

Central to Love: Renaming and Reclaiming Romeo

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Community Fieldwork and Action Research (DP-883)

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September 20, 2001

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It is approximately two hours before show time. The girls are in the chaplain's office madly putting on their make-up, fixing dried baby's breath in their carefully coiffed hair, nervous not to spoil their freshly starched fluorescent orange linen uniforms. Nancy's constant glances towards the window increasingly annoy her stand-in make-up artist. "Stop moving!" scolds Brittany, skillfully negotiating the thin brush between the inner ridge of the lower lid and the smooth surface of Nancy's wandering eye. "They're coming!" Nancy retorts, referring to four tiny orange figures walking two by two, arms behind their back, making slow progress across the vast grassless field that separates the chapel from the boys' unit K/L. Even the delicate application of mascara, a rare treat for girls in lock-up, would have to wait as all the budding Juliets rushed the windows to catch a glimpse of their arriving Romeos. "Hide, Brittany!" the girls squealed, priming their adrenaline glands for the opportunity to surprise Francisco who, upon news of Brittany's release home the week before, was sure he would not be performing his scene today.

I have left the chaplain's office and proceed to the front of the church to greet the incoming troupe of actors, in similarly starched and creased orange uniforms. They look cool, almost aloof upon entering. After eleven years' experience doing theatre programs with incarcerated adolescent boys, I knew enough by now to withhold judging their interior state based upon external observations. I knew they were nervous and excited. I also knew they would do nearly anything before revealing this to me, or to anyone else. Knowing this made me all the more interested in Francisco's reaction to the surprise which awaited him behind the chapel door in the office. After the usual round of hugs I locked arms with Francisco and walked him towards the office. "I've been thinking," I teased, "and it seems impossible to imagine that you won't do your scene today."

"Blade ...," he struggled. We had entertained the possibility of him doing the "lark" scene with an actress since Brittany had gone home. He had flatly refused. If he could not do the scene with his original partner, he did not want to do the scene at all. I repeated my observation today.

"Blade," evoking my nickname for the second time, a lilt of a whine stirring

the word this time, "I already told you...." He was pleading with me, acknowledging the dilemma posed by the power of his feelings, on the one hand, against the respect and admiration we shared for each other and this program. I was adamant, playing my part well.

"No, I've been thinking, and it seems *really* important that you do this scene..." and without finishing the sentence, I had whisked him into the office and into the arms of a squealing Brittany and three other shrieking Juliets. Even a mad dog expression couldn't sustain this flood of feelings; Francisco's face erupted into a volcanic smile and, after his minute long hug with Brittany, turned and squeezed the last air out of my lungs with a gratitude that actually surprised even me. Had it been that important to him after all?

If I profane, with my unworthiest hand

The Romeo Project, as it was initially called, began in a casual conversation one Wednesday night during my hours as a Catholic Volunteer at Central Juvenile Hall, sitting with my usual group: Joel, Lawrence, Edmundo and Francisco. Joey (Joel) had been brooding in dark sadness during much of the first few months of his incarceration. His crime partner, Lawrence, was a comfortable companion but incapable of holding any resonance for Joey's funk. We found each other in the day room of unit K/L one Wednesday night, and it was not long before he began sobbing uncontrollably. Tom Lutz observes, in Crying: the natural and cultural history of tears, a particular "pleasure and sweet satisfaction" in tears (1999, p. 35). For several weeks, when I would meet Joey in the unit, he would arrive at the conversation of his possible life sentence, the incomprehensibility of his situation at 16 years of age, and -- quite bereft of words -- would sink into tears.

For several weeks, I too would join in this "tearful communion" (p. 290) until it seemed, as Lutz notes, that if we were to "continue weeping forever, other opportunities would pass" (p. 290). I well knew what Joey was only beginning to imagine: the appallingly long mandatory sentences imposed on most teen offenders today render the prospect and imagination of rehabilitation meaningless. What is the point of turning one's life around if it is a life in prison? I knew too well the psychological impact of tough sentencing laws on the minds of young offenders. Worse than this, I sensed the thoughtlessness behind the imposition of many of these new laws:

We need to ask whether all of the people who are now incarcerated really ought to be behind bars, and for how long; and how different states are faring under different sentencing regimes. It may come as a surprise that we now know astonishingly little about any of these questions, but it is true. For the most part, the rush to incarcerate has been both indiscriminate and conducted with an astonishing absence of serious evaluation (Currie, 1998, p. 172).

Where was an antidote to this hopelessly laborious injustice? How could I begin to address his, and my own, complete loss of inspiration, given the seemingly insurmountable situation? I began praying for an exit, any opportunity to avoid, divert or escape this lamentation.

One day when I prepared to sit with Joey for our hour of grief he instead came to our meeting with a dream. He was panicked but strangely excited at the prospect that the black dog about whom he dreamt, the dog who chased him and violently tore at him was not able, in the end, to do any harm. In his dream, he said it was as if the dog's teeth were unable to penetrate his leg. His quick interpretation that the dog was Satan and the dream was telling him no harm could befall him seemed to fill him with joy, even as it sank me a little further into my own gloom. Too easy, I thought, and the kind of interpretation that would never let him come to grips with his own dark side.

My own therapeutic experience with Robert Bosnak (1988) led me down a more archetypal path with Joey, inviting him to speak from within the experience of the black dog itself. His face grew angry and his teeth snarled, slightly. "Have you ever felt this way before?" I sneaked this question in to his black dog reverie. "Yeah," he snarled. He did indeed. It was, as he noted, the kind of feeling that would typically land him in trouble, the kind of trouble that had him facing a potential life sentence. How, I began wondering, could kids like Joey ever be invited into any kind of relationship with their "black dogs" if our culture keeps sending them to the proverbial dog house, often times under threat of life without freedom?

We were soon joined, in the weeks to come, by the other boys who would become involved in the Romeo project. We would always begin with the conversations about apparent hopelessness of their disparate situations. Responses to the amount of time they could potentially face were dismal: "45 to life;" "45 to life;" "life;" and "L.W.O.P." (life without parole) were the grim pictures they painted around our little "three-sixty" (circle).

During this early time together, Edmundo -- affectionately called *maceta* (large pot) by the group for his unusually large, round head and simple, loving nature -- was excitedly talking about the upcoming birth of his child, a girl, due within a few weeks. Each time we met our ability to marvel at the advent of new life offered a brief respite from the stagnant future many of the group felt was facing them. To make matters unutterably worse, Edmundo's baby was delivered, fully developed in all areas but without a developed brain. It died upon delivery.

How could our tight group unwrap the meaningful spirituality of this loss? Angelica, his only daughter's name, would now be up in heaven, the group decided, looking after Edmundo in a very special way. This thought offered only more grief, though what unfolded were more stories of loss and heartbreak which brought the group even closer together. We had, without my knowledge, begun our journey towards love, a journey led by the ascent of an angel. bell hooks writes:

Angels bear witness. They are the guardian spirits who watch, protect, and guide us throughout our lives. Sometimes they take a human form. At other times they are pure spirit -- unseen, unimaginable, just forever present. One sign that a religious awakening is taking place in our culture is our obsession with angels.... It reveals our collective desire to return to love. (2000, pp. 225-227)

One week when it seems like we were all collectively tired of praying, tired of talking about grim pictures and tired of waiting on the slow legal process, we began talking about love. The initial conversations have left my memory, but we noticed how powerfully our moods shifted when we were talking about

girlfriends, romance, love of parents. Again, bell hooks lights the path:

Love heals. When we are wounded in the place where we would know love, it is difficult to imagine that love really has the power to change everything. No matter what has happened in our past, when we open our hearts to love we can live as if born again, not forgetting the past but seeing it in a new way, letting it live inside us in a new way.... This is the way healing begins. (p. 209)

Could our group be transformed simply by inviting the images, words and emotions of love into the room? What would this transformation look like? Most importantly, who would this ultimately serve?

A project on love, admittedly, felt too nebulous and amorphous to be "useful." My Germanic, *telos* centered puritan work ethic would hardly admit

the concept that the image of love itself could, if it were given a forum, transform all who partook of its beauty. As a safety measure, I felt I ought to do some group interviewing or counseling work with the kids. Furthermore, I felt I ought to involve their parents. As a final cap, I should probably include a victim of violent crime to ensure that the dialogue would be diverse and the image of love through the contextual tragedy of Romeo & Juliet would be realistic, not romantic.

As soon as I staked out my teliological turf and turned this fun project into a dissertation concept, new obstacles began to unfold themselves each day. My history with this particular population of actors had given me a fairly good frame of reference to anticipate what inevitably followed. The more planned and organized I became, the less authority I had with the minors and the greater resistance I experienced.

References

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