

November 2006

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Recommended Citation

Thaxton, Terry Ann (2006) "Neverlands, An Essay," *Seattle Journal for Social Justice*: Vol. 5: Iss. 1, Article 20.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.law.seattleu.edu/sjsj/vol5/iss1/20>

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Neverlands

Terry Ann Thaxton¹

Doug had been in prison for five years for drug possession, and he was not impressed with either my credentials or my writing exercises.

“You don’t give degrees for this silliness, do you?” Doug asked. “You do this with ninth graders, right? Not in college.”

He thought I was a joke. If Doug had not been in my class—if I had seen him walking down any other sidewalk—I would have thought he was on vacation, like all the other middle-aged, overweight, white men in Florida: wearing flip-flops; a loose-fitting, buttoned-up, flowery shirt; and baggy shorts. But the reality was that I had just driven through an unsafe part of town to help residents of a halfway house complete rehabilitation requirements that had to be reported to the Bureau of Prisons (BOP). I started with a few short writing exercises, hoping to convince the eighteen felons in the room that this “life skills” class would be fun. But like Doug, most of the other residents at the halfway house who came to class just sat with their arms crossed, expressing immediate skepticism.

“We already took writing classes in prison,” Doug told me.

Even the residents who claimed to enjoy writing did not want to be there. I asked them to match nouns with unlikely adjectives and then to write a poem using those unlikely pairs.

The others took to following instructions, and while they began writing a poem about a significant place using their adjective/noun pairs, I tried to reason with Doug:

“Exercises help the creative mind.”

But Doug didn’t buy it.

“Exercises generate ideas.”

He countered everything I said with another sarcastic statement about how I must not be a real teacher, until from behind me I heard:

“Shut up, Doug; we’re trying to write a poem!”

“Yeah, shut up!” other voices stormed in.

I shut up. Doug stopped for the moment.

The next week Doug came back. Every week he heckled me. Soon his heckling turned into flirtations, and within five weeks, he was trying to convince me to run away with him. Every week he handed me a piece of writing by “Anonymous,” and every week his writing attacked my attempts to help: “Here’s refuse for your word processor” or “How’s this fodder for your goodness” were common lines in his “poems.” Would I ever be able to get through to Doug?

I had never heard of a private correctional facility, but when one of the University’s graduate students, who was interning at the halfway house, solicited the faculty to teach life skills classes there, I was game. I thought I would have to convince the halfway house’s director that creative writing *is* a life skill. However, that was not the case. He was happy to have me teach anything I wanted, as long as he could call it “life skills” on his report to the BOP. At our first and only meeting, he had handed me a thick three-ring binder filled with pages listing the skills the facility needed to offer its residents. I looked through the lists and decided that writing of any kind would develop “literacy and communication skills,” and according to the BOP, communication is a necessary life skill.

As I would soon discover through writing exercises and conversations with the residents, the administration’s focus was on showing the corporate office and the BOP that the facility rehabilitates its residents. Each resident, depending on his or her sentence and parole, was required to spend a certain number of hours in rehabilitation classes, and a certain number of rehabilitation classes had to be life skills.² It did not matter if the class was actually beneficial to the resident. It mattered only that he or she was there.

Do we really rehabilitate the people we imprison? And what does a creative writing class have to do with rehabilitating felons? I quickly learned that rehabilitation was not, in fact, the goal of the facility; as with any privatization of big business, the focus is on making money. While private reintegration centers may take the burden off government correctional facilities, they are merely trying to adhere to the regulations set forth by the governing body. While I could certainly have made the argument that creative writing is a much more interesting way of developing literacy than rote grammar lessons, the administration allowed me to call creative writing a “life skill” because it could be reported as such to the BOP.

My guess was that Doug and the others had been promised a smooth transition from the inside back out into society. When the inmates came close to the end of their federal sentences, they signed up to come here. Coming from a federal prison, the halfway house must have sounded like a dream to them: serve the last 10 percent of their federal sentences at a private correctional facility, a *non-government*-run halfway house. After signing papers and agreeing to pay for this rehabilitation opportunity, the residents came to this halfway house to seek employment and start back on the road to becoming productive members of society.

However, once they arrived, residents learned that they were required to take the first job offered to them. As an example, after Doug first arrived at the facility several months earlier, he had gotten a job as a sales representative at a music equipment store; it just happened to be a perfect fit for him. Residents also committed to attending life skills classes—but only those deemed appropriate by the administration. They committed to doing their chores each week and to attending private counseling and drug classes, designed to teach them the harmful effects of drugs, which is what got most of them there in the first place.³

Like the other 55 percent of BOP inmates who are incarcerated for drug offenses each year, and face the average minimum five to seven year

sentence,⁴ Doug was eager to get out of federal prison. Drug offenders make up the highest percentage of BOP incarcerates, and the next highest is the 14 percent who are in for “weapons, explosives, and arson” offenses, and then the 11 percent of those in for “immigration” offenses.⁵ Since 1987, the number of drug law violation arrests in the United States has fluctuated between 937,400 and 1,846,351, with the highest number cited in 2005.⁶ Even though the number of persons arrested on drug violations decreased briefly, almost five hundred thousand people (adults and juveniles) were incarcerated on drug violations in 2002.⁷ The Federal Bureau of Investigation defines drug abuse violations as “[t]he violation of laws prohibiting the production, distribution, and/or use of certain controlled substances. The unlawful cultivation, manufacture, distribution, sale, purchase, use, possession, transportation, or importation of any controlled drug or narcotic substance. Arrests for violations of state and local laws, specifically those relating to the unlawful possession, sale, use, growing, manufacturing, and making of narcotic drugs.”⁸ Adding in arrests for DUIs, violations of liquor laws, and drunkenness, the total number of offenses for drug abuse and the other related arrests totals over 4.3 million.⁹

Because I taught for two years in public high schools, I figured adult felons could not be much more difficult than thirty-five ninth graders. I had told the director of the facility that I wanted to keep the class small—no more than twelve. My only other request was to have those who were willing write a letter, telling me why they would like to attend. The director laughed. All of his residents needed to go through rehabilitation, and life skills classes were part of that. My class, he explained, “was the only one being offered right now.” I agreed to take up to twenty residents, provided there was a staff member in the room with me.

However, soon the staff was sending *every* resident who needed life skills to my class—never mind that some of them could not read or write. Two or three could not speak English; one woman could only speak French-Creole. Ten or so residents could not read beyond the sixth-grade level. In contrast,

some residents had college degrees. Several had been reading high-level magazines while in prison, mixed in with all the books they could get their hands on, including Allen Ginsberg's poetry and Raymond Carver's fiction. To help with the difficulty of teaching non-English speakers, I enlisted the help of one of my college students who could speak Spanish.

It was a challenge to create appropriate writing exercises because of the variety of skill levels in the group, and every week the group changed. There were at least three new faces every Tuesday. It was easy to pick out the newest arrival: the arms folded across the chest, the frown on the face, and the disapproving glares. After being dropped off the day before in a barred van, he or she had been put in a dorm that, while it had carpet, was not much bigger than a federal prison cell. This did not look like a halfway "house;" it was a whitewashed prison with its requisite white plaster walls and stained indoor/outdoor carpet. The tables we used for writing were falling apart; the metal chairs barely held the weight of frustration placed on them. New residents arrived in my class, unsure of what was happening and what this place had in store for them.

Every week, the new residents wanted to know how whatever it was we were doing that night related to life skills. Teaching a room of felons was like teaching ninth graders, where teaching through entertainment and humor was combined with constant reminders that if they would "just complete this one assignment," class would be over. Many of the residents wanted to leave from the moment we started. Most came to class because they had to, not because they wished to have some life skills when they got out. For most of them, the question of the night was, "When do we get done with class?"

Mark, one of the well-educated residents, reminded me afterwards to ignore those who could not wait for class to end.

"Where are they going?" he reminded me. "There's nothing else to do here."

As a result, I continuously doubted that what I was doing was making any real difference for any of them, and I struggled to show that I was not another employee expecting them to follow the rules. Despite sometimes feeling that a basic reading class would be more helpful and that I was a single-room schoolteacher in the Wild West—complete with show-downs between the “fellas”—ultimately, most of the residents enjoyed the fact that someone from the “outside” was coming to spend time with them. Several of them even discovered the pleasure of writing.

Mary, one of only four women who attended any of the classes, told me right away that she liked to write “mostly poetry.” Like Mary, there were some residents who wanted to write only poetry and some who wanted to write only fiction. Most hesitated to write a memoir.

The following week Mary was not in attendance. One of the men told me that Mary had to start attending the drug class. I was upset: I had planned some of the poems especially for her. At the end of that class, however, Mary stopped by and asked for the handouts from that night and asked what we did so she could do the exercises during the week.

“I’ll be right back,” she said as she disappeared through the bland white door. She returned a few minutes later.

“Here’s the story I told you I was going to write.” She handed me a two-page, single-spaced, handwritten story.

I was thrilled. Someone had written without my direction.

“I’ll write a poem and give it to you next week,” she said. “I’ll find out from him,” she pointed to Todd, “what else y’all did.”

Several of the residents enjoyed the class and came back week after week even though they had already earned all of their life skills points. The third time I came for class, I pulled into the parking lot, and though they tried not to look excited, the residents, who were playing basketball or coming from dinner, looked my way, small grins creeping out. Soon I could hear the clamor of feet heading in my direction. One or two residents waved as I unloaded my book bags, and by the end of the summer, as soon as I pulled

in, several of them came to greet me at my car and to help carry the supplies.

Some of the residents asked me why I kept coming, why I was there in the first place. I didn't know then, and I still don't. But it doesn't matter. I know that they were finally happy to let me take them down ridiculous roads of language games, silly exercises that I use in my creative writing classes at the University. At least half of the residents thanked me every single week at the end of each class, not with just a quick "thanks" but a with a hand-shaking, emotional "thank you."

"This is my last night here," Joseph, one of the regulars, told me after class. He shook my hand.

"Congratulations," I said.

"I'm going to see my son, first thing," he said. "Thought I'd take him to Busch Gardens." He smiled.

"He's three and a half. Do you think Busch Gardens is okay?"

I could not believe he was asking me this question. "Of course," I said.

"That's what I thought," Joseph said. He was already imagining holding his son's hand and pointing at the giraffes, lions, and monkeys. As he walked out, I wished Joseph luck and told him not to come back to prison.

I gathered the leftover handouts, picked up the loose pens and papers and my bag, and headed out. I stopped halfway down the hallway where Sharon, a new staff member, was standing with Margot, one of my favorite participants. Margot showed promise as a writer, eagerly completed all the exercises I suggested, and looked out of place here. Sharon was thanking me again for my class.

"They love you," she said, "and we're not going to let you go, ever."

I told her how much I was enjoying it too. Even though it seemed I did so little during the two hours, I could not imagine not coming every Tuesday.

"This is Margot's second time here," Sharon said.

"I ain't comin' back," Margot said.

“You better not,” said Sharon.

“I’m going to move to St. Petersburg, where I have a friend who’s good.”

We talked for a few minutes. I reminded Margot about her good job and her newly-acquired knowledge. Still, her conversation focused on her “being good,” as if we were in middle school. It seemed that Margot wanted the adults in her life to approve of her. Yet, she was a capable adult herself. As we said goodbye for the night, Margot reached for my hand. I reached back, squeezed her hand, and said, “I’ll see you next week.” She smiled.

My idea for the program was to allow the residents to feel that they were headed toward a good life on the “outside.” Still, questions lingered: What kinds of jobs would they get that would pay enough to support them? Who would make sure they found good support? What about those who could not read or those who had no skills? Where would they go if they did not have family or friends to support them?

Even those with college degrees would have to disclose on job applications that they had been convicted of a felony. The fact is that most of them will likely be back in prison within three years.¹⁰ The recidivism rate for persons who have been incarcerated for drug offenses rose from 50.4 percent in 1983 to 66.7 percent in 1994.¹¹ How were the skills I was teaching going to give them anything to help them beat those statistics?

I did not see Margot the next week. When I asked Mark about her, he shook his head and said that she had gone back to prison.

I had been naïve about the penal system in America; I knew only what I learned accidentally in the news, through people who knew someone who had been in or through the system, or from my experience as a high school teacher. During my first year teaching public high school, I had signed at least a dozen forms, acknowledging the presence of felons in one of my ninth-, tenth-, or eleventh-grade classes. But I had no idea that there were private correctional facilities. While I could have deduced that prisons are about making money, I had been living with the illusion that prisons were

for the very bad among us, for those who could not control themselves and live within the laws we deem vital to our safety. During my tenure at the halfway house, I never once felt physically vulnerable in that fifteen-by-twenty foot room with twenty felons. Had prison rehabilitated these people?

Most of the residents I worked with who would admit the reason they had been “in” said they had been convicted of drug possession. For the most part, they were not violent or overtly angry—other than being angry at the system for putting them in prison for so long. Before teaching at the halfway house, I had no idea that only about one-tenth of all federal inmates are charged with a violent offense.¹² Most of them had been in prison for at least five years as a result of the “drug war” laws enacted since the late 1980s. I was not in a room with ignorant people. Most regular people would not recognize them as “criminals;” they shopped in the local grocery store or lived next door in a middle-class neighborhood.

For the most part, the residents at the facility were happy to see a face from the “outside,” and once they realized that I was not there to teach them more about what is right and wrong, they relaxed with me and wrote from their experiences. For many of them, it was the first time since they had been arrested that they communicated about any part of their lives. The halfway house was pleased that I was there, and I appreciated that the administration left me alone to teach the class any way I wanted. A staff member sat in class the first week, but once she realized that I knew how to handle a group of disgruntled “residents,” she went about her work in the other room. The residents felt freer to express themselves and to say things about their incarceration when the staff member was not present.

However, toward the end of the first month, suits appeared in the walkway, and the residents told me that the director had been fired, as had one of the most popular counselors, for “unethical things.” After that, there was a marked change in the facility’s administration: lots of hushed talk, lots of suits, and lots of questioning of all staff members. I knew that a new

director was coming, and there were hardly any staff left: only two of the original counselors remained, and a week later, one of them left. While gossip floated around as to the counselor's abrupt departure, no one on the staff communicated with me regarding any changes, so I came and went every Tuesday evening as usual. The residents were my main source of information, giving me the heads-up when a new staff person might be walking through our room, when a new resident would be attending, and when there was new gossip.

There was a pronounced lack of communication between myself and the staff and administration. In fact, the only communications I had with the staff or administration were before I started and during the first month. My contact with the administration every Tuesday consisted of seeing the two people in the control room—the space I had to walk through to get into the classroom.

Problems with the administration extended beyond the lack of communication with me. The first thing I had to do each week was to have each resident fill out a form so the administration could track the number of hours each resident spent in life skills classes. One resident aptly named this the “redundant form,” because each resident wrote his or her name on the one-page form in three separate places. The residents also had to note their “arrival” and “departure” times, and at the end of each class, I signed all the forms and returned them to management to ensure each resident received credit for attending.

In the second week of the new management's reign, a young man named Todd, one of the more interested students and an avid story-writer, explained that his new counselor told him that his old counselor had lost all of Todd's “redundant forms.” Evidently, one of the previous director's weaknesses was organization, so many of the papers had been lost or tossed. Unless I was willing to write a short note confirming his attendance during this last month, Todd would not get credit for any of the previous

classes he had attended. The reason for these lost forms occurred to me as I was writing out the fourth one: new management.

Within a few weeks of the new director's hire, new counselors were hired, and one of them appeared in my class, though I thought she was a resident because she did not introduce herself to me. She sat in the back, away from all the residents and seemed to take notes. I was not sure if she was getting pointers on handling an assertive, large, and wild group of mostly men, or if she was in some way evaluating me. But as a volunteer, my focus was on teaching creative writing: I couldn't, and didn't, care about who was sitting in and potentially evaluating me. However, I did find it disturbing that she never introduced herself to me, never asked about sitting in, and never spoke to me afterwards. This was just another illustration of the disconnect among the administration, the residents, and the volunteers. What was important was my connection to the residents, and having half the residents thank me for coming to the "hood" to write with them was what mattered.

The new director, Mr. Howard, did walk through the classroom but only because the room was in the center of the main building, and to get from the staff offices to the control room, you have to either go outside and walk around the building or walk through the classroom. As a result, Mr. Howard walked through my classroom one night. I only knew who he was because the residents had been naming him in their poems, stories, and descriptions of their days. They were calling their facility "Howard Place" and identifying him as the "ogre" who controlled their lives. According to the residents, everything was much tougher now: rules had to be followed.

However, the residents were not ignorant to the nature of the halfway house as a business. They knew that Mr. Howard was the new management, trying to make the bottom line look good to the corporate office. Bill, one of the younger residents, told me that he thought Howard was doing as good a job as could be expected. Bill remarked that if he

(Bill) was in charge of running a business, he would probably do it the same way.

“He’s just trying to make it work,” Bill said.

At the end of the summer, I still wondered if I had accomplished anything at all. I think I showed a few people that writing is not only a life skill but also fun and beneficial or a way to communicate their experiences. Why *did* I spend my summer off from teaching at the University with felons?

One week I brought Laura Kasischke’s poem “Theme Park,” Philip Levine’s poem “Animals are Passing From Our Lives,” and an excerpt from John Edgar Wideman’s book *Brothers and Keepers*. I told the residents that they were going to write a poem or a scene about a journey in which a character is changed. I asked them to list five places they had been in their lives, five places they would like to go, and five things or people they had run away from. The first list of five took no time at all: “jail” was the number one place they had been in their lives. But when they started writing about where they wanted to go, they spent a tremendous amount of time thinking. I must have walked around the circle a dozen times, waiting for them to finish.

“Hey,” one of the men said, “where’s that place where drugs is legal?”

“Netherlands.” Several of them had already listed it and knew the answer right away. I knew by then that most of them were in because of drugs, but here they were, serving the last 10 percent of their sentences and ready to go back to what got them here in the first place. Only now, at least, they knew enough to find a place where drugs were legal. I continued my walk around the tables. One of the residents, who had trouble with spelling, had written “Neverlands.”

It has been more than six months since my class ended: do any of them remember the class at all? It was such a short time (three months) in comparison to their years in prison. Have they indeed gotten their lives back? Will any of them write another poem, ever? Do any of their family

members or friends care that they can tell a story with at least two scenes? Probably not.

Toward the end of summer, I pulled up to the building and saw Doug standing outside the control room. He had on a white shirt, khaki pants, and a gold chain.

“How’re you doing?” I asked.

“Just picking up my stuff.”

Doug had finished his stay at this halfway house, had found an apartment, and was just collecting the last of his things from his dorm. He had completed his jail sentence and was ready to try living on the “outside” again.

“Are you coming to class tonight?” I asked. He said he didn’t think he was allowed, but I told him that it would be fine with me for him to come to class one last time.

Doug smiled. “But I’m not here anymore,” he said.

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² U.S. DEP’T OF JUST., FED. BUREAU OF PRISONS, STATE OF THE BUREAU 2004, at 5-6, 55, *available at* <http://www.bop.gov/news/PDFs/sob04.pdf>; U.S. Dep’t of Just., Fed. Bureau of Prisons, Community Corrections, <http://www.bop.gov/locations/cc/index.jsp>.

³ *See* STATE OF THE BUREAU, *supra* note 2, at 60; Community Corrections, *supra* note 2.

⁴ STATE OF THE BUREAU, *supra* note 2, at 60; U.S. DEP’T OF JUST., BUREAU OF JUST. STATISTICS, STATE COURT SENTENCING OF CONVICTED FELONS 1996, at 51 (2000), *available at* <http://ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/pub/pdf/scsc9606.pdf>; U.S. DEP’T OF JUST., BUREAU OF JUST. STATISTICS, FEDERAL CRIMINAL JUSTICE TRENDS 2003, at viii (2006), *available at* <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/pub/pdf/fcjt03.pdf>.

⁵ Bureau of Prisons, Quick Facts, <http://www.bop.gov/news/quick.jsp> (last visited Oct. 28, 2006).

⁶ U.S. Dep’t of Just., Bureau of Just. Statistics, Drug law violations, Enforcement, <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/dcf/enforce.htm> (last visited Oct. 28, 2006).

⁷ *Id.*; U.S. Dep’t of Just., Bureau of Just. Statistics, Drug law violations, Correctional populations and facilities, <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/dcf/correct.htm> (last visited Oct. 28, 2006) (In 2002, 155,900 jail inmates were held for a drug offense; 246,100 inmates in state prisons were incarcerated for drug offenses; 78,501 inmates in federal prisons were incarcerated for drug offenses; and 9,086 juveniles were confined in a facility that had committed a drug offense).

⁸ FED. BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION, CRIME IN THE UNITED STATES 2004, at 506 (2005),

available at http://www.fbi.gov/ucr/cius_04/documents/CIUS2004.pdf.

⁹ Drug law violations, Enforcement, *supra* note 6 (In 2005, there were 1,846,400 arrests for drug abuse violations; 1,371,900 arrests for driving under the influence; 597,800 arrests for violation of liquor laws; and 556,200 arrests for drunkenness).

¹⁰ 67.5% of prisoners released in 1994 were rearrested within three years. U.S. Dep't of Just., Bureau of Just. Statistics, Reentry Trends in the U.S., <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/reentry/reentry.htm> (last visited Nov. 11, 2006).

¹¹ *Id.*

¹² See U.S. Dep't of Just., Bureau of Just. Statistics, Criminal Offender Statistics, <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/crimoff.htm#related> (last visited Oct. 30, 2006) (In 2000, about 10% of Federal inmates and 49% of State inmates were in prison for a violent offense); The Uniform Crime Reporting Program definition of violent crime includes four offenses: murder and nonnegligent manslaughter, forcible rape, robbery, and aggravated assault. U.S. Dep't of Just., Fed. Bureau of Investigation, Uniform Crime Reporting Program, http://www.fbi.gov/ucr/05cius/offenses/violent_crime/index.html (last visited Nov. 9, 2006).