

Jail break: Meditation as a subversive activity

by [Sarah Coakley](#) in the [June 29, 2004](#) issue

A few years ago I had the opportunity to work for a semester as a chaplain at a Boston jail. My primary work was helping to lead a group of inmates in the practice of silent prayer. I cannot say that I had any particular expectations or resolves about this undertaking before I began it. But by the time my semester came to an end, I learned some wholly unexpected lessons about the transformative power of prayer in a jail setting; about the effects on the body of such personal transformation; and about this country's systemic racism and how it is in some ways coterminous with the attempt to prevent or repress such transformation.

It might not be immediately obvious that prayer, especially the sustained practice of silent prayer, could effect anything positive in the intimidating context of a jail. Especially odd—indeed, suspicious—might seem the act of imposing silence on African-American prisoners. Does not such imposed silence represent the final accommodation to oppression?

Yet one of the most striking features of jail life is the continuous level of noise. Without carpets on the floor, with screams of command from the guards regularly punctuating the atmosphere, and with small three-men cells as the locus of ongoing physical tensions and arguments (homosexual rape is a scandalously regular form of violence), jail offers little opportunity for stillness and peace. Many men find it difficult even to close their eyes in the presence of others they fear. Privacy of a sort can be achieved only by demotion to solitary confinement.

It was in these unpromising conditions that I led one of the silent-meditation groups connected to a remarkable program titled Houses of Healing. The program, following a book of the same name by Robin Casarjian (*Houses of Healing: A Prisoner's Guide to Inner Power and Freedom*), presents a method of achieving self-knowledge and self-acceptance and of preventing violence. Unlike many such self-help volumes, this book is free of the narcissistic taint of the "me generation"; and unlike many other

violence-prevention projects, the book makes it a requirement that, at an early stage of the program, each participant learns to meditate—to sit in silence for a disciplined period each day, enduring his own inner “noise” and his inner obsessions, fantasies and feelings. For many, this was an entirely new project—discomforting, challenging and seemingly pointless.

I was asked to provide a short preliminary “teaching” component on Christian silent prayer at the beginning of the hour, an arrangement that enabled the session to count for “good time” (a minor shortening of the prisoner’s sentence). By the end of the term, my “class” had grown from about 15 to over 40; all were African-American or Latino men between the ages of 17 and about 35, with the exception of two older white men (who always came together for mutual support).

On any given day I reckoned that about a third of the men were regular meditators, a third were trying to find their way into the practice, and a third were merely using the opportunity to get out of their cells or amass “good time.” Of the latter group, it was always an open question whether those who came to scoff would remain to pray.

Shared silence in peace and solidarity in the context of a jail is possibly the most subversive act of resistance to the jail’s culture of terrorization and violence that one might devise. (Occasionally I would catch the eye of the guard who checked on us at regular intervals through the large picture window into the chapel; his look of sheer wonder and simultaneous suspicion was noteworthy.) I learned too that at least some of the men were profoundly interested in reimagining their “time” as a process of trial and transformation.

Fumbling to find them materials from the history of Christian spirituality that might fire their imagination, I took in a sheet of selected sayings from the desert fathers that stressed the efficacy of simply “remaining in one’s cell” as a purposive means of monastic self-knowledge. They were as intrigued by these sayings as they were to learn that Christian monasticism started in Africa.

Occasionally, as if by miracle, the straining and sweating and shifting of a hard shared silence would transmute into a few minutes of acute and focused stillness. After one such “miracle” a prison social worker (not a Christian) who was with us that day asked: “Why is this so wonderful, and so different, when we do it together?” An older African-American prisoner, Terry, replied, “I’ve only just become a

Christian; but doesn't it say somewhere in the New Testament that when two or three are gathered together Jesus promises to be with us?" I learned that day that such scriptural texts can gain powerful new valency in the prison context.

On another occasion a bright and articulate Latino-African-American prisoner named Troy gave the practice a try for a whole session but at the end complained, "I must be doing something wrong: all I'm getting is mental jumble." To my delight, some other men immediately jumped in and replied, "No, that's absolutely right; just keep going." At the end Troy came up to me and said, "I get it. This is to make me patient; this is the opposite of drugs." He didn't have the language of asceticism, but he had instinctively grasped its essential workings on the apparatus of desire.

Often the sessions were hard work for us all. Many of the men new to the practice found it hard to relax or to bear the inner turmoil that the silence engendered. At such times I felt strongly the influence of my inner group of more experienced practitioners, whose gentleness and poise were the best advertisement for the long-term efficacy of the undertaking. Gentleness, poise, peace and solidarity: these were indeed manifest ways of "bucking the system," if only for a short and blessed interval in the prison day. Remarkably (and maybe this was beginner's luck), I never felt under any threat from the men, nor was I ever subjected to any inappropriate sexualized remarks, as I had expected.

The men had a lot of interest in discussing body posture for the practice of silence, and how to keep comfortable during a period of silence. Some of my inner group had found that, over time, the practice improved their posture: they held themselves with greater surety and dignity, and with straighter backs. Men who had more recently joined the group thought this "poncy," and there were some (relatively good-hearted) jibes from the neophytes about self-preening and "Buddhist" pretensions of enlightenment.

Most of the men got into the position that a young African-American man is apt to adopt when sitting informally: legs loosely apart, arms splayed, head forward and down. There would be quite a lot of sighing and even some groaning. In one of the early sessions I was suddenly reminded of Elijah's posture of despair on Mt. Carmel (1 Kings 18:42) and of the later Christian hesychasts' imitation of this posture in the practice of the Jesus prayer—their theory being that the posture expressed physically the "bringing of the mind down into the heart."

The next week I risked taking in a sheet with a copy of a medieval manuscript drawing of a hesychast praying in this posture, along with a short section from Gregory Palamas's *Triads* on the christological theory of the practice (the heart being the center of the self where Christ comes to take up his dwelling). I was amazed and moved when several of the men responded positively to this material, since I was all along well aware that—to the extent that some of them had Christian backgrounds or had even become Christians in jail—such traditions of silence within Christianity would be far removed from the affective and sometimes noisy spirituality of much African-American Protestantism. Surprisingly, however, I met no suspicion from the prisoners such as I encounter among liberal Protestant Harvard students, for whom the practice of silence must inevitably mean being silenced. I think this was because, for the reasons suggested above, in jail the practice was mostly experienced by the men as empowering.

What ultimately surprised me more, therefore, and what emerged from the intense interest in bodily posture, was the men's intuitive understanding of the physical and psychical changes wrought in them by the practice over time, and the personal and political potential of such changes. They laughed initially at the promise in *The Cloud of Unknowing* that such practice would make the ugliest person magnetically attractive; but I noticed that my inner group readily assented to this idea. I was left wondering, by the end of the semester, how not only individual bodies but the body politic could be affected by such "beautifying." What if the physical poise, calm and self-control that had been gained in such "miraculous" solidarity in jail could be maintained outside? Indeed, the question the men most often asked me was where they could find such a group when they got out of jail.

My final piece of learning was about race. What I already knew notionally I saw with my own eyes: that up to half of the young nonwhite men in the area surrounding the jail would at some point pass through this correctional institution, mostly for minor offenses, with the upper limit a 30-month sentence. Within the jail these prisoners would experience brutalizing violence, often of a sexual nature, and a high incidence of accompanying despair, mental illness, degradation and further criminalization. While "doing their time" they would also be indirectly contributing to the Boston economy by engaging in low-paid manual work both inside and outside the jail. Yet on leaving jail they would have little more in their pockets than what they had come in with. Their future lives, to say the least, had little prospect of worldly success or respectability; yet many already had responsibilities to wives, girlfriends and small

children. The temptation to return to the drug scene, to gang life, to thieving or other criminal activity would for many prove predictably overwhelming. Boston does not have a significant African-American middle-class population.

As I saw all this, and saw too the effects of the regular practice of meditation on at least some of the men, I made a connection as a theologian—speculative, to be sure—that I had not seen before. It occurred to me that if (as Cornel West and others have argued) it was the Enlightenment that created the category of race (dividing “white” from “black” and subordinating the latter to the former), it was also the Enlightenment that repressed the epistemological and religious significance of contemplation in the mystical theology of premodern writers. Whereas the influence of such as Denys the Areopagite had been hugely significant in the medieval and early modern Catholic thought of Western Christendom—“dark contemplation” being seen as supremely and personally transformative, at least for a minority monastic circle—the secularized philosophy of Kant relegated to the unavailable realm of the “noumenal” that which is dark to the mind, and had shorn away reference to prayer as a profound exercise of transformation.

This symbolic Enlightenment connection between race and disempowered “darkness” seemed suddenly theologically and politically important. Even if my intellectual history is questionable, the collocation of ideas gave me a key to understanding why the practice of silent solidarity might have deep political as well as personal effects: the unleashing of “dark,” subversive divine power as the antidote to racist despair, marginalization and repression is symbolically encoded in this practice. The birth of the modern prison system (another product of the Enlightenment) was predicated on the possibility of penitential reformation. But this is a goal of which the postmodern system of punitive policing and imprisoning of large segments of the nonwhite population seems to have despaired. It was the band of chaplains, social workers and educational volunteers in this institution of “correction” who refused to give up hope of change in the face of terrible political odds.

I am fully aware of the violent and criminal capacities of the prisoners I briefly served. “We’re all wicked here,” as one of my white prisoners remarked with laconic realism, and no one troubled to correct him. But I also write with a strong sense of the Calvinist tradition’s striking awareness of the ingrained and pervasive nature of original sin and of that same tradition’s insistence that our salvation is worked out in the publicly responsible realm of city and state.

Sometimes I wondered, as I worked in the jail, whether the particular form of Calvinism that has passed into the fabric of American society, adjusted to accommodate a strong commitment to the supposed separation of church and state, has not forgotten John Calvin's stern insistence that the sacrificial punishment taken on voluntarily by Christ on the cross does not need to be repeated. It is by access to that one, unrepeatable "punishment" that we are, by grace, transformed. This is not to reject, as some do, the very existence of institutions of imprisonment for dangerous criminals; but it is to resist the notion that violent and degrading punishment should continue after the prisoner has been sentenced.

The theological question that presses, then, is this one: How can that original Calvinist vision of Christ's voluntary substitution be reactivated in a country that not only condones but almost invisibly re-instantiates punitive racism through its judicial system? How can what seems a nontheological matter—the fate of black prisoners—be perceived as the outcome of certain implicit theological and ideological choices? How can the rampant individualism of a capitalist culture be brought to the Christian bar of responsibility for the whole? And how can the predatory abuse of human power in prisons against the most vulnerable in their midst be turned so as to allow willed spiritual vulnerability to be empowered by grace?

At the end of my time in prison chaplaincy, I had become a different sort of theologian, as well as a different sort of minister. I had seen certain patient practices of transformation work seemingly miraculous change in the souls and bodies of some young men, and I had seen them discern both the personal and the political potential of such change. But I had no illusions about such silence as an overarching panacea for the deep layers of racist oppression that the culture of the jail both presumes and re-instantiates. Change of a substantial nature would require political will of far-reaching range and significance.

Nonetheless, my own theological goals and plans were revised. I saw that in reworking the doctrines of sin and atonement in the systematic theology I was planning to write, I had to address head-on the ways that postmodern society, through the arm of the state, aims to punish and heal. The institutions of prison and hospital, which Calvin's Geneva did much to reformulate in modern guise, cannot be ignored. Nor can the more cynical views of repressive power proposed by Michel Foucault in relation to prison and asylum go without a Christian theological response. These institutions are a mark of our civilization or lack of it; the averted

Christian gaze is a guilty one. Despite the much-vaunted disjunction between church and state in America, civic duties to the polis are a binding Christian responsibility.

Finally, I saw that I could not even write the rather technical section of my systematic theology on religious epistemology, and on the significance of “dark” practices of contemplation for religious “knowing,” without also attending to race. I could no longer write a treatise on the way the mind is “darkened” en route to a fuller acquaintance with God without also writing on that which has been made “black” (epistemologically, politically, socially) in modern American religious history. Such a combination may seem a strange diptych, conjoining analysis of the transformative epistemology of Carmelites (Teresa and John of the Cross) with an exploration of the origins of “race”; but this strange undertaking I shall have to risk if I am to be true to what I learned in the jail.

No one who works in a jail can fail to feel the heavy weight of despair and hopelessness endemic to prison culture. But trust and hope are hard to kill completely, and I am glad that I witnessed in these men something of the irrepressible dignity of the human spirit before God.