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Brothers, Keepers, Students: John Edgar Wideman Inside and Outside of Prison

I first studied John Edgar Wideman's *Brothers and Keepers* in prison. As a sophomore at St. Lawrence University in Canton, New York, I'd enrolled in the first incarnation of a literature course titled "Life/Sentences," which met inside the walls of the state's only Supermax facility, an hour away in Malone. Every Wednesday, our professor, Bob Cowser, drove eight of us from campus in a Ford E350 van to meet with our eight incarcerated classmates. (It's important to note that, in keeping with the Temple University *Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program* guidelines on which the course was based, we as students did not teach the incarcerated men.) We studied alongside them as peers, analyzing works including James Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues," Ursula K. LeGuin's "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas," Beverly Lowry's *Crossed Over*, and, of course, Wideman's masterpiece. We endeavored to treat our classmates as equals in spite of the prison's insistence that we call them criminals first, humans second—if at all. Dr. Cowser had chosen the famous Terence quote "*Homo sum: humani nil a me alienum puto* / Nothing human is alien to me" as an epigraph for the course. With each hour-long van ride, we set out to test its limits.

Five years later, I reread *Brothers and Keepers* as I prepared to teach it in a different kind of experimental course. Martin Bickman's "Teaching English" course has become a staple of the graduate program at University of Colorado, Boulder, where I am earning my MFA. Bickman's course takes as its primary text a section of the intro-level undergraduate survey *Masterpieces of American Literature*: graduate TAs analyze their teaching and the undergraduates' learning in a seminar that meets directly after each undergraduate class. The graduate seminar offers the chance to workshop the day's successes and failures

while they're fresh in mind, with the guidance of assigned pedagogical theory reading. In the beginning of the semester, Bickman teaches large chunks of each hour-and-fifteen-minute undergraduate meeting and provides assignments and activities for the TAs to use in their small groups. As the course progresses, these TA-led small groups get more class time and the TAs get more autonomy over what and how they teach. For the final four weeks, each TA devises a unit from scratch, pitching texts and themes of his or her choice to the undergraduates, who then select the teacher with whom they'll finish the course.

For my own unit, *Brothers and Keepers* and a unit exploring race, incarceration, and social justice felt like a natural choice. It's a text I remain drawn to, and our previous unit, on *Beloved*, seemed a perfect setup in terms of both subject matter and narrative structure. Wideman's work toward humanizing his brother and evaluating his own writing process meshes well with our goals: to increase students' awareness of how they make meaning and to invite them to question themselves and complicate their gut reactions. Lingering views of the incarcerated as wholly evil, subhuman, and separate from society get harder to defend as readers gain familiarity and comfort with Robby's voice. Outside of the classroom, Wideman's words and the discussions they incite are as relevant as ever in our current political climate.

Ann Berthoff argues in "A Curious Triangle and the Double-Entry Notebook; or, How Theory Can Help Us Teach Reading and Writing," that "when we read critically, we are reading for meaning—and that is not the same thing as reading for 'message'" (42). This move from searching for a single right answer toward exploring multiple potentially contradictory meanings in a text constitutes the kind of critical thinking we hoped to teach to our undergraduates. We followed Berthoff's recommendation that students make regular entries in a dialectical journal (45). In preparation for each class meeting, they'd each post their analysis of a text to an online discussion board designated for their small group. We insisted that this journaling be informal, more like freewriting than structured essay writing. Without a minimum word count or commitment to a single, indestructible argument, students wrote surprisingly long entries and made increasingly complex observations. The loose guidelines also left room for them to bring up

comprehension-level questions and posit “wrong” answers—windows of insight that we might not otherwise observe. My plan was to combine the decentered pedagogical techniques I’d studied in Bickman’s course with an introduction to the social awareness Cowser had cultivated. I knew that the six students who selected this unit would bring with them an interest in prison literature and some level of awareness of the racial profiling and police violence that have risen to the forefront of our national conversation. I didn’t expect just how much my experience with this text and subject here in Boulder would deviate from that of the prison classroom in Malone.

Outside the Walls: Boulder, CO

In her first journal entry on Wideman, Emily writes, “I went into reading this book under the assumption that the author was white, probably because everything we have read thus far has been [by] a white author” (again, we had just finished *Beloved*). Arthur recounts the same experience: “I found myself caught by surprise when I learned that John and his brother were black. He only mentions [it] when it becomes a pertinent detail to the scene in which he is being investigated by the police.” They insisted that, though the book’s rear jacket indicates “African American Studies / Memoir” as its genre, race doesn’t become wholly unavoidable until page 14 when, as John narrates Robby’s capture, he explains how the police tried to implicate him in a robbery associated with the fugitives: “I was black. My brother was a suspect. So perhaps I was the fourth perpetrator.” A white identity remains the default expectation. Earlier, John indicates that the perpetrators in the robbery-turned-murder are black, but the students found this summary of Robby’s major crime largely inaccessible. I appreciate that summary now as a succinct account of what landed Robby in prison, but on a first reading it might take some work for a student to parse exactly who’s who:

Meanwhile, at the rear end of the rental truck, a handful of money, coins, and wadded bills the dying man had flung down before he ran, lay on the asphalt between two

groups of angry, frightened men. Black men. White men. No one in control. That little handful of chump change on the ground, not enough to buy two new Sonys at K Mart, a measure of the fence's deception, proof of the game he intended to run on the black men, just as they'd planned their trick for him (9).

At this point, students who'd neglected to look up the word *fence* were unable to synthesize a cohesive reading of the passage. And though the first paragraphs of the summary clarify, on page eight, the division between the fence and the group of robbers, one could argue that the passage presents a quite a few balls for an inexperienced reader to keep in the air and catch properly by its conclusion. Our discussion clearly couldn't move forward until everyone understood the passage and I urged the students to look beyond plot as they kept reading. We worked through sentence after sentence, piecing together how Wideman's arrangement of words could lead us to a passable, cohesive narrative. Eric gave an explanation that a fence is a money launderer or the proprietor of a business that fronts for something else, and I clarified how the as-yet-unnamed Stavros intended to flip the stolen TVs.

The differences in classroom setting between Malone and Boulder help to foreground some of our most interesting discussions: we held our first meeting in one of this country's few poetry-specific bookstores, testament not only to Boulder's culture, but its affluence as well. All six students in the group were white, as am I. Most were in their first semester of college, aged 18 or 19, and none aspired to major in English. Even considering these factors and Robert Crosman's argument in "How Readers Make Meaning" that readers synthesize meaning "according to the conventions, strategies, and expectations" of the society that has raised and educated them (213), I was still amazed to hear on that first day that most of my students had pictured John and Robby as white during the book's opening pages.

We spent a great deal of the rest of that first meeting working through the basic plot and event chronology contained in "Visits." Most of the students had difficulty moving past the idea that Wideman's ultimate goal must be to free Robby. I offered the idea that the storyline itself could be subordinate to how

it's told—that Wideman's telling and retelling of events constructs what Barrie Jean Borich in "Deep Portrait: On the Atmosphere of Nonfiction Character" would call a "deep portrait" of Robby, using description and narrative not to tell a story for its own sake but to offer the most-authentic-possible presence of the incarcerated as a living, breathing human being. To present such a deep portrait is to act against the dehumanizing power structure of the prison.

Still, the students, many of whom hadn't analyzed a work of creative nonfiction before, wanted to get the facts straight. Some were appalled—rightly, I think—that Pennsylvania law mandated Robby's sentence of life without parole even though he didn't pull the trigger in what was never meant to be a murder, even in spite of evidence suggesting that with proper medical care, Stavros may never have died (Wideman ix). Eric and Joe argued that Wideman's retelling of his brother's story must necessarily be biased in Robby's favor, painting his actions as less criminal than a truly objective version would. Michelle and Allie pointed out that John never claims his brother's innocence, leaving only the reader to deduce that Robby may deserve forgiveness or a lesser sentence.

The group debated whether a truly objective narrative of the robbery could possibly exist. Michelle and Allie acknowledged memory's inherent fallibility, how childhood friends, for example, might find remarkable discrepancies between their accounts of a shared event. The subject of court documents came up, and Allie took issue with their narrow scope in establishing innocence or guilt, their failure to consider the whole story beyond whether a specific person committed a specific action at a specific time. Others argued that this goal is perfectly just, and the court system achieves it admirably. I pushed further, asking whether even court documents, the product of human testimony in the absence of surveillance footage, could possibly reconstruct an unquestionably true version of events. My suggestion that this kind of truth may not exist met a great deal of frustration, especially from Joe and Eric. Allie and Michelle fleshed out a remarkable point: the criminal justice system necessitates that those in power write the official, legally factual version of a story, and that in most cases, unlike Robby's, it's the only story we get.

In attempting to reconcile their differences, students entered what Crosman describes as “a community of which all other readers, and the author himself, are members—[the reader] enters, that is, a dialogue, all of whose voices speak within him” (214). At different points throughout the semester, we asked students to reread their initial journal entries and synthesize, in a slightly more formal super-journal assignment, their original reactions with ideas they’d developed since, experiencing first-hand Berthoff’s insistence that “meanings are...unstable, shifting, dynamic” (42). Fear of being wrong slowly gave way to comfort with multiple coexisting right answers.

In notes added below her entry during class, Michelle acknowledges that “a lot of us didn’t realize John and Robby were black until about fifteen pages in,” and asks, “How does this alter our perspective on the story? What does this change?” Emily’s entry posits one answer: “Once I discovered that Wideman is African American, it changed my reading in that *I can now understand the author’s frustration with prisons* and how there is unfair treatment of his brother because of the color of his skin” (emphasis added).

Inside the Walls: Malone, NY

We’d been warned about the roar, the voices shouting to each other from cell block to cell block, before we arrived on that first day. Still, as we stepped out of the van in the parking lot, the sound was nauseating. These men, who made up the majority of the prison’s population, were doing time in its Special Housing Unit blocks. They’d been convicted by the Department of Corrections’ internal court system of new offenses while incarcerated elsewhere, earning 23 hours a day of solitary confinement. We’d arrived during their one hour of outdoor time, spent in exposed cages connected to their cells, barely large enough to stretch arms and legs freely. These men would not be our classmates. For our program, prison brass had selected members of the cadre population, the facility’s porters and janitors who, though still maximum-security prisoners, had behaved well since their sentencing.

Our classroom inside Upstate Correctional Facility held the same kind of desks I'd known in high school: shiny metal legs, molded navy blue seats, and tan composite tops, each with an indentation for a pen or pencil. At the beginning of our first meeting, we arranged them in two concentric circles, the inside ring facing out and the outside ring facing in. Cowser tried to avoid calling this routine ice breaker "speed-dating," wary of the prison's stipulation that we develop nothing resembling personal relationships with the incarcerated, ostensibly for our own safety.

My first speed-dating partner went by Romano. For the sake of the program's continuity, we stuck to prison protocol: last names only. As part of our own set of goals, we'd agreed not to look up or ask about our classmates' transgressions. Romano, relatively short, with thick, short-buzzed black hair and olive skin, told me he was 23—our youngest "inside" classmate. I think he told me he had roughly the same number of years left to serve. Unlike most of the incarcerated, who were from the New York City area, he'd grown up in Buffalo. We joked about the varying definitions of "upstate" New York and talked a little about our shared Italian heritage. Before we really got past the awkwardness, it was time to move to the next desk. I guessed our oldest classmate to be in his 50s, with the six between him and Romano mostly in their 30s and 40s. Many had families, some with young children. They generally agreed that the hardest part about prison was missing the opportunity to see their kids grow up. Family visits to this facility, a six-hour drive north of the Bronx, were impractical and therefore infrequent. Most hoped their good behavior would help them transfer further south.

Many of the incarcerated men expressed gratitude for our class as a weekly mental escape from the monotony of prison life. We'd get lost in our discussions of literature and tell stories in our small discussion groups, which operated much like Bickman's would later. Cowser, still built from his years playing semi-pro football, spoke with a calmness you wouldn't expect given his physical appearance. During that first meeting, he wrote two phrases on the board: *first-nature reaction* and *second-nature reaction*. He said, "I want to challenge all of us in this course, myself included, to pause and think about big ideas.

To question our gut reactions and consider perspectives that don't come naturally to us." He propelled our discussions forward with small doses of that wisdom, rarely lecturing, instead guiding us, gently, toward our own conclusions. His insistence that we learn more from struggling with difficulty in difference than from presumed understanding has become essential to my own teaching philosophy.

I don't remember what we were talking about the first time the PA system cracked to life overhead. I do remember that it was exceptionally loud, and that static rendered the announcer's voice nearly incomprehensible as he paged Officer Stewart to some location. The squawk box, as Cowser took to calling it, interrupted class frequently, and never with a message relevant to us. It became one of the most jarring reminders that no matter how deeply we discussed literature, concrete and barbed wire still surrounded us.

Like the squawk box, many of the issues my group in Boulder took time to unpack were impossible to ignore in prison. Our mixture of black, Hispanic, and white classmates understood race as central to the book from the beginning. If anyone had overlooked this, our classroom probably didn't feel like the right place to mention it. The incarcerated men, ironically enough, were far less inclined to defend Robby even though they could more readily identify with him. They'd been taught, as prisoners, about good and bad decisions and accepted their punishment as the result of the latter. One of our more outgoing classmates told us how he'd gotten the long, thin scar on his now-clean-shaven scalp in a knife fight as a teenager. How kids in his neighborhood grew up fighting their way to the corner store for milk and bread, and violence felt like the only available means for success. Still, he refused to blame his current situation on his former surroundings. Instead, he hedged each explanation with another about how he still shouldn't have made the choices he made.

Once, Cowser asked for our reactions to Robby's dialect as reconstructed by John. Most of us from the St. Lawrence campus had gained comfort with it as we read and took its authenticity for granted. Our incarcerated classmates, on the other hand, chuckled at some of Robby's turns of phrase. To them,

his way of speaking was easily comprehensible but archaic—the language of the streets had evolved since the 1960s and '70s at the center of Robby's storytelling.

Outside the Walls: Boulder, CO

My students in Boulder opened up a new angle on dialect when we discussed the first chunk of “Our Time.” After reading the lengthier sections of backstory told there in Robby's voice, they laughed at how they'd overlooked the characters' race earlier on. They were more reluctant to explain what about Robby's language indicated “black” to them, and why John's writing seemed more “white.” After letting the silence stew too long for even my own comfort, I smiled and said something along the lines of, “Come on, guys, I mean, the title is *Brothers and Keepers*, after all!” Discomfort turned to incredulity. The wordplay and multiple meanings in the title—especially the blackness in “brothers,”—had been overlooked as well, another moment of easy erasure of the author's identity.

As the “Aha!” moment faded, Eric spoke first. “Do you think he really meant for it to mean that?”

I wish I'd held my tongue and let the group work through his question, but I didn't. “Well, yes. But even if he didn't, isn't it there? Isn't it one of those things where now that you can see it, you can't un-see it?” In English, we're concerned less with authorial intent and more with language and its meanings as constructed by the reader and his or her society. At any rate, Eric wasn't yet convinced.

“Yeah, but, I mean, if he wanted us to know he was black right off the bat, he should've made the title more black.”

Now I was the uncomfortable one. I asked the only question I could think of. “What do you mean?”

“Well, if you look at the way Robby talks, you know, it's pretty informal. It's not grammatically correct. *Brothers and Keepers* is straightforward English.” Other students joined in and the group began to articulate what linguistic cues they'd learned over time to interpret as “black.” They seemed mostly aware

of and embarrassed by the notion that their associating black people with poor grammar stemmed from racism, and I considered our confrontation of this issue a success even as that day left no time for a discussion of code switching.

Inside the Walls: Malone, NY

Cowser's prison class had culminated with a fairly ambitious project. Given the entire semester, we'd read both more broadly and more deeply about prison than my students in Boulder. We'd studied Bentham's *Panopticon* and discussed how its psychology operates in modern prisons. We'd read about Norwegian prisons and their privileging of rehabilitation over punishment, and talked about how their relatively posh cells and 21-year maximum sentences probably wouldn't fly with United States voters any time soon. We'd wondered what results programs like ours could offer on a larger scale and how they could be sold to a public uneasy about helping convicts (research demonstrating how greatly education reduces recidivism seems to be the most politically palatable answer there). Cowser split us into groups with equal numbers of incarcerated and free members. Our assignment was to design the ideal prison system.

The larger framework for my group's project came from its two incarcerated members. They'd thought long and hard about how prison might better prepare its inhabitants for successful reintegration into society while still exacting a degree of the punishment the same society lusts for. They proposed a system based on a 10-year sentence, in which the convict could choose between serving that 10-year sentence in a fairly traditional prison or attending a much more intensive reform program for seven years. The two incarcerated group members came up with the practical outline of this seven-year reform center, while I and my classmate from campus worked out some of its smaller details and organized the concept into a poster in PowerPoint.

The reform program would divide its seven years into three tiers, each of which could last longer as needed, with the possibility of "flunking" into the traditional 10-year sentence. Noting that convicts

were often mentally unprepared for prison and could spend weeks or months acting out, in need of psychiatric care, before surrendering to the reality of their sentences, my classmates decided that the first tier should serve as an orientation. New arrivals would receive necessary mental health care and work with an advisor, who would help to develop a personalized plan of action. They'd live with roommates in dorm-style rooms, with public restrooms and supervised common areas, sort of a combination of first-year college housing and the kind found at many modern psych hospitals. Once stabilized and armed with a plan, convicts would move to the second tier, which would provide a combination of education and vocational training over the course of six months to two years depending on the individual's existing level of education. In the third tier, which would last the remainder of the sentence, inmates would live in semi-self-sustaining communities, using the skills learned in the second tier to contribute to a scale model of free society. They'd gain privacy and independence and demonstrate their readiness for release. My incarcerated classmates were particularly adamant that the third tier's housing include individual keys; that recovering a sense of owning and controlling *something* in the world felt like an essential part of the transition.

Outside the Walls: Boulder, CO

Since our first day, we'd been caught in one of the more beautiful traps creative nonfiction presents: our discussions had been toeing a line between the literary and the actual. On the one hand, this was a major accomplishment. I'd spent a great deal of the semester lamenting with my fellow graduate TAs about how our students came to us only able to identify literary devices, performing hardly any actual analysis. Numerous journal entries about the *The Great Gatsby*, for example, simply stated that the green light at the end of Daisy's dock had been "a symbol," then moved on to other topics. With Wideman, my students were far less inclined to reach for the kinds of formulas and tools that so often wall off the magic of a text they were meant to expand. Instead, they talked about the characters as people, events as events, and

picked apart the relationships between these elements with real-life nuance. For them, Robby getting arrested symbolized nothing beyond Robby getting arrested, and that left room to ask bigger questions like *why* he got arrested and *how* he got to that point.

The down side, though, was a move, exemplified in Joe's final project proposal, toward a purely practical application of the text. Joe had suggested that each student write a letter to Pennsylvania's current governor, Tom Wolf, asking that he pardon Robby. The letters would cite compelling passages from the book, particularly about Robby's good behavior in prison. As support for Joe's proposal grew (I'd stipulated that students pitch their project ideas to the group and choose one to fulfill), I felt the need to point out that if the book, in all its mastery, hadn't freed Robby, letters citing it were unlikely to see more success. I'd hoped the book would leave questions where underdeveloped answers had been. Instead, it seemed to contain a new set of "correct" answers: we're supposed to come out of this rooting for Robby's freedom, right? In the final section, "Doing Time," Wideman offers direct access to Robby's life as it reassembles in prison: his poetry and quiet resilience (205-207, 231), his complicated love for Leslie (209-217), his work in the prison hospital (232-236), and, finally, his earning an associate's degree in engineering (241). Though prison is always in the foreground, Wideman has by now succeeded in presenting his brother as fully human, a move that subverts, at least temporarily, the power structure of the institution.

The popularity of Joe's proposal forced us toward another question: if Wideman succeeds in convincing us that Robby is worthy of our empathy and consideration, how might that affect our beliefs about other prisoners and the prison system as a whole? After all, the most unique aspect of Robby's situation is his brother's ability to relay it to a large audience. Blank faces. Backtracking. Joe and Eric moved to solidify their positions as the strongest backers of the status-quo prison system, arguing that Robby in fact didn't deserve the education he'd earned behind bars. The group consensus shifted toward variations of "Well, he *is* still a criminal."

Out of this mini-standstill rose Michelle's proposal, which would eventually win the popular vote. She'd been captivated by the transcript of Robby's commencement speech, given when he and his two fellow graduates receive their degrees from the community college program in prison (Wideman 240-242). By this time, the program has already fallen victim to budget cuts. Robby's degree will no longer be offered, making him the first and last graduate in his field (241). Still, the speech is triumphant. For those who would oppose funding education in prison, Robby evokes the human cost of the institution, the means by which he and his fellow incarcerated men are expected to repay their debts to society:

It cost the locking up in a cell fifteen out of twenty-four hours a day. It cost the tears and shame your mothers, wives, and loved ones felt when the judge publicly denounced you and sent you here. It cost the frustrating pain of unnatural separation from our female counterparts. It cost the loss of your dignity as you are treated as a child incapable of self-responsibility. It cost all the Christmases and New Years' and other holidays alone in your cell. It cost all that and more, more than I see fit to bring up here at this podium (242).

Michelle argued that the group would benefit from a loosely structured "debate" about education in prison. By now, ambivalence about prison's role in society and its success or failure to achieve its goals had begun to solidify into nuanced opinions. Each of the group's six students would choose a viewpoint about the value of prison education and would work to support it with a combination of research and literary evidence from the book in a relatively informal paper of one or two pages. At the beginning of our final group meeting, the students would exchange papers, read each other's work, then each spend a few minutes explaining and defending their viewpoints before moving into an open discussion.

With the time left in this penultimate meeting, students workshopped their stances about prison education. Eric, a business major, expressed his firm belief that no one serving a life sentence should have access to an education. He insisted that investing taxpayer dollars into a person who could never provide a

monetary or economic return on that investment was unreasonable, full-stop. Eric's is a popular and powerful evaluative lens in our society, I thought, and if Wideman's humanization of the incarcerated is to carry weight against it, it must do so subversively. I had to backtrack from the more cohesive mindset Cowser's class had espoused and rethink the learning goals I'd envisioned for our unit. For many of my students, this was the first time they'd directly confronted the issue of incarceration at all. If Wideman could provoke critical thinking and discomfort, even without producing conclusions that seemed inevitable to me, perhaps that would constitute learning on a more fundamental level than I'd expected.

I told Eric that his argument could indeed be passable, but that he needed to move beyond his first-nature practical assessment and consider all parties affected by it. I made a demand that I think could not have been as powerful had we been discussing a work of fiction: that in order to arrive at a defense of his point, Eric must reckon with Wideman, with Robby himself, must reread the book's final pages and feel confident that he could look into the calm eyes of this tall man, now elderly, draped with dreadlocks, and tell him he does not deserve the education he earned some thirty years ago.

Arthur, who had been one of the quietest students throughout the unit, kicked off our final meeting with what turned out to be one of the most unique ideas among the students. Where others sought to either defend or condemn Robby and his fellow prisoners, Arthur argued that "We have a lot to learn from Robby [because] all he has is time. A person who's educated [in prison] has a lot of time for self-reflection, and I think you have a lot to learn from people who know that much about themselves... To condemn the lives of prisoners is a waste." He called on his peers to "look at it from a human perspective rather than numbers—the human value of an education. Giving an education to prisoners would humanize them." Eric remained skeptical. Emily voiced a similar concern: that tax dollars ought to go toward educating innocent children rather than convicts. Joe chimed in that putting prisoners to work would be more beneficial to society than educating them.

Allie took issue with their zero-sum formulas. “It’s kind of human nature to think that we have to be one or the other, we have to pick a side, pick who gets what... Giving a prisoner an education doesn’t mean you have to take away an education from someone in K-12.” The two sides volleyed back and forth for a while, with the anti-education faction continuing to steep its argument in economics, in the belief that it’s just too expensive to educate prisoners when that funding could benefit children.

Eric doubled down. “You have to draw a line between who you’re going to educate and who you’re not. The idea of educating Robby Wideman is absolutely atrocious... It’s a waste of money.”

Allie wasn’t fazed. “I think it’s easier to argue to put our money into children because they’re children and not criminals, and I think it’s harder to challenge yourself to have a human response and argue for the humanity of criminals.” Indeed, in the students’ earlier journal entries, they’d paid careful attention to Jamila’s premature birth (Wideman 15-17).

This tension between childhood innocence and adult criminality had come to a head over the course of the unit. New questions arose: could we consider education a human right? If yes, at what age or after what offense could a human be said to have forgone that right? Emily ventured a response. In his very first entry, Joe writes, “Jamila is almost like the second life of Robby. Robby is locked up in prison, and Jamila as a baby was locked up [in the preemie ward]. Now she’s free.” And in growing up with an incarcerated uncle, she has “seen things and knows things that almost every kid her age has never even thought of.” Later on, Robby’s work with mentally handicapped children resonated with similar strength. In his third journal entry, Arthur writes, “On page 137, we see a different side of Robby when he talks about his job working with mentally challenged children... Here, we see Robby as a thoughtful and caring person... This makes Robby more personable and gives him redeeming qualities.” If education was a human right, at what age or after what offense could a human be said to have forgone that right? Emily ventured a response. “I would argue if money wasn’t an object, we’d probably all say go for it; everyone needs an education.” Finally, Joe blew the cover off the financial line of argument. “I mean, the whole

point of the sentence of life without parole is retribution. It's supposed to be a punishment. It's also supposed to be a deterrence for possible future offenders." I asked for a show of hands: how many people, if money was no object, would educate all prisoners?

Not a single hand went up. Michelle clarified that she wouldn't force people who refuse to learn to sit in a classroom. She'd give them the opportunity, though. I thought back to my incarcerated classmates in Malone, whose feeling that some people just couldn't be helped produced the 10-year traditional alternative to their seven-year rehabilitation center plan. To my surprise, without any prompting, Eric began to articulate how a similar system—one he'd called impractical twenty minutes before—might operate. He would support "an open option. You can get [an education] if you want, but you have to stay on this course. There are rules...Say you're in prison for five years, you could have the option, if money was no object, to pick whether you want to have this education, even if it's just...a GED." At this point, the conversation shifted toward the shortcomings of childhood and secondary education.

Emily asked, "Do you think that part of the reason [some kids] don't want to learn is because they know their school is inferior to other schools? Like, if every school was equal, would people be more willing to learn?"

"I think that's why people end up in prison sometimes," said Allie. She explained how the group's feeling that it's pointless to educate prisoners might be similar to how disadvantaged kids—not unlike Robby—feel: "Why even try when I'll never have the same access as white kids?" Furthermore, "Learning about something you don't give a shit about sucks." Here were college first-years, presumably treating their own educational experience as a monetary investment with an expected ROI, starting to dissect the purpose of education itself, let alone prison. Michelle worked through these issues in her final paper as well, quoting Robby's commencement speech: "In our society an education has become synonymous with getting a job or getting a better job or some type of material gain. Though that is understandable in our

highly competitive world, there is still more to gain” (Wideman 240). She agrees: “Robby is right that in our highly industrialized, materialistic world, an education is seen solely for acquisitive purposes.”

In “The Pedagogical Implications of Reader-Response Theory,” Mariolina Salvatori offers some useful insight about the learning process that seemed to transpire as this final discussion lurched forward. Salvatori sifts through Wolfgang Iser’s work in *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* for its wisdom about teaching and learning. Her interpretation of the “wandering viewpoint” (qtd. in Salvatori 4) seems to explain Joe’s change of heart and Emily’s thoughts about the school-to-prison pipeline: as a reader engages with a text, his or her viewpoint

does not remain fixed in one perspective, but passes through the various perspectives offered by the text, relating them to one another as well as to extratextual perspectives...In spite of what the word might lead one to assume, “wandering” does not imply aimlessly directionless movement, but rather a forever-changing constellation of narrowing and widening perspectives (4).

Eric continued to develop his ideas about education in prison: “I think what would be great is a literacy class. Giving [illiterate prisoners] tools they can use to go into the library and do things on their own.” He’d widened his perspective significantly since arguing that any education in prison would be worthless, and seemed to be reaching some level of reconciliation between his reader-relationship with Robby and his overarching view of the incarcerated. This might exemplify another phase of learning/reading comprehension explored by Iser and Salvatori. In “consistency building” (qtd. in Salvatori 4), the wandering viewpoint

must be checked if we are to impose order on the multifariousness of meanings we generate as we read. Indeed, Iser suggests, as we undergo a continual modification of memory and an increasing complexity of expectations, we instinctively tend toward a grouping activity (Salvatori 4).

When I asked my second-to-last “big” question of the discussion, Eric again synthesized his previous statements into a beautifully mature response. I’d read a quote from Emily’s paper: “Prisoners with life sentences will never be able to benefit society, even if they do receive an education,” then asked, “How do we define society? Are prisoners in prison members of society? Has prison removed them from society?”

Emily sighed, thinking. “I would argue that prison has removed them from society.”

“That’s the whole point of prison,” agreed Joe.

Eric, though, had made a new connection:

Could we say that [Robby] is benefitting the prison society? In that he’s a role model and he’s benefitting from his degree? Having somebody that, because he’s older, and there are younger people in the prison, seeing him and seeing what he’s done with his life sentence, in theory, could show them, “Hey, there’s a possibility for you to further yourself, educate yourself, and get out of here.” So that could be a benefit to society that he has.

I left them with one final question among the many Wideman had enabled me to ask: “If we bring money back into it...Can there ever be a situation where the right thing to do is not, or is even opposite from, the financially sound or economically correct thing to do?” Blank stares gave way to murmurs of climate change and anecdotes about loved ones on life support. No one seemed to have a clear-cut right answer, precisely the end note I had hoped for.

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