

J.D.

Lavelle

Something

to

Teach

From the profane to the profound, this is the story of one man's struggle to teach inside a maximum-security juvenile correctional facility.

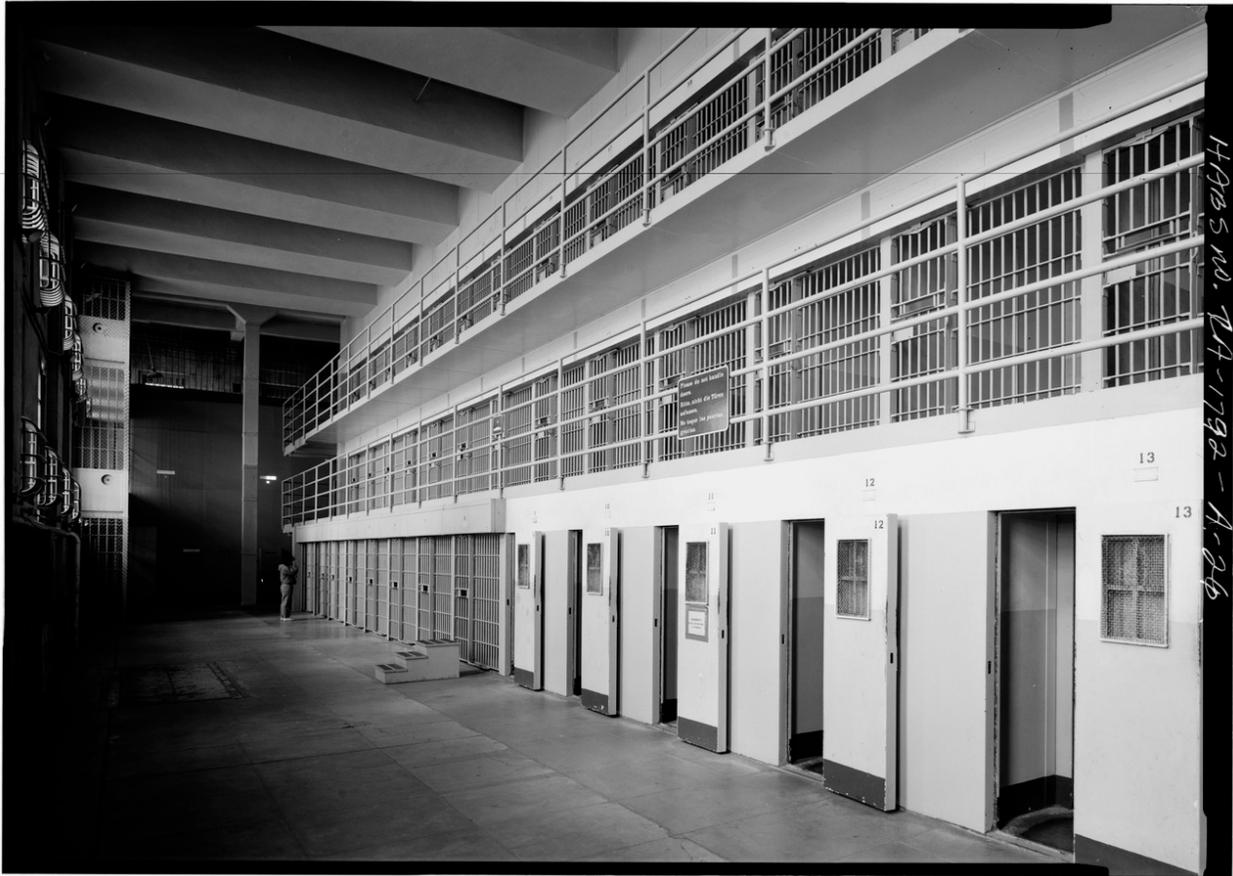
Something to Teach
Copyright © 2018 J.D. Lavelle
Revised Edition Copyright © 2021 J.D. Lavelle

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, copied in any form or by any means - by electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise - without written permission from the publisher. You may not circulate this book in any format.

Disclaimer

This is largely a work of fiction. The characters found in this work represent composite sketches of several individuals and from my own imagination. No reference to any specific living person is intended. Portions of this novel are derived from real events.

Find out more about the author and his writing at www.jdlavelle.com.



Dedication

This book is dedicated, in part, to my students. All of them. They have taught me much. This book is dedicated, in part, to correctional officers. Some of the best teachers/counselors/guardians/mentors I have known were correctional officers.

This book is also dedicated to the victims of crime. It is my hope that their wounds, both visible and invisible, are healed.

Lastly, this book is dedicated to my parents - my first and greatest teachers. I would not be able to do what I do without their teaching.

Introduction

For many of my students, the prison was a place without hope. They had been removed from all that was familiar - family, home, and friends - and thrust into a place filled with predators, pepper spray, and little time for play. Granted, all had earned their way into that place, but I never thought that I should add to their woes, nor did this mean that I was inured to their suffering. Certainly many of my charges considered schooling of any sort to be a peculiar form of torture. And, many of them insisted that my classroom was one of the most heinous violations of the Eighth Amendment, but my job was not to torture, but to teach.

And so we met at the intersection of our two worlds - the classroom.

In a perfect world, all students would file into the classroom, find their seats, look expectantly at the board for an outline of the day's activities, as well as an appropriately inspirational quote, and mentally prepare themselves for a period of learning. Ours is not a perfect world. At the outset of my teaching career on the inside, many students shuffled into my classroom, flopped into their chairs, or sprawled across the tabletops, closed their eyes, and shut their ears to all outside stimuli – specifically my voice.

Many were not good students and didn't know how to play the game of school, or they simply didn't care enough to play along. Whatever the case, we both had jobs to do. They were supposed to do their school work, every day, and I was supposed to teach them. I had certain expectations.

It was inside an institutional classroom - the intersection of my world of teaching and their world of prison - that my expectations changed. My expectations changed when a young man walked into my classroom from the unit and I winced.

“He won't be in the mood to do any work today,” I thought.
“Somebody beat the brakes off him.”

He had two blackened eyes - almost swollen shut, a bruised and

battered mouth, and no doubt other bruises hidden beneath his clothing. He was getting ready to complete his program and go home to family and friends, and someone had given him some going away presents to remember prison by.

I didn't tell him to pick up his pencil and get to work. Instead, I said, "Put your head down and go to sleep. I will not bother you. I will not write you up. Let me know if you need anything."

He did this for two days - kept his head down and slept. On the third day, he came to class, still battered and bruised, and said, "Let's get back to work."

And we did.

Another time, I was greeted at the door by a young man who said, "Don't talk to me. I'm not doin' your work today. Leave me alone."

I have gentled the words here. In fact, his statement had been laced with profanity. I merely nodded, followed him with my eyes to his seat, and gave him a moment to get settled comfortably. Later, as I made my way around the room, I wandered nearby, and asked, "What's the matter today? Do you want to talk about it?"

"No," came the sullen reply. "I don't want to talk about it. Leave me alone."

I stood there, unmoving, waiting. He stared into space, head raised slightly.

"They found my uncle."

I nodded, waiting for more.

"They found him in the woods. Hanging from a tree. He'd been there a while."

And I was supposed to teach him - to make him see the importance of "he said/she said clauses" while his uncle was hanging from a tree.

My expectations changed because of these young men. My expectations were not lower, just different.

These young men were locked up while the outside world continued

to move along. It was cause for much heartache and hopelessness. The reality of their lives did intrude upon the smooth working of my classroom, but these woes were not insurmountable. They were often offset by these very young men themselves. Their words and deeds were very often my source of hope.

You might imagine that teaching in a prison leaves little room for magical moments of hopeful inspiration. If so, then you are mistaken.

Chapter One

“I was sleeping too. One of my roommates woke me up. He tried to put it in my ear.” The young man faltered. “I mean...he put it in my ear.”

Somehow I knew we were about to tread upon a road less traveled by most teachers. Like the ghost of Hamlet’s father, whom I had just finished quoting, this pronouncement was waving us to removed ground. And, like the sweet prince, I did not heed the voice in my head that said, “‘But do not go with it.’”

I should have listened to that voice.

“It?” I inquired.

“His dick.”

“He put his...” I said, pointing below my belt. “In your...” I continued, pointing to my ear.

I was at a loss for words.

“This can’t be happening,” I thought. My heart began to beat faster and beads of sweat appeared on my brow. When I was learning to be a teacher my professors routinely stressed the importance of connections between students’ lives and classroom materials. Any connection that a student made between the two was to be celebrated. I’m sure they didn’t have this in mind. There was never a mention of making connections between Shakespeare and sex offenses. “It’s Hamlet, for God’s sake.”

But a connection had indeed been made.

On this day, all I wanted was to let my students watch Mel Gibson’s production of Hamlet. I had even printed off copies of an easy-to-read version of the play. We would follow along and read the text as the actors on the screen played the scenes. It was a wonderful plan. One that was being stymied by an unexpected player in this classroom drama. The ghost of King Hamlet had just explained to a tormented Mel Gibson that his death was a result of poison. And now I stood

transfixed as this student made a connection between a king who had a leperous distilment poured into his ear and himself - a young man who had a lecherous dingus placed in his ear.

He stared at me. Waiting.

His classmates stared at him. I gurgled something inarticulate, then managed to ask, "What did you do?"

"Nothing."

Now I stared.

A wiser soul would have done something, anything, to prevent such an aural assault. This young man had apparently done nothing.

And I stood there - doing nothing. Mel Gibson was frozen on the screen and I stood frozen before the class. My class. I was their teacher, but my teaching methods class had covered topics such as literary tools for teaching and not phallic tools for probing.

"Mr. Lavelle?"

A new voice interrupted my reverie. I turned, hopeful that this new speaker would offer a diversion.

"Yes?"

"I done put my dick in lots of different places. But never in nobody's ear."

My eye's widened.

"Please God," I prayed. "Don't let this get any worse."

And then another voice from the chorus chimed in.

"I know the first place I'm putting mine when I get out. My girlfriend had her tubes tied. I'm gonna get up in there and untie 'em. Like this." He rose from his chair and proceeded to demonstrate exactly what he meant. It was a gymnastic display to be sure, but not at all suitable for the classroom.

The outside world suddenly seemed many miles away. Even though it was a short walk to the sallyport - and freedom - the emotional gulf that existed between my classroom and life on the outs was vast. As I

surveyed the faces before me, all clad in khaki jumpsuits, I suddenly realized how much I missed my old life as a teacher. A public school teacher. Now, as an institutional teacher, I was not only dealing with acts most foul, strange, and unnatural within an orchard where a king slept, but those within the confines of a maximum-security juvenile correctional facility where a juvenile offender slept.

“All I want to do is teach,” I whispered. “That’s it. Expose these young men to something better than the banal stapled packets that they’re used to. They deserve something better, even if we are here on the inside.”

I had a dream. A vision. A plan.

Most of my students had not seen much success in school on the outs. I, however, would be the fulcrum for educational and intellectual change in their lives by bringing the light of literature inside the confines of these walls. These walls where they were told when to eat, sleep, and urinate. These walls where there was no freedom. These walls would no longer be home to teachers with sour expressions and low expectations. I would bring my charges to the summit of learning, and from there, we would gaze upon the vast vistas of knowledge.

From Hamlet we would move on to explore the treachery of Macbeth and his witches with their toil and trouble. Then perhaps delve into the poetry of Poe with a black bird tap, tap, tapping on our door. Or maybe we would explore the frozen land of the Yukon with Jack London as we tried to light a fire? Literature offered a vast expanse of experience beyond the confines of the razor-wire topped fences.

But first we had to get past the dick talk.

And I had nothing. I was tapped out. Nothing in my teacher training or previous years teaching in the public school had prepared me for teaching on the inside. Nothing.

I stared at the faces in the room. No one was fazed by the young man’s revelation that his ear had been sexually assaulted, but I couldn’t have the classroom conversation continue in the same vein.

Maybe Hamlet would help? Watching a movie was a rare occurrence, even if it was Shakespeare, so maybe moving on to the next scene would help.

“Gentlemen,” I said. “We need to proceed to the next important scene in the play. Remember that the ghost of King Hamlet has just told his son that he was murdered...by poison in the ear.”

I risked a sideways glance at the young man who’d started this whole mess, then turned to the television screen, and continued, “Let’s see what happens next.”

I pushed play, hoping that whatever scene I had queued up didn’t trigger any more questions or comments that might fall outside the bounds of decorum.

“...and hope,” I prayed silently, “that a few moments respite will give me a chance to collect my thoughts. This class isn’t lost yet.”

I took a deep breath, surveyed my students as they sat and stared at the screen, and told myself that we hadn’t even gotten to the best parts of the play. There was so much more to come. So much more excitement.

And like that old fool Polonius, I was clueless. I had no idea. I stood and stared at the screen as the words of King Hamlet echoed in my ears, “Pity me not, but lend thy serious hearing to what I shall unfold.”

So how exactly did all of this trouble start?

With a dream. A vision. A plan.