Redemption through Education

Christopher Shumway

Some of my fondest memories are of time spent reading. My grandmother and I used to sit together in a big comfortable chair and transport our imaginations to faraway places. As a retired librarian, she understood the power of literacy; her time and effort provided me with this gift at an early age. Years went by, and I built upon this foundation. By the time I’d reached high school, I aspired to become a mechanical engineer. However, being book smart isn’t the only thing a person needs to accomplish their dreams.

Picking up the Pieces

At 28 years old, I have been incarcerated for almost ten years. Although it was my own failures that brought me into this predicament, an inside perspective of the U.S. justice system leads me to believe that there must come a point when our dues are considered paid, and we are allowed to shift gears toward redeeming our humanity.

If I were your son, brother, father, or husband, would you call me a felon, change my name to #76633, and decide that I no longer have anything to offer? Or would you find a way to accept that I made terrible choices and support sensible opportunities where I could put forth efforts toward redeeming myself?

The people who live in prison have brave longing to be parents to their children and be ready for work post-release. Nothing is more effective in ensuring that they don’t come back to prison. And nothing is more cost-effective.”

“Nothing we do in criminal justice does more to reduce violence within the correctional institution than college in prison programs. Nothing better prepares people in prison to be parents to their children and be ready for work post-release. Nothing is more effective in ensuring that they don’t come back to prison. And nothing is more cost-effective.”

– Max Kenner
Bard Prison Initiative

There must come a point when...we are allowed to shift gears toward redeeming our humanity.
Prisons and Justice?

Recidivism and College-in-Prison

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>College Status</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No College</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some College</td>
<td>13.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor’s Degree</td>
<td>5.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master’s Degree</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: <www.wesleyan.edu/cpe/About/whycip.html>

What does recidivism mean? If you don’t know, use the context to figure it out. Look it up to check your understanding.

Taking a Chance

Thanks to the generosity of Doris Buffett and her foundation, I enrolled in college courses through the University of Maine at Augusta. This past summer, I completed a four-year degree in Liberal Studies—with Honors. I am extremely fortunate to have had this opportunity.

Instructors and professors came into the facility each semester and connected with us on universal issues. Education helps us realize that there are more things linking us to one another than there are things setting us apart. Labels, stigmas, and stereotypes are not matters of fact; they’re not set in stone. Education changes the way we see the world and our own place in it.

Having earned a college degree while incarcerated hasn’t fixed the wrongs I’ve committed or removed the suffering I’ve put into the world. What it has done, however, is given me enough tools to work on myself and the issues that led to my imprisonment. When it finally comes time for me to return to society, I’m confident that I won’t become the source of someone else’s grief. People took chances on me when I was at my lowest, when I’d done absolutely nothing to deserve such kindnesses. Yet they reached out anyway, and that’s not something I would turn my back on.

Christopher Shumway is incarcerated at the Maine State Prison. He currently seeks enrollment in a Master of Fine Arts program in Creative Writing, where he aims to utilize the transformative power of the written word to initiate public conversations about guilt, shame, and redemption of the human spirit. You can reach him at Chris Shumway #76633 ME 108 top, 807 Cushing Road, Warren, ME 04864.

Take it Further

1. In 2010, 2,600 out of 2.3 million incarcerated people in the U.S. earned a college degree. Approximately what percent of the prison population earned a degree that year?

2. Look at the chart above. Use your own words to describe what the chart says, and then write a one-sentence summary of the chart.

3. Does the chart give you enough information to determine that there is a causal relationship between getting higher education in prison and lower recidivism rates?

4. After reading the article and the quote, what is your opinion about education in prison? Find two additional sources to back up your opinion.

5. Describe two counter-arguments to your opinion. Write an essay that develops your own opinion about college in prison and responds to potential counter-arguments.