

Expressive Arts in Prison

Healing and Self-Discovery at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility

by Steve Podry, with Bobby Blanchard

The Literacy, Education and Parenting program (LEAP) is a family literacy resource at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility in New York state. As program coordinator, I have tried to utilize my background in the arts and as an expressive arts therapist to develop a learning environment that kindles the creative spirit of the women we serve.

The women we serve are mothers. Between 1977 and 2001 the number of women sentenced to prison in the U.S. increased 592%. Currently, there are over 97,000 women in jail, and 75% of those women are mothers. The ripple effect in terms of damaged families and children is an American disaster.

In response, the Children's Center at Beverly Hills emerged over 25 years ago to become a cluster of thirty inmate- and civilian-staffed programs and classes designed to nurture the relationship between children and their incarcerated mothers. One of the Children's Center core endeavors is the Nursery program, which provides an opportunity for incarcerated mothers to follow the love for their new babies as source and guide into new life. Women accepted to the Nursery keep their newborn children with them for up to 18 months. Most are released before this, or soon thereafter. LEAP is the family literacy and learning resource center for the Nursery community.

Prison amounts to a life-quake, a void, a troubling transitional space of chaos and vulnerability. LEAP offers the Nursery mothers an invitation to use this occasion to plunge into their own being. Each student begins by writing her autobiography, and proceeds to participate in

LEAP's Classes and Projects

- "Parenting Through Art & Play" and "Work World Preparation" classes for mothers
- "Art Education for Young Children" for the inmate caregivers who staff the Infant Development Center where the mothers leave their babies while attending class
- community art projects in the Children's Center Visiting Room as a way for older children and their mothers to celebrate their time together while also saying good-bye
- "The Musical Art of Making It Up" improvisational music-making classes
- a series of classes on using the expressive arts to work with dreams
- monthly visits from a retired poetry teacher and an authentic movement therapist
- volunteer instruction on the beautiful old art of quilt-making
- a six-week workshop in the art of telling stories
- open studios in the Nursery housing unit where moms with babies make art in a lively community atmosphere
- community murals, a variety show, and artistic and moral support for holidays and babies' birthdays

many creative activities. (See the box about LEAP's classes and projects.)

Everything we do in LEAP bears some connection to human creative potential. Trust, gratitude, a sense of wonder, and many other spiritual, aesthetic, and ethical qualities wait in the wings to emerge when a woman's creativity

comes alive. I often think of one Nursery mother marveling at her own art work: "How did I do that?" Writing and making art together, we begin to glimpse each other's strange beauty too. These awakenings and creative practices that support learning—journal writing, group sharing, and art for relaxation, healing, self-discovery—serve to disrupt the prisoners' feelings of victimization.

Prison is mad, less because of its reluctant guests, perhaps, than because of society's contradictory mandate that prisons should both punish and rehabilitate. An archaic part of our brain confuses "pain" and "gain." I have come to believe that punishing lawbreakers, children, or anybody else is counterproductive, since retribution is founded on feelings of vengeance and righteousness that only engender more of the same. It is an old habit to punish others and comfort ourselves by believing that the problem (e.g., the national drug epidemic) is being adequately addressed. One difficulty in supporting a non-punitive approach is that the alternatives to punishment appear far more bewildering, a challenge to our collective social imagination.

"Prison is the program; we try to create a sub-context," says one seasoned inmate, a parenting and prenatal teacher. Rehabilitative prison programs are simultaneously supported and undermined by the double-binding fallacy of rehabilitative punishment. Yet, prisoners themselves often construe a method in the madness of their predicament: "I'm lucky to be alive. Prison gave me a second chance." LEAP seeks to become a vehicle through which prison may reveal and give more than its destructive contradictions take away. Art-making supports imagining one's victimization in ways more conducive to living mindfully and creatively in the future, because an artistic attitude sees obstacles as opportunities to create something new. When an incarcerated woman re-imagines her prison time as an opportunity for reflection, for example, she shifts the potentially toxic consequences of imprisonment onto fertile ground. Still immersed in the literally creative act of giving birth, the

Nursery mothers may be especially keen to contemplate creativity and the remaking of their lives.

LEAP's guiding vision is that human beings are essentially creative. We imagine, shape, and make split-second decisions every moment, whether we realize it or not. We are *in* "Creation." We are in collaboration with a creation that is still in progress. No one has arrived. Nothing is a *fait accompli*. LEAP's vision says, "No wonder the world's such a mess! We aren't finished yet!" By using the arts to shape life and become aware of the ways in which life shapes us, we learn to navigate the tender middle ground of inner choice and imaginative action. Working in the expressive arts engages our identity as creator-participants in the world—making us all a little more free.

Bobby Blanchard was program coordinator of LEAP for a year before becoming the Nursery manager. Steve Podry has been LEAP coordinator since 2000.

Resources

Collective Voices in Expressive Arts

This excellent compendium put together by a variety of artists, educators, and therapists at Appalachian State University presents a range of specific frameworks and ideas for working with groups. Contact Professor Sally Atkins at atkinsss@appstate.edu to purchase a copy.

www.glasslakestudio.com

A great site to explore for more information on expressive arts therapy.