

Integrity Forged in Cages

by Chris Hedges via claire - TruthDig *Monday, May 13 2019, 10:06pm*

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Chris Hedges delivered this talk to 27 graduating students who were formerly incarcerated -- several of whom he taught in prison -- and their families at Rutgers University on Friday. The ceremony was held by the Mountainview Program at Rutgers, which helps students complete their degrees at Rutgers after they take college courses inside prisons through the New Jersey Scholarship and Transformative Education in Prisons Consortium (NJ-STEP) program.

My fellow college graduates: Integrity is not an inherited trait. It is not conferred by privilege or status or wealth. It cannot be bequeathed by elite schools or institutions. It is not a product of birth or race or gender. Integrity is not a pedigree or a brand. Integrity is earned. Integrity is determined not by what we do in life, but what we do with what life gives us. It is what we overcome. Integrity is the ability to affirm our dignity even when the world tells us we are worthless. Integrity is forged in pain and suffering, loss and tragedy. It is forged in the courtrooms where you were sentenced. It is forged in the shackles you were forced to wear. It is forged in the cages where you lived, sometimes for decades. It is forged in the cries of your children, those who lost their mothers or their fathers to the monstrosity of mass incarceration. It is forged in the heartache of your parents, your brothers, your sisters, your spouses and your partners. Integrity is forged by surmounting the hell around you to study in a cramped and claustrophobic cell for the college degree no one, perhaps not even you, thought you would ever earn. Integrity is to refuse to become a statistic. Integrity is to rise up and shout out to an indifferent universe: I AM SOMEBODY. And today no one can deny who you are, what you have achieved and what you have become -- college graduates, men and women of integrity who held on fiercely to your dignity and your capacity to exert your will, and triumphed.

Several of you are my former students: Boris, Steph, Tone, Hanif and Ronal -- though to be honest it is hard for me to use the word "former." To me you always will be my students. I have spent many hours with you in prison classrooms. I know the scars you bear. You will bear these scars, this trauma, for life. Own your suffering. Do not deny it. And know that healing comes only by reaching out to others who suffer. It is to say to those thrown aside by society: "I too was despised. I too was where you are. I too felt alone and abandoned. But like me, you can and will endure." I am not romantic about suffering. I saw a lot of it as a war correspondent. Suffering can make some people better. Others, it degrades and destroys. But those who surmount suffering, who hold fast to compassion and empathy, can become what Carl Jung called "wounded healers."

Thornton Wilder, in his play "The Angel That Troubled the Waters," wrote, "Without your wounds, where would your power be? ... The very angels themselves cannot persuade the wretched and blundering children on earth as can one human being broken on the wheels of living. In love's service, only wounded soldiers can serve." And there was something else I learned as a war correspondent: Education is morally neutral. The highly educated can be as cruel and sadistic as the illiterate. This is why so many human predators who profit from the misery of the poor in corporations such as Goldman Sachs have been groomed in Ivy League universities. This is why James Baldwin wrote that "brilliance without passion -- and by this he means moral passion -- is nothing more than sterility."

In Tony Kushner's play "Angels in America" he writes of the suffering and demonization of gay men with AIDS, not unlike the suffering and demonization many of you have felt as members of the criminal caste.

"In your experience of the world. How do people change?" Harper asks.

"Well it has something to do with God so it's not very nice," the Mormon mother answers. "God splits the skin with a jagged thumbnail from throat to belly and then plunges a huge filthy hand in, he grabs hold of your bloody tubes and they slip to evade his grasp but he squeezes hard, he insists, he pulls and pulls till all your innards are yanked out and the pain! We can't even talk about that. And then he stuffs them back, dirty, tangled and torn. It's up to you to do the stitching."

"And then get up," Harper says. "And walk around."

"Just mangled guts pretending," the Mormon mother affirms.

"That's how people change," says Harper.

Trauma is not static. It is dynamic. It is written on your flesh. These scars will keep you honest if you use them to see your own face in those who are demonized -- women, immigrants, the LGBTQ community, Muslims, poor people of color. If truth is to be heard, as Theodor Adorno wrote, suffering must be allowed to speak. Flannery O'Connor recognized that the moral life always entails confrontation with the world. "St. Cyril of Jerusalem, in instructing catechisms, wrote: 'The dragon sits by the side of the road, watching those who pass. Beware lest he devour you. We go to the Father of Souls, but it is necessary to pass by the dragon.' No matter what form the dragon may take, it is of this mysterious passage past him, or into his jaws, that stories of any depth will always be concerned to tell, and this being the case, it requires considerable courage at any time, in any country, not to turn away from the storyteller."

There are people in this room who committed crimes, but there are no criminals here today. Not that criminals do not exist. Is it not criminal to allow more than 12 million children in the United States to go to bed hungry every night while Amazon, which earned \$11 billion in profits last year, paid no federal taxes? In fact, in our system of corporate welfare, Amazon received a \$129 million tax rebate from the federal government. Is it not criminal that half of all Americans live in poverty, or near-poverty, while the three richest men in America, including the founder of Amazon, Jeff Bezos, have combined fortunes worth more than the total wealth of the poorest half of Americans? Is it not criminal that millions of factory jobs, which once allowed families to earn a living wage with health and retirement benefits, have been shipped to places like Monterrey, Mexico, where Mexican workers in GM plants earn \$3 an hour without benefits? Is it not criminal that our families have been sacrificed to feed the mania for corporate profit, left to rot in violent and post-industrial wastelands such as Newark or Camden? Is it not criminal to harass and terrorize the poor on the streets of our cities for petty activities, such as selling loose cigarettes or "obstructing pedestrian traffic," which means standing too long on a sidewalk, while Bank of America, Citibank and Goldman Sachs have never been held accountable for trashing the global economy, wiping out 40 percent of the world's wealth through fraud? Is not criminal that, as poverty has gone up and crime has actually gone down, our prison population has more than doubled?

George Bernard Shaw got it right:

Poverty is "the worst of crimes. All the other crimes are virtues beside it; all the other dishonors are chivalry itself by comparison. Poverty blights whole cities, spreads horrible pestilences, strikes dead

the very souls of all who come within sight, sound, or smell of it. What you call crime is nothing: a murder here and a theft there, a blow now and a curse then. What do they matter? They are only the accidents and illnesses of life; there are not 50 genuine professional criminals in London. But there are millions of poor people, abject people, dirty people, ill-fed, ill-clothed people. They poison us morally and physically; they kill the happiness of society; they force us to do away with our own liberties and to organize unnatural cruelties for fear they should rise against us and drag us down into their abyss. Only fools fear crime; we all fear poverty."

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel said of society that "some are guilty, but all are responsible." The crime of poverty is a communal crime. Our failure, as the richest nation on earth, to provide safe and healthy communities, ones where all children have enough to eat and a future, is a communal crime. Our failure to provide everyone, and especially the poor, with a good education is a communal crime. Our failure to make health care a human right and our forcing parents, burdened with astronomical medical bills, to bankrupt themselves to save their sick sons or daughters are communal crimes. Our failure to provide meaningful work -- in short, the possibility of hope -- is a communal crime. Our decision to militarize police forces and build prisons, rather than invest in people, is a communal crime. Our misguided belief in charity and philanthropy rather than justice is a communal crime. "You Christians have a vested interest in unjust structures which produce victims to whom you then can pour out your hearts in charity," Karl Marx said, chastising a group of church leaders.

If we do not work to eliminate the causes of poverty, the greatest of all crimes, the institutional structures that keep the poor poor, then we are responsible. There are issues of personal morality, and they are important, but they mean nothing without a commitment to social morality. Only those who have been there truly understand. Only those with integrity speak the truth. And this is why I place my faith in you.

My first student to get out of prison, nearly four years ago, Boris Franklin, is graduating today. I met him with his mother at the gate. He had spent 11 years inside. His first words to me were "I have to rebuild my library."

Boris was part of the class in East Jersey State Prison that wrote the play "Caged." He and I devoted hundreds of hours over the last four years editing and rewriting it for the stage. It was performed a year ago at the Passage Theatre in Trenton, with Boris taking one of the pivotal roles. It was sold out nearly every night, attended by families who knew too intimately the pain of mass incarceration.

In that class we read August Wilson's play "Joe Turner's Come and Gone." The conjurer Bynum Walker tells traumatized African Americans emerging from the nightmare of slavery and lynching that they each have a song, but they must seek it out. Once they find their song, they will find their unity as a people, their inner freedom and their identity. The search for one's song in Wilson's play functions like prayer. It gives each person a purpose, strength and hope. It allows a person, even one who has been bitterly oppressed, to speak his or her truth defiantly to the world. Our song affirms us, even if we are dejected and despised, as human beings.

Boris was as determined as I to make that song, your song, heard outside the prison walls, to lift up that truth, to affirm the integrity of those the world has forgotten and demonized. Your song is vital. It must be heard. I do not know if I could have endured what you have endured and become who you have become. Boris once told our friend Michael Nigro that he did not understand why people like me went into the prison, that in the 'hood when somebody did something for you, he or she usually wanted something. But you should know, my students, what you have given me. It cannot be quantified monetarily. It is one of the most precious things I possess. It is your friendship. And that is why today I am the most blessed among you.

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[Well delivered Mr Hedges, I note that you have finally triumphed over your morbidity and defeatism.]

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