

A Zen Motorcycle Odyssey: Women and Children in the Jails and Prisons of our Nation

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Seldom in a lifetime, if ever, arises the opportunity of a physical challenge coupled with a meaningful experience. Last summer, I had the opportunity to ride a motorcycle on an odyssey to the four corners of the nation to speak on women and children in our jails and prisons. On the surface, it was a 10,585-mile ride, done in 59 days, with more than 20 talks.

The motivation for the journey came from a group of nine female youthful offenders I had in a mind-body stress reduction program at the women's prison in Lowell, Florida. Seven of them had at least one child, and two of the children had been born to women shackled behind bars, and they had been taken from their mothers within an hour of being born.

As I came to know these kids, I learned that none were incarcerated for violent crimes, nor were they a threat to society. There were three questions that came from the experience for me. The first was, why? The second was, what

is the impact on the children? And finally, what could be done about it?

The tragedy is that, according to national statistics,¹ 60 percent of those released from prison will return within three years, and about 70 percent of their children will end up incarcerated too.

Statistically, three out of five of those youthful offenders with babies will return to prison within three years, and their children will be without their mothers for a second time. Multiply that by maybe 100,000 and you can see we have a real train wreck headed our way.

I am often asked if there is a thread that runs through the non-Zen classes I teach in prison. The truth is that the bones come from *The Compass of Zen*. The backbone rotates around Jon Kabat-Zinn's Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), which was developed at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center. Frequently I will refer to these threads as "stealth Buddhism."

Jon Kabat-Zinn is clear in his book *Full Catastrophe Living* that ". . . it is no accident that mindfulness comes out of Buddhism, which has as its overriding concerns the relief of suffering and the dispelling of illusions." However, I build on this concept in two classes I developed, "Inward Journey" and "Success in College," by constantly coming back to *The Compass of Zen* for a consistent set of bones that supports both classes and builds on the experiential practice of MBSR.

The basic dynamic I use in teaching reentry into the free world emphasizes building a plan based on one's direction, which translates into "What is the cosmic glue that gives meaning to our life?"

The question of direction is put to students on the first class of each cycle, and there is a full two-hour block of instruction built into the two-month cycle of instruction. The key to direction is that they need a benchmark for every decision they make, not just in planning for reentry but



Photo: Joseph Vivona



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in the daily moment-to-moment decision making process when they get out.

One challenge in particular is that those people who knew them before they went to prison have no reason to change their own behavior, because they did not go to prison. However, clarity in direction and knowing that circumstances have changed often means the difference between living a meaningful life or going back to prison.

There is a reason why 60 percent of the women that come out of prison go back. Those women sitting in the Inward Journey classes give vocal testimony to the importance of understanding change and direction.

My experience of riding through the highways and byways of the country has been that the mind operates on two levels. There is the mechanical level of “what if” coupled with processing all the what ifs. Then there is a deeper level of processing that goes on at an unconscious level.

Essentially in the last 15 years, I had been teaching in prisons without a break. The 60 days I spent on the road afforded me the opportunity to process a lot of stuff I had not yet processed. My talks were in a constant state of change as I was verbalizing all that I processed. Also, each day I blogged, I was verbalizing a lot that I was processing between talks. The best description of the odyssey was ride, blog and talk, with scenic breaks in between.

I have been asked a ton of questions about being on the road and the particulars of how and what we did. I tried to put together as much as I could, and a lot came together in no particular order. However, at the core of a road trip, as at the core of life, is just the direction.

You cannot plan such a trip simply by getting a tent and sleeping bag and having a vague destination. The characters

in the movie *Easy Rider* traveled without direction, and that ended most tragically. Aside from that, a Peter Fonda or Dennis Hopper I am not. I was a retired soldier in the summer of his 69th year who was on a mission. Essentially, *Easy Rider* was just a bike trip from California to New Orleans.

Our trip had a clear direction. It was to raise the level of awareness of women and children in the jails and prisons of the nation, and to do it, we took motorcycles to the four corners of the country as a vehicle to spread the message.

Even though a lot of people opened their homes and organizations to our presence, it was still an expensive project. In an effort to reduce expenses I chose a combination of camping, staying at people’s houses and at nonprofit organizations, and occasionally sleeping in motels when the situation demanded.

Beside that, in many respects, motorcycles are not only hard but most inefficient. It takes time to load and unload them with camping gear—about an hour or two at the end of each day’s ride. Loading a bike is a mindful exercise, and the price of carelessness is becoming instant roadkill at highway speeds. In addition to camping gear, we packed computers and projectors, as well as clothes to wear during the presentations.

We created a blog to generate interest in the trip (<http://gatelessgatezen.com>) and to help students prepare for the talks beforehand, as well as review them afterward. Although this sounds nice, it also required from me at least two hours a day.

The blog did serve its purpose, and by the time we got to Cambridge there had been more than 5,500 hits on it. I decided to continue the blog after the odyssey, based on requests from ex-offenders as well as from volunteers at talks around the country. Also, we had to expand our Web server’s bandwidth during the trip as the visits and downloads exceeded our existing contract.

I think the biggest surprise of all was crossing the Florida-Georgia state line on the last day. The question that occupied my mind was, do I really want to come back to my life of teaching in prisons? The simplicity of life as a motorcycle vagabond has a great deal of appeal. However, return I did, and when I went to the prison to give my first class of the 19th cycle, I knew I had done the right thing.

Know then, that I will ride anywhere to speak to any audience in any venue on the issue of women and children in the jails and prisons of our nation.

Note

1. See, for example, www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/216950.pdf.