

20.12.26 Music That Mends Hour NEW.wav

AS: Audio Sample
SM: Sarah McConnell
DC: David Coogan
AG: Antonio Garcia
JI: Josh Iddings
BZ: Bonnie Zare

[00:00:00]

AS *[music] I gotta look inside me to find my way. I'm going to make the best of this, my second second chance at life.*

SM This is from a choral piece called Change, based on the writings of 10 incarcerated men. It was performed in Richmond, Virginia. Antonio Garcia was inspired to compose the choral music after he read the book called "Writing Our Way Out: Memoirs From Jail". I'm Sarah McConnell, and today on With Good Reason, we take inspiration from the writings of people in prison.

[music continues]

"Writing Our Way Out: Memoirs From Jail" is the brainchild of David Coogan, a professor of English at Virginia Commonwealth University. He taught a writing class at the Richmond City Jail where the men wrote about turning points in their lives on their paths into and out of prison. David's colleague, Antonio Garcia read the book. He was so moved he composed an entire chorale called "Open Minds: Music that Mends". Antonio is a music professor at Virginia Commonwealth University, and the two of them join me for the interview. David, "Writing Our Way Out" is the book you put together with 10 men who are in jail for nonviolent offenses. Why is it called "Writing Our Way Out"? Had they been released from prison or was writing going to help them get out?

DC We call it writing our way out because we understand that people get caught up in a lifestyle that can lead to crime and incarceration. And writing is a way of exploring the boundaries that you've created, but also the ways you can break past those and to start a new life.

SM You founded a program called Open Minds where your college students take courses with men and women in jail. What do you notice about their interaction during those courses and what do you think they all get out of that experience?

DC It's amazing, really, how much work you have to do to kind of arrive at this simple and profound truth, that the people in jail are really no different from the people that are not in jail. Everybody makes mistakes. Everybody has dreams. And so when you really get into conversation across the table like that, between incarcerated people and college students, you realize that not only have - a lot of people have experienced the same troubles in life, whether it be addiction or physical abuse or poverty, but that people also have the same beautiful humanity in them. They have the ability to kind of change their lives. They just didn't stop and think of it, that we're all struggling and we can all overcome.

SM Tony, you read "Writing Our Way Out". What was its effect on you?

AG Well, I think it's a transformative book. For those of us who have been fortunate enough to isolate ourselves a bit from the acts of crimes that have taken place in our communities, don't really think about anyone who has been involved in those and the reasons why people would commit crime.

SM Were are you thinking as you read it, I could do music to this?

AG Well, I was. I had met Dave a couple of years previous at a faculty reception, we talked briefly. And when I finally got a chance to to read the book, frankly, music was jumping out of every corner - off of every page. I couldn't stop hearing music that I could derive from the books. So the most difficult decision was simply what not to write about.

SM What parts of the book most inspired the actual music and lyrics you created?

AG The book had sections that focused on the upbringing of these individuals, the horrible things that happened to them in a variety of points of their lives. And keep in mind that each of these men have claimed full responsibility for their actions, they're not using this book as an excuse. And their reflection on what led them to that and what path they want - they dream for their future. And the first movement that I drew upon from the book was a scenario titled "Hot Dogs". And even that phrase "Hot Dogs" brings to me a musical picture. And so it was very easy for me to draw on those kinds of musical images as I read David's book.

SM David, would you read from "Hot Dogs" and then let's play the musical selection?

DC Sure. This is a piece by Stanley Craddock.

"Hot Dogs. Get your hot dogs". The man at the baseball game sings out. "Hot dogs, hot dogs. Anyone want a hot, hot dog?" The man keeps on in a high pitched voice, not knowing that his words are hypnotizing me, sending me deeper and deeper into a trance. For the next few moments my life is frozen. Where I grew up, in the rich area near Bird Park, everybody played sports. My father loved baseball, that's what he understood. But I excelled at football. Any stress in that game I readily accepted. The press, third down a yard to go - give me the ball. Now, my father is not into sports where you sit in front of the TV and just watch a game. That's not his style. His character is more of a man who fixes things around the house. He was so involved in my playing baseball that he would drive the whole team to games. Now it's three balls, two strikes, a full count. I'm at the plate. But instead of focusing on the next pitch, I'm worried about what my father is thinking, watching me in the stands. My God, here comes that last pitch and I'm going down swinging. Our relationship was lost at three balls and two strikes.

AS *[song] Hot dogs are my favorite. Oh, hot dogs, morning, noon and night. My father always shared a hot dog... Everywhere we went, we'd get a few and for me, he'd always gets me two. I grew up loving two things, my father and hot dogs. Get your hot dogs. One day, father took me for a drive to a bag with food down his back side, and man I saw stands apart and lets me in...*

DC The reason why his relationship with his father was, as he put it, lost, was because he was being blamed for all the lack of harmony in the household. Stan had been adopted, was then, you know, as a teenager, whatever problem was happening in the house, he was blamed for it. He accepts a little bit of responsibility for being mischievous, but he

doesn't, as he put it, says, "I don't think I'm the devil". But his father thought differently and drove him down to Gray Street. And Gray Street was, well, let's say, less about Panera Bread and more about prostitution back in the 80s. And that's where he was living, all alone in a one bedroom apartment and taken in by an older prostitute, who took care of him and taught him how to survive the streets. What he holds in continuously is this confusion, anger and frustration at being abandoned by his family.

AG And as a - as a musician reading this book, it was revelatory for me to understand that perspective and to be able to meet Stan as an adult and to really try to educate myself with, as the piece says, an open mind. Because if we don't get to the root causes of child abuse and drug abuse that infect our communities, we're not going to stop the crimes that these folks will later create as adults.

SM David, this next piece is called "Hell was on the Way".

DC Yes, this is a piece by Naji Mujahid, another one of the coauthors of "Writing Our Way Out: Memoirs From Jail".

My mother is sleeping peacefully on her back with her head turned slightly to the side. She's beautiful, thin, with smooth ebony skin. To me, her eyes are her most endearing trait, they're large and bright and have this magical sparkle. One glance and I know exactly where she is emotionally. She makes me feel like I am the only thing that matters. She doesn't wake up right away, but I know she's playing. I can't remember her ever being mad. Even when she gets upset with my brother and me, her demeanor is more like a person who has experienced a great loss. She has this old record player, a cabinet combination made of veneer wood grain with twin speakers built into the sides. It's filled with old records, 33s and 45s. Her favorite artist is Sam Cooke. Every day it seems, I hear him crooning that the girl was only 16, she was too young to fall in love and he was too young to know. The melody is slow. The rhythm is contemplative. I climb into the bed, jumped down on my knees and begin tickling her. She doesn't move, so I begin shaking her. When that doesn't work, I start to get worried. Finally, I call my brother and we both shake her and shake her, until my brother explains to me that something is terribly wrong. Of the few memories I have of home, the one of my mother dying is the most vivid. I internalized my pain because I didn't know how to express it. I really thought that that was the worst thing anybody would ever have to go through. But I was about to find out, life hadn't even begun to get rough for me and my brother. Hell was on the way.

AS [song] She doesn't like up right away, but I know she's playing. I climb into the bed and begin tickling her. She doesn't move, so I shake her. It doesn't work. I call my brother and we shake him, but can't wake her. Of the few memories I have of home, the one of my mother dying is the most vivid. I internalized my pain because I didn't know how to express it. I really thought that was the worst thing anybody would ever have to though. But I was about to find out that life hadn't even begun to get rough for me and my brother. Hell was on the way. Between the ages of five and nine, I was completely terrorized by my grandfather. (slapping noises)

AG After the concert, one of the contributing authors on the stage was Kelvin Belton. He had written in Dave's book the - the phrase, "a second, second chance at life". And he was there to hear that concert. And now he considers this piece to be his theme song, really as

something to really help prompt and provoke and encourage him every day, every minute to seek that path of redemption that he has set himself on.

SM Let us have a reading for this next piece, which is called "Change".

DC This piece is written by Andre Simpson, another of the coauthors, for writing our way out.

My plan was to continue living drug free and crime free, and to do that, I had to replace the drugs and crime with something else. The void had to be filled. After my first bid, I begin working as a salesman and getting myself God-centered. I chose to be a salesman because I already knew I was able to sell drugs to every walk of life. And out there, the competition was fierce. So I had to formulate a plan and sure enough, have a nice talk game. If I didn't use my gift of gab, the other hustlers in the game would have climbed aboard my back and rode me till I stumbled and fell, stealing my air, my strength, my aura. So becoming a salesman on the right side of the fence made pretty good sense to me. "You must do the thing you cannot do", Eleanor Roosevelt once said. I applied for the job knowing I was a convicted felon, but I made the affirmation and guess what? I got it and flourished. I became the best salesman GHH and associates ever had. The boss even gave me the keys to the warehouse to run the business. Change is an inside job. And slowly I built awareness into my life. I learned to check my behaviors at the door. You can make a wish or you can make it happen. And I finally decided to make it happen. But immediately peer pressure attacked me. I didn't want to be labeled a chump, a.k.a. wanting to live right. So I made drug deals, but I still held fast to not using the drugs. When I was by myself, though, I realized that I couldn't do wrong no more.

AG It was incredibly fulfilling for the folks who wrote the book to hear the music and to be able to say back to us as performers and as the composer,. "Yes, you've heard me. You represented us clearly and well". And as I said to Kelvin and to Terrence Scruggs, who was also present afterwards, I said, you know, we don't know you, but now finally we know of you. You know, we can take it from there. We've got we've made a journey to this point. So this final movement that we've - you've heard a piece of and that will close with, "Change" is - is really a theme song of hope for individuals, but also for a community. And as Dave read in his text, it's an inside job for all of us. There's nothing that is more an inside job for us as individuals than change.

AS (music) I'm going to make the best of this, my second second chance at life.

Who do I want to be when I get out? I make the choice that keeps me free. I'm gonna to make the best of this, my second second chance at life.

One second chance at life change.

I choose instead to look inside and find my way to a brighter life, because change is an inside job. I've got to look inside me to find my way. I'm going to make the best of this, my second second chance at life. (applause)

SM David, where do you go from here? What's next?

DC We've actually already taken the next step. Just this past semester, I worked with our commonwealth's attorney, Mike Herring, to divert low level offenders, the same type of

people that get caught up in the criminal justice system - to divert them away from the courts and up to campus for the same writing class that I usually teach at the jail.

SM And how does that work? They get - yhey get special...

DC They get out of jail. They get out of jail, is how it works. And it's great because they - going to jail for the kinds of charges that they have solves nobody's problems. And we are lucky to have a Commonwealth's attorney who understands that, and it was a great experience and we're going to do it again.

AG We're not that far away from this problem. We are a half a block away. We're three houses away. We're one car away from these challenges affecting our homes if they haven't already. And we better get on the stick and address it soon.

SM David and Tony, thank you for talking with me today on With Good Reason. David Coogan is a professor of English and Antonio Garcia is a professor of music at Virginia Commonwealth University. Antonio is the composer of "Open Minds: Music That Mends" and David is the author of "Writing Our Way Out: Memoirs from Jail". Coming up next, books from behind bars.

[00:17:45]

SM Whether the authors were criminals or innocent or victims of oppression, the solitude and confinement of prison has produced many important writings. Miguel de Cervantes was in debtor's prison when he wrote "Don Quixote". Henry David Thoreau wrote "Civil Disobedience" after spending a night in jail. And Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was behind bars when he wrote "Letter from a Birmingham City Jail". My next guest says prison literature can also be read as an account of vulnerable people, who've been disenfranchised and forgotten by society. Josh Iddings is now a professor of writing and communication at Siena College. He was at Virginia Military Institute when we did this interview.

Jl Prison is an institution that I think we sort of take for granted in our society, though we don't really get many insights into what's actually happening in prisons. We don't really necessarily know what - what goes on, what happens, what are prisoners thinking about, you know, particularly if they're there for long term. What do they - what do they worry about? What do they care about? Who are they thinking about? Why do they take up writing?

SM What have you learned they do think about behind bars?

Jl I think they think about everything that we think about. From their politics to who they love. You know, you get someone like Dietrich Bonhoeffer who's imprisoned for trying to assassinate Hitler. He's a - he's a pastor. A lot of his writing from prison is theology. This is a guy who's, you know, likely to be executed. He does end up being executed just a few weeks before, actually, the fall of Hitler. He's worried about the ways that we interpret God and what we think about God. To me, that's super compelling. Prisoners think about, you know, their sexuality. Do you look at someone like Oscar Wilde, who most of us know is this great Irish author who's imprisoned for essentially being gay? Even in prison, he still produces writing, you know, he writes "The Ballad of Reading Gaol".

SM How far back does prison writing go? We've had it since people wrote?

Jl Yeah, sure. So - so we've had people who write from prison who write about their experiences in prison. Some of the most famous names in literature have produced something that people would consider to be prison writing. Cervantes, John Bunyan's "Pilgrim's Progress", Boethius, Dostoevsky, Malcolm X in his autobiography, writes about his experience in prison.

SM What was he in prison for?

Jl He was in prison for larceny. As opposed to some prison writers, he committed a crime. There are some prison writers who write about the fact that they think they didn't commit a crime. You know, Leonard Peltier tells us he thinks he's in prison because he is American Indian. Bobby Sands in the north of Ireland thinks he's in prison in part because he's - he's an Irish Republican. He's an IRA member. Many of the most famous names in literature, many of our civil rights movement folks are writing from prison. You know, Martin Luther King Jr. writes "Letter from a Birmingham Jail". He calls out the white moderate who says the nonviolent actions that they're taking in the south are one, outside agitators and two, that Martin Luther King Jr. and his colleagues are sort of agitating and causing violence, not really acknowledging the violence from the other side. You know, they're nonviolent action as somehow equal to the violence of the Jim Crow South. This is a pretty, I think, common theme across a lot of prison writing is - is the role of religion and religion is closely tied up to the ways that we punish.

SM How so?

Jl Well, so people thought crime, let's say the 1800s, early 1800s, people thought crime was something that was just part of our sinful nature. Prison wasn't this thing that is something that we should really take for granted as a relatively new thing. You know, outside of holding someone for trial or actually debtors' prisons until people could pay off fines. We didn't really just sort of lock people up and separate them from society. Punishment was often a public spectacle. You go to the town square and see the person put in the - in the shackles or whatever, and they would serve their time and be done. But later on, for example, in the United States, in the mid-1800s or so, prison became this huge complex. We started to think that prisons would deter people from becoming criminals. It wasn't until later where we thought people could be reformed. And part of that was, again, a connection back to - to religion. Does God see us as someone that's capable of being reformed or changed or can we sort of repent?

SM Do you remember when you were young, when you first were exposed to writings by people from behind bars? Do you remember your reaction to it?

Jl Yeah, I think for me, the first person that really drew me was - was Bobby Sands. He's an IRA prisoner in the north of Ireland in the mid 70s.

SM But he's seen there as a terrorist.

Jl Oh, absolutely. Claiming he's a freedom fighter. So up until the mid-70s, IRA prisoners were considered POWs. They could wear their own clothes, their street clothes. They were able to - to educate themselves, to read political texts and that sort of thing, and then the British government revokes that status. That's so important to them that they go on two hunger strikes. The second hunger strike actually results in the death of ten people. Bobby Sands is the first.

SM To die?

Jl He's the first to die. Yeah, he's on on strike for 66 days. So those ten members die, but they're striking against this status as POW, which to some readers might seem so minor. They refuse to wear the prison outfit, so they're - they wear their blankets, they're denied access by guards to - to the facilities, to use the restroom. So they're there doing their thing right there in the prison cell with fellow prisoners right there with them. So here's something that - that Bobby Sands writes while in prison. He says,

The men of art have lost their heart,
They dream within their dreams.
Their magic sold for price of gold.
Amidst of people's screams.
They sketched the moon and captured bloom.
With genius, so they say.
But ne're they sketch the quaking wretch.
Who lives in Castlereaugh.
The poet's word as sweet as bird,
Romantic tale and prose.
Of stars above and gentle love.
And fragrant breeze that blows.
But write they not a single jot
Of beauty tortured sore.
Don't wonder why such men can lie,
For poets are no more.
And where are those whose holy prose
Have gave them hallowed fame?
They kneel and pray, or so they say,
And play their little game.
For politics and love don't mix.
As well the vanquished know.
So genuflect, you tortured wreck.
And bear your cross of woe.

You know, I think for me, what you see a lot of prison writers do, and Sands is certainly one of them, is call out the greater society, call out the religious leaders, call out the people that say they're the artists, the poets, the speakers for generations and say, look what look what's going on here. Look what we're going through. Look how we're being treated. You know, something that really compels me about this kind of writing is how much it interacts. When you see the civil rights movement in the north of Ireland for Catholics and they're - they're holding up signs quoting people from our civil rights movement - Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr., etc. To me, that - that is compelling, that we all should be fighting for, sort of, social justice issues, equality, not having people in our society feel like they're second class citizens.

SM Do you see ramifications for today?

Jl You know, one thing that I think is interesting is, what conclusions these writers are drawing about society. I think sometimes we forget the histories of issues of inequality, for example. But you can go back as far as you know, if you want to look at someone like Frederick Douglass who's not obviously, as a former slave, is not writing as someone

who's - who's imprisoned in the fashion that we think of in terms of, you know, you commit a crime. Obviously, he's not committing a crime to be confined in the way that slavery confines him. But the issues that he's writing about, the social justice issues of his time, he's calling out the clergymen in exactly the same way as King is doing. You have people today who are writing like Michelle Alexander, Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, you know, they're making those connections between slavery, Jim Crow and what Michelle Alexander calls the New Jim Crow.

SM Which is...

Jl The idea that we have built a society of second-class citizens that primarily affects Black and other people of color. You know, the idea of mass incarceration as a way of controlling and - and making second class citizens of people of color, for example.

SM Josh Eddings is a professor of writing and communication at Siena College. He was at Virginia Military Institute teaching cadets when we did this interview. This is With Good Reason, we'll be right back.

[00:28:00]

SM Welcome back. From Virginia Humanities, this is With Good Reason. A warning, the next segment contains discussion of child abuse and sexual trauma. Conversations about prison tend to focus on men in urban areas, but recent research shows women are the fastest growing incarcerated population in America. Bonnie Zare is a sociologist at Virginia Tech. She takes us inside a rural Wyoming women's prison to understand the experiences of what some women call The Little Prison on the Prairie. Bonnie, you interviewed dozens of women who were either incarcerated there or had been, what brought you out to that remote prison in Wyoming?

BZ Well, we knew that it was the smallest prison - or nearly the smallest - in the entire United States, only got 250 beds. We also knew it's one of the most remote prisons in the entire country.

SM Can you describe the prison? What was it like?

BZ Yeah, if you can imagine just the very smallest of towns, where the downtown goes by in the blink of an eye and then turning off the road and seeing nothing but prairie, you know, a couple of antelope and then making your way on a pretty bumpy road over to what looks like basically a huge brick elementary school surrounded by masses of barbed wire. There's nothing to see for miles and miles except the big sky.

SM It's so remote. The women even call it The Little Prison on the Prairie, right?

BZ That's right. We also heard names like Camp Cupcake and Barbie Boot Camp.

SM And they say that because life is relatively easy at this prison, right? Rules they can abide by.

BZ That's right. I mean, they would tell you that some of the challenges are that the correctional officers have a large turnover because it is such a remote location. And so when we build prisons in these very remote places, people tend to forget about how that cuts off women from their children. It cuts off, you know, visitors. And it also, unfortunately,

leads to quite a turnover because it's difficult to live in such an out-of-the-way place. And so correctional officers were often brought in from California and other places and didn't stay very long.

SM What sort of things are women in there for?

BZ Its minimum, medium and maximum security, all in one place. Only 20 percent of the women have committed a violent crime. 30 percent of the women are in for drug related crimes, but there are many more who are addicted or who have made their mistakes or their lapses in judgment because of substance use. And that is often in combination with intimate partner violence and experiencing intergenerational poverty. What they do often, is they will turn to drugs to cope with - or alcohol to cope with their conditions, which are very difficult and sometimes structurally abusive. Many of them came from homes where they experienced abuse as children or experienced neglect at the very least. And then they tend to meet up with and find intimate partners who then also are abusive, may be involved in drug selling already or drug using, and then the cycle starts to perpetuate itself. As they look around, they can't find jobs with a living wage, they already have children, the children are dependent upon them and that stress level rises, right? And I think the difference between rural and urban women is that the support systems, the network, the community services are so much smaller. Right. So you might think about it on the one hand and romanticize that close knit community feeling. But the flipside of that, is that everybody knows that your family is the family with the guy in jail. And so the police are always looking at your family and thinking of you as the outlaw family. And when that kind of reputation gets established, there aren't very many other people to - to disrupt that stereotype.

SM And where the abusive experiences they had as children and the abusive relationships they found themselves in in adulthood, more the rule than the exception, would you say?

BZ Yes. And that was really a persistent pattern that we saw. There as an interesting remark made to me, "these girls are in here because of some bad guy". And it's not to attribute their mistakes to the men, but it's often through their relationships that they end up pretty much conforming to fairly rigid gender roles and sort of doing things that they didn't imagine early on in the relationship they would ever do.

SM Give me examples of some of this.

BZ So that includes maybe attacking their partner after they just couldn't take it anymore. Maybe they're attacking their partner even just with a broom or, you know, with something that's lying around the house - sort of a cycle of violence. One of the women said to me, "Violence has flow. After a while, you get so tired of, you know, being sexually and physically assaulted that you may just snap and suddenly you're the one doing the assaulting". And those kinds of situations were definitely things that women didn't plan on and didn't anticipate, especially early on in their relationship. They didn't see themselves as the aggressor. Another example would be selling drugs, you know, ferrying drugs in the back of cars to go over the border from Utah to Wyoming. And basically, again, coming down to things like, I needed to feed my children and I really found that some of the service work that was available to me wasn't getting food for them fast enough on to the table.

SM Give me some of the stories that individual women told you that stayed with you.

BZ Well, there was. One woman who talked to me about having grown up in a household, which was quite disturbing. She had five brothers and sisters and her father was a member of a sort of self-produced Christian cult, and he sort of ran the small town with her stepmother. And the children were neglected and made to - to do things that they didn't want to do. They were trying to report their parents because the parents would go away for weeks at a time and things like that. Parents would never clean and there were lots of pets. And so there was lots of feces in the house and these sort of examples. But the father was so powerful in this tiny town that anything that they reported to the school system, he would, you know, claim that they were all liars. And - and eventually at age 13, she ran away. She - she slept with various men, she got involved with drugs, and then eventually seeing the treatment of a new nephew that had been brought into the home, was just so very, very angry that she snapped, and she actually murdered her stepmother. And, of course, she regrets that. And she doesn't think this woman should have lost her life, but the way that she described all the moments leading up to that moment, you know, it just it just sort of takes your breath away and makes you wonder what you would do after all that abuse. Another story that moved me a lot was the story of a woman who seemed to keep having a relationship with a person who was already drug addicted and so would get into the business of selling the drugs so that she could feed his habit, so that she could respond to his pressures and the stress is so high that she turns to the drugs herself. And - and sort of understanding that transition and how she sort of finds herself then carrying drugs across the Utah border and, you know, kissing her little toddlers on the cheeks and then going off to do this illegal work. And, you know, meanwhile, trying to keep her own drug habit on the down low from her kids.

SM There was another woman you encountered who had been subjected to many rapes as a small child that continued into her teenage years.

BZ Yes, she was unfortunately - she was in a situation where once a boyfriend of her mother's had raped her, she was taken to a doctor to be examined and that doctor raped her. And that was at the age of six. And so, because she was so very small, of course, she became extremely fearful. I think she started to lose some of her language skills and really people decided to categorize her as being cognitively impaired, although what kind of actual impairment she has, it's hard to know now because she never got beyond a fifth-grade education. Sort of her - the school system sort of gave up on her and she retreated. And then as she was growing up, she really learned to just be the very obedient person who sort of fetched everything for everyone and eventually obeyed her boyfriend's commands to fetch a knife. And the boyfriend killed another person in the home that was visiting. And so, she is in jail for 25 years to life for being an accomplice to a murder. And she said it was so difficult to describe why she went and got the knife. I mean, even as she went and got it, she questioned why she should go get it. But she just felt like a robot and just understanding all those previous moments in which her body had just kind of been operated on and she'd kind of left her body was something that I'll never forget.

SM Did you come to have any understanding of how the legal system in this - in these small towns had treated these women once the crimes had been committed?

BZ Well, one - one moment that stands out to me is when a woman told me that the judge announced that he was going to lock her up for killing her husband and make her an example for all Wyoming women. This betrayal of the gender roles, this idea that these women are coming from pretty rigid and old-fashioned ideas about gender, which gets them internalizing the stigma of whatever their situations are in the first place. You know, why can't I get out of this job and get more food to my children? Why can't I stop using

these drugs? I must be a terrible woman. That's already operating in their minds, but when you have a system sort of prejudging you in that way and deciding that, you know, you're a deviant, it really doesn't provide a space in the imagination for these women to try to go forward to build their skills and to try to prepare for citizenship on the outside of the bars.

SM Were they less able to find these kinds of services because of how remote their circumstances were?

BZ Exactly. A lot of people live in small towns far, far away. So they live in towns of 2000 to 8000 people. The services are not available, or they don't have reliable transportation to those services, including sometimes things like A.A. and N.A. - 12 step programs that have really been useful for a lot of people.

SM How much do you think untreated mental health problems contributed to the prison experience for many of these women?

BZ You know, what I would say is that the woman badly needed help before, but also during their time in the prison. There was only one counselor per 50 women. The counselor themselves could change, so one session to the next session, you might not know if you would get the same one. So perhaps you had a crisis on a Tuesday, but you couldn't tell yourself, "oh, it's OK, I'm seeing my counselor on Friday", because you really didn't know when the next appointment was or perhaps you knew and it would be changed so often that you couldn't really count on that. And so that I found to be something we really need to try and fix as a society. If we are saying to these women, please rehabilitate yourselves, get ready for being great upright citizens when you get on the outs. How are we not providing some of the most basic ways that they could start to put together that self that they can present to the world and become employable with?

[00:39:52]

SM How many of these women were also mothers?

BZ You know, most of them. I would say more than two thirds of the women were mothers. It turns out we don't provide very optimal situations for these mothers to continue to connect with their children. And the women were really inclined to tell me about that. If there was one thing that they told me that kept them feeling hopeful and alive, it was a relationship with a family member, particularly if it were a child. That the children represented their future to them. And unfortunately, if your child was actually staying with a family member, which sounds like a pretty good thing, you know, it was not in foster care then. There was no provision for Skyping with the children and instead, you know, you could only make these really expensive phone calls. And then when your money runs out, it runs out. The Skyping privileges where you could see your children were only available to people who were living with foster families, because the reasoning was that the foster families wouldn't have any relationship to crime. Whereas they couldn't assume that if you're talking to, you know, your mother or your - your grandmother who's taking care of your child, that the grandmother wouldn't start giving you ways to tell you how to make drugs inside the prison. While we understand those kinds of ideas, but, you know, these are women who would really like to just see their children's eyes and read them a bedtime story at night. Right. And that - when not being able to do that is was really painful to them.

SM Did you find that living circumstances day to day in relationships was a little like "Orange is the New Black", the Netflix series that depicts a women's prison?

BZ You know - are you asking me whether I sort of saw that TV show reflected in there?

SM Yeah.

BZ Oh, there's way too much sex in that TV show for me to have seen it in there. Yeah, no, but - but in all seriousness, I would say that some of the friendships that you see in that show and some of the joking and also, you know, sometimes the tensions of a women living close together like that is reflected in in the prison. There were - there were definitely jokes about it being worse than - than a high school in terms of cliquishness. And there were - it was interesting that sometimes there were even, sort of these gendered remarks from the correctional officers. That it was easier to take care of men, because men tend to just use their fists instead of trying to verbally insult each other so much. It was just a much more transparent and above board, so they knew what to do, which I found to be an interesting way that women judge each other, right, and kind of fall into that old fashioned mindset of thinking that women are somehow, in some sense because they're not physical, are therefore more suspicious.

SM Were the guards exclusively women?

BZ No, the majority were men, and that is true across the country. The majority of corrections officers in women's prisons are still men. There has been more attention paid to this now that we have PREA, there need to be female officers that are watching the showers and bathrooms rather than male officers, for instance, which is a good improvement.

SM There were actually prison rules, at least in this one rural prison, against hugging each other.

BZ Yes. You can't hug anyone, you can't have any one sit below you on the floor, you can't braid anyone's hair. Those sorts of things are put in place to avoid any kind of hidden exchange of small pieces of paper or anything illicit. But human beings need touch and human beings who are mourning family members and grieving really need touch. So, the idea that no woman can touch another woman is really unrealistic and really unfortunate, I think, policy.

SM You taught a writing course to these women at the Wyoming prison. Did the women really crave the course that you offered?

BZ They did. They really enjoyed the chance to get into some fictional worlds of other women who had written memoirs. They also greatly enjoyed the opportunity to hone their own expressive skills through speaking out loud, through writing, through rewriting. They were just joyous about it. The only exception was the very first day. One woman came in and she literally slammed her books down on the desk, just like out of a sitcom and said, "Well, someone told me to be here and I don't really want to be here". And I found myself thinking, really, even in a prison, there is somebody who doesn't want to be in my class? But it turns out she just had a different idea. She had heard the memoir writing class and she had heard that as "you must spill your guts and say every deep, dark secret you possibly have and put it on paper and someone else is going to get to read it". And when we assured her that, no, it was up to her which parts of her life story she might want to write about, her entire face changed, and she loved the experience. You'd never sort of recognize her - it's the same woman who had done that in the first minute.

SM I was hoping that you would be able to bring a couple of pieces from what these women wrote that you could share with us.

BZ Yeah, I did. So this one is a poem, "My Rhythm of Life" by Sarah M. Lujan. And I'm going to read an excerpt.

Memories fade like the smoke of a 'rex.
The lifestyle,.
Chop the game.
Nowadays, stuff's so complex!
Loyalty!
Gone!
Yeah, I'm your home girl.
Verdict...
...Guilty!
Not for long.
Some say society's morals just ain't the same.
I say solo, silent and savage,.
Is the only way.
Keep it simple homegirl,.
Never lose your sight.
In our addiction, yeah, we may have lost the fight!
Have we lost the battle?
God only knows.
Come... Jump on the saddle.
Take a chance and see what life unravels.
I'm jaded...
Full of life's own riot.
I've done searched high and low,.
For my own rhythm to give
Trying to drown out this demon.
It's tiring!
It's my turn to live.
No more chances.
No more games.
I throw up deuces to these mark a-- lames.
I'll find my rhythm.
I'll find my way.
I'll put a stop to this cutthroat charade.
All I know homie,.
Is for me.
It ends today!
My rhythm of life.

She is native, coming from the reservation. And she was involved in several different, sort of, I think what you probably call them is youthful escapades. And then finally, as a person who was addicted, she got caught stealing a car, you know, and again, no - no real intention of stealing a car. Part of the whole unfolding and unraveling of that evening, which she - I guess what I would remember most about her was the lift of her chin. She was a proud, self-possessed woman who knew she had really made some big mistakes and was hoping to turn things around. Only 25 years old.

SM Are there opportunities for the women to reform within the prison walls? Are there some good programs?

BZ Yes, there's a program that has mixed reactions from the woman. But I did want to tell you about it, since it's such a striking part of the time there. Some women go into the intensive treatment unit, a separate living complex for those who are working on changing a pattern in their lives, usually addiction. And they go on for about seven to nine months. And the good news is that many of these women really appreciate the chance to work on themselves. They do a lot of journaling, a lot of reflection, a lot of work with 12 Step and in small groups. And then the not-so-great news is that other inmates are running the program. And so some inmates feel that some of the consequences or punishments or negative sides of the way the program is structured can undermine some of the progress that otherwise they could make. So, while it's a mixed experience, it is something that I think is really important to recognize is going on inside.

SM Any ideas for what we could do better for these women, rather than just keeping them locked up and shut down?

BZ Well, one thing I would absolutely say is important, is to try to help these women connect with their children. So if there's any part of a volunteer program you could be a part of to - because I know that some libraries, for instance, would have the ability to either do book clubs or either - and maybe even facilitate a way of having these children, these mothers read books to their children, you know, depending on the state and the laws. That's - that's one thought I have. Continuing to press our policymakers to make the phone calls and visits more affordable for family members because it's really, truly through relationships that many of these women have maintained some hope for their futures and want to work and build their skills. And then finally, there needs to be a lot more programming that's less focused on individual choices. We have so much individualism in America as it is, and these women tend to forget that there's a lot of structural factors that have led them to this moment. And when they internalize this as an individual problem, a defect within themselves, they are again much more likely to turn back to substance use, to get back involved in a life of crime and maybe even return to the prison.

SM What do you mean by less focus on individual choices?

BZ So instead of programming, which is sort of self-help because you have been a bad person who doesn't have these - these good ideas, you can reform yourself, instead thinking about if you're in an intimate partner relationship and it turns violent, here are some of the warning signs to look for. And here are some of the ways you could access, help and start to extricate yourself from the relationship. That it's not about you and your bad judgment, it's really about understanding that many women who are in this situation will need to be careful and take on certain steps in order to extricate themselves.

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