



REACHING

over the

WALL

BY A. ROBERT SMITH

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Their words are touching: “My life was a mess literally. Ever since I have kept contact with y’all my attitude towards the spiritual realm has become the key to my well-being mentally.”

They speak from the heart:

“Y’all sent me a book called *Your Life Understanding: The Universal Laws*. It’s the best self-help book I’ve ever read! I’ve been applying these laws to my life, and man what a change in myself and the people around me.”

They’ve caught sight of a better way:

“I didn’t realize that knowledge could be so powerful. The spiritual guidance that I’ve received through reading and prayer, along with meditation, has transformed my life completely and I only wish to keep growing spiritually.”

They overflow with gratitude:

“You people have been wonderful at providing me exactly what I need, and keeping my interests alive.”

These are the words of prisoners whose letters arrived from behind the walls of scores of American state and federal prisons, addressed to the A.R.E. Prison Outreach Program. One of the less publicized services performed by the Edgar Cayce organizations, the prison service has been reaching out to men and women behind bars for over 35 years, offering inspiration within the overall mission of the A.R.E. to make people’s lives better through the information in the Edgar Cayce readings.

The program today consists largely of mailing books to prison libraries and directly to individual inmates. A few wardens or prison chaplains object to Cayce books, and A.R.E. staff have been known to pray for them until personnel changes open the flow of enlightening information.

Many titles are sent as requested, such as these: “I would like for you to send me another book, a book on dreams and/or spirituality” or “A lot of men in here lose a love one and I usually can comfort them thanks to your books. Could you please send me some books on the soul.” Their letters are answered but the A.R.E. has no pen-pal program as such.

Plans for expanding the program’s reach include focusing on youthful offenders in local detention centers. A Vir-

ginia juvenile corrections judge once said, “The concepts in the material – thinking of others, controlling negative emotions and responses, taking personal responsibility for one’s actions – are all important things for young people to learn. If these troubled youths understand their past actions, they can make better choices for the future.”

“Our purpose is to provide them opportunities for enlightenment and hope,” explains Karla Siedschlag, A.R.E.’s director of Outreach Services. “We’ve given it a lot of increased attention this past year.”

Personal testimonials inspire her determination. One former prisoner with a history of alcoholism said he contemplated suicide until he read the Cayce biography, *There Is a River*, and that book became “the turning point in my life.”

“My perception of life as well as my dreams and goals are now based on spiritual principles developed through the years of studying Edgar Cayce’s work,” he explained. “Be assured that your program is making a difference.”

He has since been released and is now seeking to start an A.R.E. Search for God Study Group in an Arizona prison.

Study Groups functioned in more than 70 prisons in the 1980s, according to Judith Stevens Allison, who began the outreach to prisoners in 1972 by answering inquiring letters from prisoners who’d heard about Edgar Cayce. They seemed so eager for information about “the Sleeping Prophet” that she got approval to send them books and tapes of lectures by A.R.E. speakers. “I asked for any books from the A.R.E. Press, damaged books, or whatever, because we had no budget,” she recalled.

The study group she attended at the time, Virginia Beach 17, led by Gladys Davis, Edgar Cayce’s longtime secretary, offered to support the prison outreach effort and gave half their donations to finance it. Judith and others tithed their income to contribute to what she named the “Over the Wall” program. The number of books sent to prisons increased from 1638 in 1981 to 7882 in 1985. Today some 10,000 books are sent each year.

“It grew like topsy,” she said. “I went to prisons all over the country, both minimum and maximum security, to jails, to

road camps. I never feared for my safety.”

There were 13 prison groups in Virginia alone in the 1980s. An A.R.E. member customarily volunteered to conduct the study group, if a request was received from prisoners or their chaplain. One study group has been going for 35 years in a maximum security institution in Washington state, Ms. Siedschlag said.

Jim Dixon, a longtime A.R.E. staff member, who worked with a study group in a Huntsville, Texas prison for over a dozen years “observed many whose lives made full 180-degree turns from resentful bitterness and cynicism to optimistic and excited expectations for the future.”

A.R.E.’s prison outreach declined during the 1990s when budget cuts eliminated the staffing, and management changes gave higher priority to other A.R.E. programs. It has since been revived with the aid of donations solicited by current management from members at large. One donor recently pledged \$500 a month to buy books. Several patrons gave \$10,000 gifts. The annual budget for the program has been increased from \$36,000 two years ago to \$56,000 this year. Given added funding, a student intern will join the team for research and record keeping.

The expense of mailing books has virtually doubled since 9/11, September 11, 2001. For security reasons, many prisons now refuse to accept delivery of packages sent by media mail, the least expensive designation, and insist on first class postage.

The program is conducted under Ms. Siedschlag’s supervision by two members of the A.R.E. Headquarters staff, James Van Auken and Opal Rogers, with the help of five part-time volunteers who pack books and reply to inmates’ requests. In the six years she’s worked in the program, Ms. Rogers said they’ve received only one hostile letter, which said “Your books are awful, don’t send any more.” But many inmates who’ve read one book ask for another. “What I need from you is more great books to study,” wrote one prisoner. “I have found *Toward a Deeper Meditation* by John VanAuken to be perhaps the most readable, enjoyable, insightful book I’ve received yet,” wrote another.

Most of the books are published by

the A.R.E. Press, the book publishing division of the Cayce organizations, which gives the prison program a deep discount. Some books are donated by A.R.E. members and headquarters staff from their own libraries.

Among the popular topics being sent are: Family Karma, Overcoming Fear & Anxiety, Dreams: Your Magic Mirror, Meditation: Gateway to Light, The Search for the Girl with Blue Eyes, Reincarnation of Biblical Characters, Persian Legacy, Edgar Cayce's Atlantis, Edgar Cayce on Vibrations, Nurturing the Body Temple, Akashic Records, The Psychic Sense, Soul & Spirit, Channeling Your Higher Self, No Death, Soul Growth, End Times, Christ the Power and the Passion, and Jesus: His Words Decoded. Also Ancient Egyptian Mysticism, Beginning the Search, The Multi-sensory Human, and Guidelines for Prayer & Meditation for Help & Healing.

One correspondent said, "Thank you for sending such inspirational books! I am locked in a cell 23 hours a day alone."

The A.R.E. notes that Edgar Cayce, as a young man, began visiting jails when he was a Bible teacher in his native Kentucky. In reading 281-18 he paraphrased Jesus: "Ye that minister to the sick, to the disconsolate, to those in prison, to those in turmoils and strife, minister unto me."

That there is great turmoil in American prisons today is more evident than ever. There are some 2 million prisoners in

American federal, state and local prisons or jails, and the projections have it rising in the years ahead. Prisons have become increasingly overcrowded. The main reason is the use of illegal drugs, plus the propensity of lawmakers and jurists to favor harsher punishment in the form of longer sentences and abolition of parole rather than devoting more attention to rehabilitation.

Drug convictions account for 53.6 per cent of the federal prison population, according to the Bureau of Prisons, or more than all the other crimes combined. The other offenses were weapons, explosives and arson 14.1 per cent; illegal immigration 10.7; robbery 5.5; fraud 4.2; burglary, property crimes 3.9; homicide and kidnapping 3.1; and sex crimes 2.2.

The Bureau of Prisons reports that 34 per cent of prisoners are enrolled in one or more education programs, some just learning to read, others gaining the equivalency of a high school diploma. And about 18 per cent are employed in prison industries, learning such skills as auto mechanics, recycling, and electronics. That leaves 66 per cent not gaining further education, and 82 per cent idly doing time.

Charles Campbell, a former warden with the Federal Bureau of Prisons, is alarmed about these conditions. He says that the prison system has become largely a "warehousing" operation that gives less and less attention to rehabilitating inmates

for eventual release. In his recent memoir, *Doing Easy Time*, Campbell is especially critical of turning many prisons over to private companies to operate.

"Essentially, what profit-driven privatization of prisons does is to commercialize, and thus make undesirable, the factors that contribute to keeping the prisons filled to capacity," wrote Campbell. He cites cost-cutting policies and low standards for training correction officers as common in privately managed prisons, undermining the goals of rehabilitation.

Another regrettable condition is the symbiotic relationship that has developed between prison companies and legislators who press for tougher anti-crime laws.

"We can be certain that lobbyists for the private prison industry and other businesses that profit from having large numbers of people behind bars stalk the halls of the Congress and state legislatures throughout the country. Money in large amounts flows into the campaign coffers of the politicians who make criminal justice policy," says Campbell.

The prisoner population, which has tripled in the last 25 years, has become "a vast, brimming reservoir of anger and resentment," he added. "Hundreds of thousands of alienated young men without lawful skills and without hope are released into the community every year. It is a largely unrecognized national disaster."

About three out of every four prison-

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A.R.E. Outreach Services, 215 67th Street, Virginia Beach, VA 23451

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ers who are released become repeat offenders. Lack of support system for newly released individuals is often the cause, contends Garry Sims of Hope Aglow Ministries in Lynchburg, VA.

The efforts of such non-profit groups to help avert disaster by helping turn around the prisoners' lives are low on budget and high on principle. Their volunteers are impelled by faith and charitable virtue. The A.R.E. Prison Outreach Program is one of numerous such efforts. Many churches or religious groups are active in helping mitigate the harmful effect of prison life, visiting inmates, distributing Bibles and religious tracts, offering counseling, Bible lessons, and pen-pal correspondents. Some ministries offer correspondence courses. The Salvation Army sends missionaries into the jails and devotes the proceeds from its thrift stores to helping inmates in government half-way houses. Others operate their own halfway houses.

A central tenet of the Cayce philosophy that seems effective is its emphasis on personal responsibility and that no one's present circumstances are by accident but by virtue of their own thoughts and actions. As an inmate at a Chesapeake, Virginia prison said after studying the materials, "I have come to realize that my situation is of my own making and that it can only be changed by me."

A New York City police inspector said a study group "is ideally suited for a prison setting. The concept put forth, that we are all the creators of our present circumstances, can provide dramatic changes in some and plant the seeds of change in others who are earnestly seeking."

A man who was incarcerated in Texas for 13 years, and later became a minister, reported that "everyone who was involved with the A.R.E. Study Group on the Ellis Unit of the Texas Department of Corrections made parole and never returned to prison. Through this program an individual is able to really look into himself and see the motivating factors which cause him to act the way he does, and then to correct his actions in his dealings with others."

When Canadian members helped organize a study group in a prison in Laval, they were cautioned "that there was strict

separation between the French and English prisoners and an additional line separating the black prisoners from both. Within six to eight months the A.R.E. study group had bridged all lines of segregation in complete harmony, to the amazement of the administration."

A California member who volunteered to conduct a study group at San Quentin in the 1970s saw "constructive changes in the prisoners. . . as they were changing their attitudes and behavior, becoming more joyous and filled with hope and enthusiasm."

A psychiatrist in North Carolina said he thought "any inmate who participates in it will find a more satisfying personal philosophy of life that will help him develop a new, positive, constructive set of values."

An example of this positive result is a man who had been imprisoned in Ohio for murder at age 16, and paroled in his late 20s. "I had grown up in prison and in many ways I had not prepared myself to leave it and assume responsibility in the 'free world,' so it is not surprising that I returned to prison," he wrote.

Back in prison, he focused on self-improvement as a member of a group but never found the "real me" for another 16 years until he began getting encouraging materials from A.R.E., including *Many Mansions* by Gina Cerminara. He joined a Search for God study group.

"During my study of the A.R.E. material, something was emphasized that I had sensed before: I had to involve myself. I had already come to the conclusion that prison rehabilitation doesn't exist unless the person takes it upon himself to change. The A.R.E reinforced this by shifting the responsibility for my own life to me, while letting me know I wouldn't be alone and that the A.R.E would be there to provide support, guidance and continuing materials for study."

Paroled once again, having being in prison for over 18 years, he became active in the Jaycees, married, and became manager of a business. "I would have to credit A.R.E. as a turning point in my life."

Such testimonials from those who have benefited inspires A.R.E. management to expand the program, especially in

Anyone wishing to contribute books may send them to Prison Program, A.R.E., 215 67th St., Virginia Beach, VA 23451. Paperbacks are preferred, as some prisons won't accept hardbacks because they could be used as a weapon, but either is welcome, said Ms. Rogers. Funds may be donated to the same address or online at www.EdgarCayce.org/donate.



light of the deterioration of government help for inmates, to bridge the gap from a life of crime to good citizenship.

"If prison authorities are devoting less time to rehabilitation efforts it poses additional challenges for our outreach efforts to prisoners," declares Karla Siedschlag. "We must work harder to identify prisons where we can provide books to prisoners and to address the continually changing staff and policies at prisons. We must be constantly willing to form and reform positive relationships, establishing our intentions with the prison administrations in order to accomplish our mission of hope with as many prisoners as possible."

Symbolic of those who benefit is the testimony of the former prisoner in Arizona: "I stand here four months until my release from prison in a perpetual state of reverence for life and the holy mystery, knowing that the best is yet to come. As I near the end of my long walk through the desert I thank you all for helping to make it a journey and not just a destination. May God bless you all." ❧

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