys on minorities, the poor, homeless, and nonviolent drug offenders.³

Former inmates often have low job prospects and dire educational backgrounds, due to disenfranchisement in public school systems and added biases because of their prior

¹ “Wisconsin Profile,” Prison Policy Initiative, Feb 10, 2022, www.prisonpolicy.org/profiles/WI.html

² “Wisconsin Imprisons,” NPR, Feb 10, 2022, www.wpr.org/wisconsin-imprisons-1-36-black-adults-no-state-has-higher-rate

³ Allison Edwards, Feb 10, 2022, www.americanactionforum.org/press-release/the-links-between-incarceration-and-poverty-in-the-united-states/

incarceration. Half of the formerly incarcerated have only a high school diploma or GED, often earned while imprisoned—and a quarter have neither. In increasingly skillset dominated job markets, education is crucial. In 2019, 37.1% of 25–44-year-olds had a bachelor’s degree⁴ but in 2008 only 4% of prior inmates aged over 24 had earned bachelor’s degrees or more. Fewer than 4% will have graduate degrees. Even 4 years after release and without recidivating, many do not attain further education suggesting that education could profoundly affect life outcomes.⁵ For example, a study from 2007, reported inmates who received education in prison were 43% less likely to recidivate.⁶ These problems are endemic and a more just system would wed these incomprehensible deficits to positive programming, including education, to alleviate the social injuries being suffered and promulgated.

As a formerly incarcerated individual, I face undervalued job possibilities, depauperate housing options, and overall community stigma which has led to a lack of confidence and dignity. The formerly incarcerated live in constant fear of being found out or coming out, and in many ways, I still do. For example, at UW-Waukesha I was initially denied a lab position. Later, while doing for-credit cancer research at UW-Madison’s Hospital, I was denied laboratory access. Each because of my past. Through attentiveness and determination, I managed to make headway in college and now I aspire to be an integrated-intellectual—a scholar combining personal disadvantage with academic ability to diligently address unjust disparities with which I am familiar. Coming out as an integrated-intellectual is a trying ordeal, but worthwhile for the impact I can have on others. I offer a bridge between incarceration and education, and veritable insight into the inner turmoil and unspoken injustices which pervade society. But others need to come forward and, more importantly, they need to be recognized as more than their past.

Mine is an individual problem, but this struggle intersects society and is a multidimensional community challenge that extends beyond any one person or institution. Therefore, it is also a problem that no one person can resolve, but it is something that one person can attempt to address—especially address in their own life. I found some small courage last Fall to proactively propose helping ex-offenders in the proposal Liberated Intellectuals (LI). LI gets inspirations from its partner, the Wisconsin Prison Humanities Project. The nascent plan proposes humanities inspired, higher-learning preparatory seminars, to assist former prisoners in pursuing higher-education applications, to ameliorate adverse experiences, improve opportunities for well-paying jobs, reduce recidivism, and pave the path to college degrees. It is under review for the Wisconsin Idea Fellowship and has already received support from the HEX-U Fellowship. There are multiple partners both in and outside of academia for it and I am excited. LI actuates Wisconsin Idea tenets by expanding educational access, amplifying obscured voices, and helping individuals navigate difficult experiences.

I believe it is necessary to proliferate these types of groups that offer the formerly incarcerated more than work, but in addition the opportunity to serve others while building their self-confidence through education. Currently, there exists a void between the education in the

⁴ Science & Engineering State Indicators, Feb 10, 2022, nces.nsf.gov/indicators/states/indicator/bachelors-degree-holders-per-25-44-year-olds

⁵ “Getting Back on Course,” Prison Policy Initiative, Feb 10, 2022, www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/education.html

⁶ “How effective is correctional education?” Rand Corporation, Feb 10, 2022, www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR564.html

colleges and the education in the prisons, with few organizations helping in between. The current resources of universities should bridge this gap and increase justice. Higher education offers meaningful opportunities not found in disadvantaged situations, but which easily encourage sustained, deep growth. For instance, through LI, I can maturely disclose my history and it is my hope that this opportunity is seized by others who learn how to disclose their own histories appropriately too. Ideally, these groups would impart dignity. The significance of dignity, adjacently related to confidence, are both missing from people burdened by the complex life intertwining with imprisonments. Dignity inspires courage and it is a useful salve for the repercussions of the disadvantaged lives that usually lead up to incarceration. Operating LI inspires me to serve because it affords others similar luxury of opportunity afforded me. It provides the opportunity, if they so choose, of coming out as an integrated-intellectual—addressing their own familiar injustices. Disclosure will be embarrassing and difficult—but so is hiding. By addressing these types of problems, we will gain control of our futures, finally having a say in how others perceive our pasts.

The purpose of this essay is to instill an idea of how to move forward toward a more just world. First, we should create a viable method for the formerly incarcerated to no longer be burdened after they are freed. Secondly, we should question the legitimacy of the largest system of bondage on the planet, which has collateral effects in health, community, future potential, and learning. Third, we should give the chance to be educated. Education is tied to life-outcomes and school creates connections needed to thrive in fields which rely on experience. Education is the most trusted measure to deliver a more just world, and it has profoundly affected me. I wish it to affect others. If I were to encounter this situation again somehow, instead of hiding, or living a double life, I would be more courageous, starting much earlier, and accepting that being proactive is a rare opportunity and not a path in life which I must fear.