Upon first glance it would seem that working in the theatre and being involved in jail ministry would have little in common. I have been able to make connections between the two, especially in terms of how they relate to hope for the future. My work has raised many questions, but has also helped to clarify and create definitions for what I do.

I have come to realize that hope begins the moment that one's understanding and attitude about the future changes from that of shame and self doubt to one of potential. Sometimes this process must happen over and over again. Hope grows out of hardship. Hope is not only something that a person can have; it is something that a person must do. Hope is a verb. Just like reconciliation and starting over, hope is something that a person does. Through my involvement with Jail Ministry I see hope, or the lack of it, regularly. Forgiveness may or may not come from the victim or even from the offender toward himself. Reconciliation with family members or victims is often out of the question. Starting over is an option, but there are no guarantees.

I have worked as a theatre designer for the past twenty five years. I have been making pastoral visits to inmates in the La Crosse County Jail for two and a half years. During that time I have been looking for opportunities to connect with others who engage in similar activities. I have been able to connect with others who minister to inmates and have also discovered an entire theatre community who work with the inmate population. My experiences and research into both areas have given me a better understanding of hope and the possibility of starting anew,
even in the bleakest of circumstances. Even though I still have more questions than answers, I have begun to create some definitions and reach some conclusions about hope, and the power of believing that forgiveness, reconciliation and starting over are possible.

What is Hope? In his book, *The Scalpel and the Soul: Encounters with Surgery, The Supernatural and the Healing Power of Hope*, Dr. Allen Hamilton offers this definition, "Hope is simply the desire to prevail, to survive, and to win against overwhelming odds." (Hamilton 127) As a physician he has discovered that there is no such thing as false hope. The author of the book of Hebrews describes hope as a refuge, something that we are able to lay hold of, "...an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast..." (6:18 NKJV) St. Paul writes in his letter to the Romans that we should,"...glory in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope." (5:4-5 NKJV) He goes on to tell us that hope does not disappoint. Hope is the end product of endured tribulation. There is tribulation in jail. There is also tribulation and conflict in dramatic texts, especially Shakespeare. I have learned that hope, even against even insurmountable odds, is essential to healing and maintaining at least a moderate quality of life.

I began jail ministry without really knowing what to expect. I attended a volunteer orientation, after which the chaplain gave me the names of five men who expressed interest in receiving a pastoral visit. After the orientation and a tour of the jail, I was pretty convinced that I could not do this. This was not for me. These were the bad guys. I found the jail to be an intimidating place, but I had made a commitment to do this and would follow through, at least once. Visiting hours for making pastoral visits are Friday evenings from 7-10 pm. I met the men one at time
while speaking through a telephone handset with a glass partition between us. While allowed only twenty minutes per inmate, I discovered that I had found an opportunity to be useful. As time went on I was interested to know who else did things like this. Who else cared about these guys? Jails and prisons are not one of the more sought after venues for community service or ministry. I was looking for role models and peers among others who did this kind of work. I needed peers to help me to process what I was doing and the issues with which I was dealing. I discovered the work of several compassionate individuals who have greatly influenced me and afforded me some perspective and guidance. I have also sought guidance from Scripture, especially the life and teachings of Christ as found in the Gospels.

As I searched for wisdom and scripture to share with the men whom I visit, I kept coming back to a few key examples of hope and starting over. The Gospels are filled with accounts of those whose lives were changed, at least for a little while, by the love and compassion of Christ. One account that resonates with me and the inmates with whom I visit is the account of the woman caught in the act of adultery in John, Chapter 8. This account brings up several issues both for inmates and for those of us on the "outside". This story has a lot to offer in terms of how I came to view the inmates and how I came to view myself. As the story goes, the woman was apparently guilty of the crime of adultery, and according to the laws of her society, she was deserving of punishment. Jesus was fair and compassionate, yet firm in his dealings with both the accusers and the accused.

According to the account, the religious leaders bring the woman to the temple to for a public trial and punishment. What was their motive in doing so? Were they concerned with the moral well
being of the community? Was their first concern upholding the Law of Moses or were they more concerned with using the situation to trap Jesus? The accusers explain that, "Moses in the Law, commanded us that such should be stoned. But what do you say?" (John 8:3 NKJV) They were not looking for judicial or legal wisdom from Christ; they were seeking the assurance of their own self-righteousness.

What were the legal rights of the parties involved? Depending on the situation, Old Testament Law required that both the man and the woman caught in adultery must die, as stated in Deuteronomy 22:13-24. The other part the challenge they posed to Christ was the fact that capitol punishment was reserved for the Roman government alone, not the Jewish religious leaders. They were skating on pretty thin legal ice here. If Jesus let the woman go free, he would be viewed as breaking Mosaic Law. If he condoned their actions and granted their request to allow the stoning; He would be breaking Roman law. What happened next was one of those moments that would have been met with a gasp in any courtroom drama. Jesus challenges her accusers by asking, "He who is without sin among you, let him throw a stone at her first." (John 8:7 NKJV) Mosaic Law required that the witness throw the first stone as stated in Deuteronomy 17:7. It is as if Jesus is saying, "Go ahead, do your duty, you deal with Rome!" The argument goes back and forth, back and forth. Ultimately, Jesus is using this incident to further illustrate what he had previously taught in the Sermon on the Mount, recorded in Matthew, Chapter 7:3: "And why do you look at the speck in your brother's eye, but do not consider the plank in your own eye?" Realizing that they can not win this argument, their self-righteousness tarnished, the woman's accusers begin to slink away. The accused was told to, "Go and sin no more." Not a suggestion, but a command. This is often easier said than done.
This account leaves me with more questions than answers. Who is this woman? What is going through her mind as she was given a second, or perhaps third or fourth chance? Was she repentant? Did she become a follower of Christ? Was this woman able to reconcile with her accuser and her family? How long did the good intentions of starting over last? How did her family treat her after her offense and the public humiliation? How long did this act of grace impact her life? Did she sin again, of course? She thought that she was being dragged out to her death, to meet her maker. Well, she was half right, she met her maker. The great lesson here for everyone is that Jesus was the only one who treated her with dignity. He probably even helped her up. Jesus treated her as an individual and not as the sum of her past. He gave her hope. Through forgiveness, he offered her a chance to reconcile with those against whom she sinned and allowed her to start over with the command of "...go and sin no more." Jesus did not condone her sin; he forgave it. What is there to learn from Christ's example? Is the State supposed let those accused of crimes go free? No. Are we to feel superior to those incarcerated? No. we are to see the face of Jesus in everyone, even those faces only vaguely discernable because of so much darkness. Jesus concludes the incident with these words, "I am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life." (John 8:12) Jesus offers this hope and reconciliation for both the accused and the accuser.

Could anything like this be possible today? Yes. Hope and the possibility of second chances, even third and fourth chances still exist. An inmate with whom I have visited over the past two years received such a second, or should I say, fourth chance. Steve is 28 and has been in and out of jail and prison for about 12 years. Steve is funny, smart and a great guy with a lot of potential when you look beyond his offenses. He was being sentenced for yet another case of drunken and
disorderly conduct. This time it was serious, he beat up the arresting officer, and he was facing a felony charge. I attended his sentencing on November 7. Steve was facing 6 years in prison as a repeat offender. This is what the law required and was fair given his actions and his past record. What happened in that courtroom was not unlike the account of Christ and the woman caught in adultery found in the Gospel of John. The judge treated him as an individual and with dignity. She gave Steve hope. She gave him a thorough and complete reprimand, but she also gave him hope. She allowed for a shorter sentence to be served in the La Crosse County Jail so that he could work to get his life together and receive the assistance that he needed.

The judge challenged Steve with her own version of "Go and sin no more," but also required him to read Tattoos on the Heart- The power of Boundless Compassion by Father Gregory Boyle. This book is about Fr. Boyle's work with gang members, who like Steve, have been in and out of jail most of their lives. The book was given to the judge by a Sister from St. Rose Convent, who had also ministered to Steve. We were the only two spectators in the court that day. The gravity of what had happened was not lost on those of us who were in the courtroom.

The judge, inspired by Father Boyle's book, told Steve:

"Now you have had a tough life, but other people have tough lives too, and they come out of that abyss in some fashion. But not without a helping hand. But many hands have tried to help you, and each time you managed to bite those hands, because I don't really think that you fully comprehend that you're worth the fight. . .[Name] , the choice for you is prison or changing who you are. Not changing what you do, not changing who you associate with, not changing whether you drink or don't drink. It is about feeling
differently about yourself. It's about giving yourself license to love who you are so that you can be a better person. It's not about the opportunities I can give you on probation. It is about how you use those opportunities and how you allow yourself to use those opportunities."

Go and sin no more. Again, not a suggestion, and again, easier said than done.

One of the greatest barriers people have to hope, reconciliation, and starting over is the thought that they are some how not worth the fight. Shame is crippling. In his book, Father Boyle points to many instances where young gang members are crippled by the shame of being seen as "less", being no good, and certainly not worth the fight. "Guilt of course, is feeling bad about one's actions, but shame is feeling bad about one's self. Failure, embarrassment, weakness, overwhelming worthlessness, and feeling disgracefully 'less than'- all permeating the marrow of the soul."

(Boyle 46)

Both Steve and I read the book and discussed it on subsequent Friday night visits. It truly is filled with stories of boundless compassion, not unlike the compassion showed by Christ. Most of the men with whom I visit have a great deal of the shame as described by Father Boyle. There is guilt too, often plenty of it, but I have come to see the difference between guilt and shame. Guilt can be paid for by time and/or fines, but shame continues. Guilt is connected to the crime, shame is connected to the person. As Christ showed us, the crime is bad, the person, or the soul is worth a great price.
Steve did get out of jail, but is back in again for a probation violation. Often addiction can be stronger than hope. He will be released in two weeks. What will tip the scales and change the equation this time? I have no idea, but it is important to keep chipping away until we reach the number of times that Christ requires us to forgive our brother, 70x7 as he indicates in Mathew Chapter 18. This is Christ's way of telling us not to give up. The affirming aspect of this is that Steve has not lost hope. Positive incidents in his life such as reconnecting with an absent parent, and his faith in God continue to give him hope for starting over and the future, as uncertain as that future currently may seem. He is beginning to see himself as worth the fight and not as "less".

I try to get inmates to think of themselves apart from the shame and the feeling of being "less". When I meet with an inmate for the first time I often begin our visit with Christ's Parable of the Pearl of Great Price as recorded in the Gospel of Matthew. The parable is short and contains a "big meaty nugget", as one of my guys pointed out. The parable is as follows: "Again, the Kingdom of God is like a merchant seeking beautiful pearls, who when he had found one pearl of great price, went and sold all that he had and bought it." (Matt 13:45-46, NKJV) After reading the parable I pose the question, "Who is the pearl?" Silence. I read it again. Ask again. . . "Is it me?" is invariably the response. Yes! Then we can begin. God sees beyond the shame and sees each of us as being of such great value that he gave up everything to purchase us.

Most of what I do is just show up and listen. I think that the first step of letting someone know that they are of value is to just show up and listen. In some way, just sitting there renders them
acceptable. If they don't yet see that they are worth as much as a pearl of great price, they can see that they are at least worth twenty minutes of someone's time. Small steps.

Father Boyle states this beautifully:

"Emily Dickenson writes, 'Hope is the thing with feathers that perches in the soul, that sings the song without words and never stops at all'.

I've come to trust the value of simply showing up- and singing the song without the words. And yet, each time I find myself sitting with the pain that folks carry, I'm overwhelmed with my own inability to do much more than stand in awe, dumbstruck by the sheer size of the burden- more than I've ever been asked to carry. " (Boyle)  

I don't know what happens to most of the men with whom I visit once they are released from jail, or sent to and eventually released from prison. I am not to get personally involved with their lives. In the same way we are not told what happened to the woman accused of adultery in the Gospel of John. We don't know what her future held, or if she took the words of Christ to heart. In the same way just like the woman caught in adultery; it is a moment, or twenty minutes on a Friday night, that is important. Then we both go back to our respective lives. The only time that I really see any of them again is when they land themselves back in jail. It is bittersweet to see their names on the "Whose in Jail" web page. At least in jail, they are safe and given a little time to regroup. We start again; we start over. . .

I have been fortunate to witness the transformative power of being able to start over and the hope which that offers. I have seen outlooks and attitudes transformed. Over the course of time I have witnessed the renewed determination to go forward toward an uncertain future. These are
just moments. The moments at which my path has been allowed to converge with those whom I visit has been very meaningful to me. I have learned the reason why Jesus tells us to feed the poor, care for the sick and visit those who are in jail. It is good for us. I am constantly humbled, and convicted of my own sinful nature and self-righteous attitude. Just like the inmates, I start over. I have discovered that doing what Jesus tells us to do is good for us. Go figure.

As I continued to search for peers and delve into the topic of jail ministry and the various programs available to inmates, I discovered the book, *Performing Lives* edited by Dr. Jonathan Shailor. This book is a compilation of essays by theatre artists and educators who use theatre as a means of education and empowerment, and building hope in the lives of inmates. Jonathan Shailor is an Associate Professor of Communication at the University of Wisconsin-Parkside. He is the founder and director of the Shakespeare Prison Project which he developed at the Racine Correctional Institution in 2004. He uses techniques and methodologies created while developing his ideas for Theatre of Empowerment. Shailor has directed groups of inmates through a nine month rehearsal process which culminates with the production of one of Shakespeare’s plays before both a prison and a public audience.

As a theatre artist and educator, his work and the work of the other contributors to the book were of great interest to me. I had the opportunity to interview Dr. Shailor. I asked him to expand on the idea of "moral imagining, or re-imagining". His response and further discussion reinforced the ideas set forth by Father Boyle and my own experiences. People in dire circumstances, inmates in particular, need to find new ways of imagining themselves. They need to think of themselves, others, and the world around them in new and positive ways. Theatre, especially
Shakespeare, can help them to do this by imagining and portraying characters who have the same desires and impulses, but are at the same time larger than life. They can pretend to be someone important and learn how to re-imagine themselves thorough the characters. This helps to bring about the moment during which their understanding and attitude about the future changes from one of shame and self doubt to one of potential and hope.

Shailor expanded on the account of one of the individuals he writes about in his essay, *Prison Theatre and the Promise of Reintegration*. A young man named Jayden participated in three productions directed by Shailor at the prison in Racine. Jayden first played The Fool in a production of King Lear. It is important to note that the inmates choose the roles which they want to perform after much discussion and collaboration. Jayden thought that the fool would be appropriate for him, but at first did not realize the profound nature of the character. He saw himself as a fool and a screw up. His confidence in his performance ability and in himself in general, grew after having the opportunity to perform. He proved to his fellow inmates and to his family that at least in this instance he was no fool.

Jayden went on to perform in three other productions; the roles that he chose for himself, which were affirmed by the group, changed. Both he and his peers began to see him differently. The following year he performed the role of Roderigo in Othello. Roderigo is a corrupt Venetian who is lusting after Desdemona. He is involved with an ill-fated scheme to win her love, but ends up being killed by Iago. This is a role to which Jayden could relate. The role was a transformative one for him as it challenged him to re-imagine himself and how he and his fellow inmates came to terms with the issues in the play. The world of Shakespeare's plays is full of
dishonesty, greed, lust, power struggles, and murder. Inmates understand Shakespeare like no one else. The character of Marc Antony was Jayden's final role in prison. Within the course of a few years he went from seeing himself as only capable of playing a fool, to being capable of leading a Roman army and being great lover as well. What changed? He did. He wanted to be taken seriously. He was able to re-imagine himself. Theatre of Empowerment, indeed.

So, why do this? Why do inmates deserve special programs, opportunities, and attention? My research, discussions with colleagues, both ministers and artists, and my own experiences have led me to the following conclusions. The first reason for doing this and what drew me to it in the first place is that Jesus tells us to. Christians are to have compassion for "the least of these my brethren". In our society these are among the least. They are the offenders. They are addicts and often violent. They are the ones who could not live by the rules. They are in great need of the Gospel and the assurance that yes, there is hope for them too. A more pragmatic approach to these questions seems to be that up to 90% of inmates will be released from their respective correctional institutions. Upon release they will live in our neighborhoods and rejoin our community. The inmates could spend most of their time serving, "dead time" doing nothing, or they could be engaged in something positive that will build them up spiritually and emotionally helping them to re-imagine themselves and their worth as human beings. They may eventually live right next door to you. Would you rather live next to an ex-offender who was able to take part in these programs or one who did not? Christ tells us, and more importantly shows us that hope, reconciliation and starting over is for everyone. If there is no grace or hope for offenders then there is no grace or hope for us either.
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