Drew Leder –

I want to focus on lifelong learning not for myself alone, but primarily for men and women I have met along the way – many of whom were lifers. This story begins in 1992 at the Maryland Penitentiary. I had decided to step outside of the pirvileged environment of Loyola University to bring my skill-set, limited as it was – philosopher, educator – to students whose access to these things was limited. I started volunteer teaching in what was the oldest continuously operating penitentiary in the Western world, situated in downtown Baltimore. At the time it served as the men's maximum security prison for all of the state of Maryland. It is the oldest continuously operating prison in the Western World – having opened its doors – or maybe I should say shut them – first in 1811. I started with 15-20 of the most motivated men from the inmate population. We read about Socrates' trial in *The Apology*, the stoicism of Epictetus, -- a crippled Roman slave -- and Martin Luther King, Jr.'s, call for justice in his Letter from Birmingham Jail. Most of the inmates were serving life, or double-life, or life plus 20, strange concepts unless you're a believer in reincarnation. They weren't going anywhere so neither was I. That class continued some 18 months, a luxury you don't have inside a university setting.

There was also a passion you don't always see at a place like Loyola. We there, faculty and students alike, are used to taking the liberal arts for granted.. To study history, literature, philosophy, theology, and on and on, ho-hum. It can seem not a privilege to be deeply valued, but at least for our Loyola students, almost a prison sentence to be served. Four years of hard labor finishing the core curriculum, and major-requirements, until release is finally won in the form of a diploma.

How very different was the attitude of the inmates! For them the liberal arts *was* their release. Even while under severe bodily confinement, the spirit could take flight, soaring and sweeping through the heavens.

Dwelling in a world of ideas, the inmates were better able to disconnect from the harshness around them – the bars and barbed wire of a maximum security prison. But finally, our work was not primarily about *disconnecting*, but *reconnecting*. The inmates needed to reconnect with all those things within themselves that life in the inner city, and in prison, had obscured. Who am I, beyond my identity as a drug dealer, a criminal, a tough guy? What happened to that innocent child I once was – is he still in there somewhere, and dare I let him out? What is life all about now that I'm serving a life sentence? What went wrong in my past? How can my future be different? How can I be useful? How can I be happy? How can I control my inner demons and contact my inner angels?

Such questions were not merely intellectual (though intellectual they were). Your very life was riding on the answers adopted – your emotional, social, and spiritual life, and on the streets, and in prison, sometimes your physical life.

Our class conversations proved so powerful that I began to tape and transcribe them, and they formed the basis for a book, *The Soul Knows No Bars: Inmates Reflect on Life, Death, and Hope* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2000). I want to quote a little from a letter I received a letter from Donald Thompson, Sr., one of the participants in that project, and serving life plus 100 years for armed robbery, attempted murder, and murder in the first degree. Its important that not just I get to speak hear today, but the voices, even the images of the prisoners, so that they can escape all the bars and barbed wire, the endless prison time, and circulate a little among us in freedom. Donald writes:

As I am wont, I commence this missive by evoking the peace and blessing of God on both you and your entire family. I, myself am well despite my present plight. God is good. Out of that goodness he has blessed me with the mental and spiritual fortitude to cope; however, when I do have my moments of pain, I remember that the grave-yards are teeming with folks who would gladly have this cell and all the time too.

To be honest, most of my depression derives from thinking about the victim in my case. Sometimes I just do not feel worthy of God's grace because I took that man's life. Long ago I went to God and begged for forgiveness: and he blessed me. Yet I have been unable to forgive myself....I truly appreciate you affording me a nonjudgmental shoulder on which to lean....

We are at present under a lock-down because two officers were stabbed two weeks ago. It is very unfortunate that these officers were injured. My heart goes out to them and their respective families, for I do not condone violence. I am, nonetheless, not tripping off about the lock-down. It gave birth to this mail you are perusing. Plus, it forced me to meditate, rest, and reflect. So I have embraced this situation. I would be blessed if I could somehow incorporate that philosophy in other aspects of my life.

When I went to God – twenty two years ago – for grace, I made a covenant to not perpetrate violence again. The fact that I have been able to honor that commitment is not mere hocus pocus....The thing that deterred me from violence was a structured environment which was comprised of social programs, therapeutic programs, educational programs, and the like. These institutions

> armed me with the empowering information I needed to honor my covenant. I was also able to network and bond with folks such as you. And you my friend have played an integral role in my edification. This is what we need now to curb violence in and outside the walls. That is, institutions that educate, socialize and heal. In addition we need ordinary people to *attach* themselves to these structured environments. No gang-banger can withstand this transformation juggernaut. Drew, I do not know how many acts of violence I have prevented by employing the information I gleaned from these programs and folks like you.…Many of these programs no longer exist.

Donald's right: he's experienced an inward transformation assisted by outward supports. He's also right in his last statement: many of the programs to which he refers no longer exist. Shortly after our course together, a federal anti-crime bill in the closed down college extension programs in prisons around the country. The 1994 bill rendered inmates ineligible for Pell Grants, the funds that assist low-income Americans to pay for higher education. To me, this is not an anti-crime bill, but pro-crime in its effects. Our get-tough-on-the-criminal politics has led us to turn away from the very concept of rehabilitation. Instead, we stuff the prisons ever fuller with what we regard as unredeemable social refuse. America now locks up over 2.3 million inmates, some 64% of whom are Hispanic or black. We hold fully one-fourth of the entire world's prison population, jailing people at six to eight times the rate of comparable Western countries. For example, we hold more prisoners in a single *state*, the state of Texas, than do the *nations* of France, Germany, Great Britain, the Netherlands, Japan, and Singapore all

combined. Some 72% of these prisoners are in for non-violent crimes. It costs over $30,000 a year to house each one.

We conduct this under the aegis of the Department of Corrections, but do we truly seek to correct? We lock people in penitentiaries, but do we work to assist them in a penitential process of self-reflection and change? In most cases, the answer is a resounding no.

In Plato's allegory of the cave he portrays prisoners chained so all they can see are shadows cast on a wall which they take to be real, having no object of comparison. This is an apt description of many a prison. Those who might bring light in from the outside world are often sadly absent, with the inmates left to contemplate shadows on a wall – the contempt of authorities, the society of other criminals, and the memories of a failed life. Not surprisingly, upon release inmates are often poorly equipped psychologically, educationally, and occupationally. They also are branded as ex-cons, which takes away jobs, even housing and voting rights. It has been said the prison system serves an expensive way of increasing criminal behavior, or at least keeping under surveillance and restriction large segments of our minority populations.

But there remain the many inmates who also see the prison as a place for exploration and self-transformation. One of the men I worked with, Charles Baxter, a Muslim imam, compared the prison not to Plato's cave, but a "prophet's" cave. He says, "Man is created from one cell, right, and as man grows he adapts into another cell, and that cell's also a place for growth and evelopment. When you read the Koran and the Bible, you'll see that different prophents went to the cave for comfort and iolations. And cell's like that cave." I asked him the size of the kind of cell he was referring to, and to

which he was confined for decades. He said “It’s about the size of a small bathroom in an old house.”

How do we on the outside support such men in their quest for lifelong learning and growth? Here are a few things we have done at Loyola over the years. We have run a book drive to support the prison library system. The funds to purchase books for the Maryland prison library system has recently been zeroed out by the state – that’s right, zero. We have helped produce a brochure to support inmates in developing a meditation practice in prison – over ten thousand have been distributed. We have supported prisoner writing and research – here, for example, is an autobiographical memoir by a prison, Arlando Jones, III, who I know as Tray – that has been published by Loyola’s Apprentice House Press.

Perhaps most importantly, we have continued to run classes in philosophy and the liberal arts, now at the Jessup Correctional Institution, a newer maximum-security facility. For a number of years, I have taken in with me service-learning students from courses I teach at Loyola. The prisoners love the infusion of new energy, and the Loyola students, participating as co-learners alongside the prisoners, have an experience that explodes their stereotypes and impresses them deeply. It’s a win-win situation.

As word has gotten out, more and more area faculty have become interested in volunteering, until this has expanded into a real college-level program, though we give no credits or degrees. It is called the JCI Scholars Program. We have a menu of about seven courses offered a semester, with 130 inmates participating. These include many natural leaders within the prison so I like to think what they learn, and who they become, ripples through the prison, affecting others and the institution. I know this has all had profound effects on me, and on my Loyola students. We have been moved by the prisoners’ own

fierce dedication to, and application of, the liberal arts. I too have become a lifelong learner, educated by lifers.

But I don't want to end by painting too bright a picture, especially given the cruelty of our prison sytem. Tray, the author I mentioned, now in his mid-40s, serving life plus twenty for crimes commited when he was 16 years old, recently wrote me the following. "I feel that I often fall into moments of despair when I can't shake my dark thoughts…I believe I told you in a previous letter that I was beginning to regret my decision to grow intellectually. Knowledge doesn't bring the comfort that ignorance does. If you recall a famous philosopher said, "In life, you get one of two things, knowledge or tranquility…No one can have both."

Knowledge, at times, can be a hard thing to live with, when you're serving endless time with little chance of release. You've built a "new you" – but are stuck with the crimes the "old you" committed – even if they happened when you were very young. You live in a culture, which especially for people of color, seems to demand endless punishment, which many people, communities, and corporations, are profiting from. It is unlikely that your educational accomplishments will win you early release,.

Still, the liberal arts can free us from inner jails of ignorance and self-defeating rage. It can help build supportive communities of learning and positive empowerment. It can help us connect with the greatest minds and spirits who have ever lived. It can prepare us for life, whether that unfolds inside or outside prison walls. I'm reminded of all this every other Monday, the day I go to prison.