The blessing lies outside your comfort zone

I thought I'd have to earn the prisoners' respect in class. Instead they gave it freely.

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“The blessing is outside your comfort zone.” I recently heard this on a podcast about the spiritual practice of running. But this truth extends beyond the topic of physical exercise.

A month ago, I was escorted to a classroom in the men’s maximum-security prison 20 minutes from my home. I was there to teach a class to 14 inmates on the meaning and importance of empathy for healthy, human relationships. The class was part of a research program funded by New York University to offer support and resources to the incarcerated and hopefully reduce the rate of recidivism. Ten of us at my college have volunteered to develop and teach a liberal arts, literature-based curriculum as part of this program.

As I prepared for the class, I felt anxious about the teaching and about how I would be received. From the volunteer training, I expected to meet murderers and sex offenders as well as men serving unreasonable, unjust sentences for minor drug charges. I expected the men to come from lives and backgrounds vastly different than my own. I expected the majority of the inmates to be black and brown—because these are the people we incarcerate in America today. (I was right, there was only one white man in the class of 14.) I expected that I would have to win them over and earn their respect, in spite of what seemed like huge relationship obstacles.

But when I arrived, early, they were already in the classroom at their desks. I decided not to sit behind the large teacher’s desk at the front of the room, but rather sit at a student’s desk in a circle among them. One of the inmates didn’t like the rickety desk I had chosen to sit in, so he stood up and insisted I take his

because, as he told me, it was better. We went around the room and introduced ourselves and I asked them to share why they were interested in the class. Their answers varied a little, but every man shared that he wanted to better himself, wanted to learn, and wanted to give back to his family, his community, and his society.

The men devoured the literature I had given them to read. I asked them to read one chapter of a book and instead they read the whole book. And when the class was over, every single inmate, before leaving, took a moment to shake my hand, look me in the eye, and say, “Thank you for coming. Thank you for teaching us.” Clearly, I had an amazing experience teaching this class full of engaged, thoughtful, respectful men who, I discovered, defied many of my expectations and assumptions.

I’ve been back to the prison many times now to teach. It’s never comfortable going there. I have to leave my cell phone in the car, cutting me off from communication with the outside world. (This is terrifying.) To get to the classroom I have to walk through multiple large metal doors that open as I approach, then close and lock behind me. (Prison is no place for the claustrophobic.) But the men I meet there, the stories I hear, the meaningful conversations we have and the pain I feel when the class is over, knowing they will go back to a small shared cell with paint peeling off the walls, is worth traveling 20 minutes down the road where the blessing lies outside my comfort zone.

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