

# Poetry, Teaching and Love

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Many of us in Arts-in-Corrections have had talks about the difficulties of simultaneously trying to create our own artwork, earn a living, obey prison rules, teach our students, fill out the necessary paperwork, spend time with our families... This is a dilemma, we say, everyone we know seems to share: not enough time in the day. And yet being teaching artists or artist/facilitators in prison presents not only this problem of competing loyalties, but also a unique paradox: the nature of art up against the nature of procedures and rules.

In her book, *A Different Voice* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1982), Carol Gilligan distinguishes between two kinds of morality. The first is a morality of rights, one that can be applied impersonally, through systems of logic and law. The second is a morality based on a view of “a world that coheres through human connection rather than through systems of rules,” a morality that is experienced personally through communication in relationship.

In our Arts-in-Corrections talks we speak of trying to live our lives in a way that matches this latter description. We say that as artists, we’ve been trained to see “right” as a matter of context: the sound of this word against the sound of that word, this image against that. In our talks we whisper another unspeakable “L” word, we whisper the word “love.” To create art, we say, we must love the world, we must care. To be true teachers, we say, we must love our students, these men and women with whom we share the demands and the joys of drawing self-portraits, writing short stories, playing the blues. We don’t understand, we say in these talks, how we can do our jobs well without this love.

We say that those IST orientations – where often what we’re given is an expanded version of “Never trust an inmate; they’re all assholes” – don’t match our own experiences. Most

of our students are bright and funny and sincere. Whatever they did that brought them to prison, our students present themselves to us most often as human beings with great feeling, care and concern.

Yet we know we are travelers in a foreign country, prison. And prison is a place where Gilligan's "morality of rights" dominates. We're obliged, by courtesy if nothing else, to follow the customs of this land. And the bottomline custom governing the relations of inmates and staff is paragraph 3400 of the Director's Rules:

3400 FAMILIARITY. Employees must not engage in undue familiarity with inmates, parolees, or the family and friends of inmates or parolees. Whenever there is reason for an employee to have personal contact or discussions with an inmate or parolee or the family and friends of inmates and parolees, the employee must maintain a helpful but professional attitude and demeanor. Employees must not discuss their personal affairs with any inmate or parolee.

Professional. I'm professional, but for me to be professional – to be true to the nature of poetry and true to the nature of teaching as I understand these – I must insist of my students, "When you were five, how did your mother walk across the living room floor?" "When you sat on the porch that summer, how did the concrete feel beneath your bare feet?" "How can you make the word 'oppression' in that line come alive in specifics?" "If you could say whatever you wished to your son, what would it be?" "What do you mean by that word 'pretty'? Blonde hair/blue eyes pretty? Cornrow pretty? Wrinkled-aged-elder pretty?"

I can inundate my students (and often I do) with technical information on metaphoric language, direct imagery, rhythm and meter, line break and such, but unless I also ask questions such as, "When you had that talk with your wife, what was she wearing? How did she move her hands?" I am cheating, I am not sharing poetry. In other words, if I do not discuss "personal affairs," I am not doing my job.

In fact, I think those of us having these Arts-in-Corrections talks have developed a working understanding with most of the staff at our institutions. In my own case, this understanding came after two occasions in which I was under investigation for being “overfamiliar,” or at least, for being naïve. It came after the warden told me, “You know, poets aren’t the only ones with feelings.” It came after watching a few artists coming in from the outside choose to disregard paragraph 3400, causing problems not only for themselves, for Arts-in-Corrections, and for staff, but also, most seriously, for the prisoners themselves. It came after watching more than one female staff member escorted off grounds, having been discovered making love with an inmate in some closet or storeroom. It came after an occasional student misinterpreted my concern as some personal man/woman feeling or as an offer of non-stop support and motherly care. It came after one student’s obsession with me had him sneaking my address from somewhere, sending me flowers, getting rolled up and transferred to another prison where he still, after two years, refuses to separate reality from delusion. It came, in sum, after four years in which prison staff saw that I take my work very seriously and after I no longer viewed paragraph 3400 of the Director’s Rules as arbitrary, to be followed out of courtesy only; after I had experienced a few of the reasons why the rule had been written.

The depth of this shared understanding, although helpful, never made the paradox any easier to bear. In these Arts-in-Corrections talks, I hear most of us say how often we feel stuck: rules and bureaucratic procedures pulling us in one direction; the nature of art and of teaching pulling us another. I know for myself, most days at San Quentin I was confronted with at least one situation in which I felt no matter which way I chose, I’d be wrong.

Martha Nussbaum, classicist and philosopher, interviewed on Bill Moyers’ “World of Ideas,” defined the moral life in terms similar to Gilligan’s second model: “...trying to live well toward friends, toward fellow citizens, toward one’s own capabilities and their development.” She said, “Often, when you care deeply about more than one thing, the very course of life will

bring you round to a situation where you can't honor both of the commitments. It looks like anything you do will be wrong, perhaps even terrible, in some way."

Nussbaum talked about Agamemnon's choice in Aeschylus' play. Agamemnon was a king trying to lead his army to Troy, but encountering no wind to move the ships. The gods told him the only way to save his troops was to sacrifice his daughter. Nussbaum described Agamemnon's situation as one of: "Two deep and entirely legitimate commitments coming into a terrible conflict in which there's not anything the king can do that will be without wrong doing."

It is this situation I think we describe when we have those Arts-in-Corrections talks. Of course, we constantly make choices, or, in current jargon, judgment calls: we act in the moment the best we are able. But I think Martha Nussbaum's warning – "...it's very, very important to separate the question, 'which is the better choice?' from the question, 'is there any choice available to me here that's free of wrongdoing?'" – might help us as we live with the paradox of being artists working in prison.