A RAY OF HOPE THROUGH READING

by Alison M. Lewis

"Dear Sir," reads the letter I open, written in pencil on lined notebook paper; then, redundantly, "To Who it concern Sir." My white, feminist, middle-class values cause me to bristle at this insistence that the reader is male, and the English teacher in me is already mentally correcting the spelling and grammar. But I read on: "I hope you can help me. I am teaching myself to write and do math and spell and need books on these subjects if you can help me. My grades are about 4 to 6. Any thing you can send me that can help me in these subjects." The letter continues in one run-on sentence until its close, but my heart goes out to this prisoner in Texas, who is, against all odds, working to educate himself. It's a Tuesday night "book packing cafe" for Books Through Bars, a volunteer organization based in Philadelphia that sends donated books free of charge to prisoners around the country. I'm on a mission to find the right books for the right readers.

Luckily, we have some elementary-level writing and math books in stock, so I'm able to fill the first part of my Texas prisoner's request with no problem. The second part comes later in the letter: "... and if you have a study Bible are a dictionary you can send me. ..." We usually have several Bibles on hand, but study Bibles are few and far between. Since dictionaries are so frequently requested, Books Through Bars has made the decision to spend some of our meager funds to make sure that good-quality paperback dictionaries, Spanish/English dictionaries, and law dictionaries are generally available to help fill the orders. With two well-used textbooks donated by a local private school, a ten-year-old book of eegesis on the Book of Acts, and a brand new paperback dictionary in hand, I begin assembling the package. Then I remember that I should have checked the "Restrictions List," a compilation of all the arcane rules for sending books to various penal institutions. When I do this, I find out that his institution will allow him to receive both hardback books and used books, so I can go ahead and send the ones I've collected. I fill out the form letter, indicating the date and number of books I'm sending, and write a short note on the bottom: "Good luck with your studies! I hope these books help—I admire your desire to learn."

Out of Darkness

Truth, like light, seems harsh at first to those not used to its brilliance.

Bob Slaymaker

This Texas prisoner is just one of the many incarcerated men and women across the nation who are striving to learn and better themselves, but who have few if any resources to help them. Lack of education is often a contributing factor to being behind bars in the first place. According to statistics from the Sentencing Project, almost 65 percent of prisoners in the U.S. lack a high school diploma. Ironically, instead of providing educational programs that would allow released prisoners to have a better chance in the outside world, many prisons are cutting back or eliminating them. Tonya McClary, Director of the NAACP Criminal Justice Project, laments this trend, saying that here in the U.S., "we've abandoned the notion of rehabilitation in prison, cutting back on counseling, drug treatment, and education programs."

In spite of this lack of support from the institutions supposedly rehabilitating them, I've seen many prisoners who have taken the opportunity of their incarceration to educate and improve themselves by any means available. A group of prisoners in a state prison facility in Michigan formed a study group to help improve...
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reading, writing, and other basic skills. It was extremely gratifying to hear one report back, "Just last week three of us were able to gain our GEDs because of the reading programs created from your assistance." I've also had the opportunity to send advanced college textbooks to a prisoner serving a long-term sentence in Florida. This man, like many in his position, had decided to make the best of his situation and was pursuing his interests in math and biology. His request took months to fill, as it required navigating a lengthy bureaucratic process of securing approval forms for the titles I wanted to send.

As part of my work with Books Through Bars, I am in contact with prison libraries that are under- or non-funded. "Our library program has a budget, but the vast majority of funds go to buy federally mandated law materials for inmate availability," writes a librarian from Kentucky. Meanwhile, a librarian in Florida reports that the new budget in her state leaves her "without any state funding for general library materials." I can only imagine how depressing it must be for an inmate to enter a library filled only with ancient, yellowed, tattered books with torn covers and pages missing. I send a box of books to each institution, trying to fill requests for general categories of books such as self-help, reading and writing, popular fiction, classics, African American studies, and books in Spanish.

As the prison industry continues to grow at a mind-boggling pace, the need for quality reading materials grows as well. The Sentencing Project reports that the U.S. has the second-highest incarceration rate, after Russia, among 59 nations in Asia, Europe, and North America. More than half of these inmates are serving terms for nonviolent offenses, such as drug charges. Although there are myriad complicated reasons why any one person ends up in prison, many of these nonviolent crimes could be characterized as economic crimes, and are often tied to poverty, racism, lack of education, and limited opportunities for legitimate work. The prison population has also radically increased due to tough new sentencing procedures such as mandatory-minimum legislation and "three-strikes-you're-out" laws. These laws came into place because politicians who wanted to be seen as "tough on crime" have played into the public's fear of crime, which in turn has been heightened by the media's sensationalized coverage of high-profile violent crime. Both mandatory minimums and "three strikes" laws take away the judge's ability to render a true judgment, show mercy, or mete out a punishment consistent with the crime. While intended to punish repeat offenders, such as major drug kingpins, in reality these laws victimize people whose major "crimes" may be poor judgment or drug addiction. In California, where these laws are the harshest, people are given mandatory sentences of 25 years to life for crimes such as shoplifting (if it is their third criminal offense), and the judge has no leeway to either reduce the sentence or to order drug rehabilitation in lieu of incarceration.

Books Through Bars began in 1989 as a project of New Society Publishers in Philadelphia, when editor Todd Peterson responded to book requests from indigent prisoners. In addition to sending books into prison, Books Through Bars strives to educate people on the outside about prison issues and conditions on the inside. For those of us in more privileged positions, it's easy to forget that people in prison exist, or to simply write them off as "bad" people who deserve their punishments. Books Through Bars has sponsored public speakers and workshops on prison issues, participated in conferences, and most importantly, tried to get the voices of the prisoners themselves heard. One of the most effective methods Books Through Bars has developed for letting the prisoners speak has been the Contexts art program. Prisoners' artwork and written statements appearing in Contexts art shows at bookstores, universities, community centers, and even a law school have given the public a chance to see and hear what prisoners have to say. Insider's Art, a book of artwork and writings from the Contexts project, has gained an even wider audience for these incarcerated men and women.

Books Through Bars currently receives over 700 letters per month from prisoners—more than we can possibly fill. Similar books-to-prisoners programs in other parts of the country are also working to fill large numbers of requests. Our work sometimes feels like a drop of water in a bucket compared to the vast, overwhelming ocean of need. Why do I keep going? I continue to do this work because, as a Friend, I believe that everyone is worthy of having hope in life. The example of Elizabeth Fry and her work at Newgate Prison shows me that changes can be made and hope can be found, even in the most difficult circumstances. "I was in prison and you came to me," whether by visiting, writing a letter, or sending a package of books, is a powerful way of serving God and bringing light to a dark, forgotten corner of our world. I continue because of people like Frank C., another inmate from Texas, who wrote: "I hope that it helps you to know that by receiving these books I may gain knowledge that will better prepare me to meet the challenges that lie ahead upon my release... Thank you for helping make my time a little more meaningful."

The author, selecting books for shipment.