



# Empowering the Outcast: Past versus Future Storytelling

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# ESSAY

## EMPOWERING THE OUTCAST:

### Past Versus Future Storytelling

in partial fulfillment of Leadership Training

School of Playback Theatre

by Darby Hayes ▲ July 2006

I entered the salliport of the prison at 1:30 pm. The sliding door was heavy and with ominous thickness. A humming motor generated it's opening sliding movement and, in turtle-speed, gave me access to the inner sanctum of the security check. The door was heavy massive steel with layers of ultra thick glass and closed with equal speed. Now 1:45, my impatience began to mount. The sounds of its motorized glide finished in an echoing clunk, signaled the "search". Its matching counterpart, only a few feet away, offered exit from "the salliport" and entrance to the compound grounds. Both stood like stations of power-over-passage, laden with secret stories of daily incomings and outgoings of staff, officers, volunteers, and visitors.

It was a regimented security process, filled with standard operating procedures befitting a high security prison. Policies and procedures were tantamount to my need to get to class.... and being delayed at this portal frustrated the hell out of me. Yet, I complied with all the wherefore's and whatnot's just to get to the prison's Wellness Center on time to meet the PathFinders, my playback troupe of wayward souls, caught in the web of disillusionment and misfortune.

The women trickled into this large open exercise room, one by one, sometimes in two's and three's. Dressed in pale blue uniforms and fatigue boots, their moods were usually solemn, often fatigued with the routines of regimented prison life. Sometimes they were downcast or agitated by some newly mandated restriction or procedural policy. Their personal dilemmas usually centered around health or jumping a myriad of hoops around the logistics of their incarceration. It was apparent that they lacked luster and enthusiasm for life.

How would I manage these downcast and draining attitudes? What would I do today?.... the lesson plan I prepared? .... or some facsimile of instruction? I could always rely on a game or two for loosening the hold on their anger, fatigue, and depression. Then what? Their futility flashed like a warning beacon in the dark night. For them, there was no escape. They knew nothing more than being rejected and deprived of the freedom that others glibly presume. Their in-group connections, whether large or small, became their redemption from being the societal outcast.

In their confinement, women incarcerates learn quickly that their station in life is reduced to the bottom denominator of a cattle herd. Institutional staff refer to meal time as "feeding time". Inmates have little to turn to for solace save junk food snacks from the canteen and a cigarette break, restricted to the hot asphalt pavement in the tropical sun. When they enter the gates of "the correctional institution", these women leave behind the dignity and self respect that we take for granted as part of daily life. I often wondered why did I ever chose this population for my playback grant project?

**INTRODUCTION:** This essay contains a scope of the project and reflections on my experience facilitating PathFinders Theatre. I developed and implemented this Playback Theatre (PT) training program at a high security prison for women in 2003-2005. As a grant project, the aim of PathFinders Theatre was to teach performance skills to under-served populations, yet the more striking outcomes were their changes in attitudes and behaviors.

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I will attempt to give the reader an understanding of the nature of this population: background profiles and considerations, environment, psychological aspects, and the nature of incarceration. More importantly, I want to share with you the discoveries I made relative to the themes used to invite stories for telling in Playback Theatre. Perhaps this essay will provoke contemplation, discussion, and further exploration of the impact of past versus future stories. After all, we do live by the stories we tell and the felon's life dramatically illustrates this concept.

**Profiles of Female Felons:** I met the Director of Wellness Services at the prison four years earlier. She was eager to bring in a theatre program for these women and welcomed my input. She informed me about the nature of female incarcerates. It became apparent to me that women inmates would benefit greatly from a playback training and performance program. It was important for me to understand this population and the conditions of their environment.

Different from male incarcerates, most female incarcerates are victims of serious abuse (sexual, physical, and/or emotional) and addiction patterns. Women in prison often enter the system with complex histories indicative of neglect and abuse, starting in childhood and continuing through adulthood. In a 1996 study by Coca and Austin, 92.1% of the female offenders interviewed reported having received some form of emotional, physical, or sexual abuse prior to their current prison term. Thirty-one point one percent reported they had been forced to engage in sex, or had been raped or sodomized as children.<sup>1</sup>

To effectively understand the typical female offender, one must first understand her past. Trauma in the forms of domestic violence, sexual abuse, and prostitution can injure an individual permanently and female offenders carry these scars. Many women are incarcerated for drug related offenses. A recent study by the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) indicates that "for the female prison population, drug offenders were the largest source of growth." This is in sharp contrast to male offenders, who have much higher convictions for violent offenses.<sup>2</sup>

Studies have also demonstrated that abuse of women initiates depression, anger control problems, self-destructive behavior, and even suicide. Abused women who become incarcerated take those problems with them to prison, requiring long term mental health treatment.<sup>3</sup> Female offenders, in general, are poorly educated. In one study of female offenders, 64.4% had not completed high school. In that same study those offenders reported significantly lower levels of education during their primary and secondary school years.<sup>4</sup>

This typical profile, together with considerations for different learning styles, levels of education, ethnic profiles, sexual orientation, and age differences presents a population challenged with poor self-management, self-reliance and communication skills, and issues of personal integrity and low self-esteem. Their herstory is typically a lineage laden with heavy emotional and/or physical abuse that fuels their emotional addictions to anger, blame, guilt, shame, resentment, and lack.

**Inmate Statistics:** Literacy - 32.5% are functionally literate. Age - 40% between ages of 35 and 49. Education - 17.3% have GED or high school diploma. Psychological problems - 82.8% received routine psychological treatment. Primary offenses - 37.4% are in for drug-related offenses. Race - 62.6% are black; 34.4% are white; 2.4% are Hispanic; .2% are Native American. Religion - 73% are Christian heritage; 4.1% are Islamic heritage; 2.5% are Jewish heritage (Florida Department of Corrections 6/04).

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<sup>1-4</sup> SPECIAL REPORT ON FEMALE OFFENDERS IN FLORIDA PRISONS Supplement to The State of Florida Correctional Medical Authority's Annual Report 1998-1999

**Typical Inmate Herstory:** Centre for Playback Theatre - www.playbackcentre.org (Excerpt from an article on the Criminal Justice System, "Putting Faith in Ex-Cons, Miami Herald, 2005.) Many women inmates are like MB, 37, a soft-spoken woman who looks like a school teacher. She is now in prison, convicted of drug dealing. MB has a sick mother and a child with emotional problems. This is her eighth time in jail. Her criminal career, which began in 1986, has been a mix of auto theft, drug possession and dealing.

Every time M. B. Gets out of jail it is the same thing. She can only get a room or an efficiency apartment in a run-down building in a dangerous neighborhood. Once someone hires her for a minimum-wage job, she no longer qualifies for food stamps. So MB Goes back to her old ways to pay the bills. She starts dealing a little bit on the side and then a little bit more, until she is arrested again. "It's either steal for food or deal drugs," said MB, who said she isn't looking for a handout - just a break. "All I want is the chance to make a decent living and live in a decent place and make my bills."

Inmate, SH, 42, is a repeat offender. She has been in and out of jail eight times since 1985 for forgery, robbery, and auto theft. "You get out of here with all these new skills (computer, office skills training, optical-lens manufacturing, fashion design) and they won't hire us because we are ex-felons. We can't even get Section 8 (government voucher) housing. After you finish your punishment in here, it's continued on the outside. It's like, 'Well, you're a felon. Why should we hire you? Why should we give you a lease?'" Most women in prison have something in common - they have children or parents that they need to take care of once they leave prison, and have no financial resources to do that.

**THE CORRECTIONAL ENVIRONMENT:** Prison officers police the compound with jaded attitudes, heralding these wayward souls as the dredges of humanity, worth nothing more than the dirt they walk on. Inmates are labeled "offenders", "felon", or "incarcerate". All treatment towards them reinforces this station and all that is implied as being a bad person and a threat to society. The only saving grace for insuring humane treatment are the obligatory policies that maintain the basic human rights proclaimed by law. An inmate does have the right to file a grievance, if she has the courage to do so in spite of staff or peer retribution. More often inmates tend to wallow helplessly in perpetual fear and resentment, living on the edge of "lock down" for the smallest unacceptable reactive behaviors.

**The Purpose is to Punish:** After many months working with these inmates, I came to understand that the restoration of the human spirit has little place or value in the correctional setting. Prison life is built on fear through the practice of punishment. The system perpetuates the belief that punishment for a crime is a deterrent for further criminal or abhorrent behavior, yet recidivism rates continually rise. Inmates quickly learn to contend with personal debasement but not without the seeding and feeding of their anger and resentment, blame and guilt, self pity and depression.

Fear and degradation impact daily prison life. There is a regulation for everything. Victimization is fervently reinforced by the policing authority. Where victimization is rampant and perpetuated, there is little place for personal empowerment. Motivation for behavior is built on fear and causes further contention, breeding contempt and conflict.

**Prison Activities:** From the moment women enter the penal system, their dignity and self esteem are debased and battered at every juncture. Because these women are stereotyped by corrections officers as "scum, liars, cheats, thieves...", they are treated with little regard. Needs for housing and food are basically satisfied. Labor is menial, with most jobs focus on cleaning and maintenance, food prep and grounds keeping. From the moment they enter the justice system, these women are viewed as burdensome, of no value to society.

I also learned about other programs that were offered to inmates within the prison compound. In addition to the prison ministry programs, there are GED and other technical training programs, including seamstress training, and optical lens technology. The prison has an addiction treatment program as well as basic medical and mental health services. These programs benefit a small portion of the prison population. These constructive learning programs offer valued academic and technical training, contributing to their esteem, recognition, and self-actualization needs.<sup>5</sup> Their meals are mostly composed of highly processed weight producing foods and the quality housing and hygiene is barely basic.

**This Is the Justice System:** Sentenced to an environment that perpetuates this victim mentality, offenders have little to no authority or control over their lives, save for bodily care and functions. Any hope to escape from the emotional tyranny of sentenced punishment is futile and perpetuated by agendas filled with mistrust, anger, resentment and lack (lack of esteem, personal power, hope). Any search for escape from this despairing treatment is short lived, whether their prison term is short or long . . . or even life long.

For these women, to find any morsel of self esteem is a rare find. They have lost self control, made poor choices, sought quick fixes to their life dilemmas. Somewhere along the way, their guidance system became distorted by their urge to survive and inner longings to belong and succeed. With having lost their dignity and valued place in society, these women are hungry for redemption, yearning for some way to recover from their moral dilemma, some way of coping with the emotional anguish of shame and guilt, compounded yet by penal imprisonment.

Any morsel of self worth met its demise the moment they entered the prison walls. The system has the power to condemn or forgive. They themselves are powerless, for the system has the power to punish or to have mercy, to control when they sleep and wake and feed. For the majority of women inmates, the only thread of salvation, the only way to sanely survive the unyielding hell of prison punishment, was Jesus. He has the power to make things right again... to forgive, to have mercy, to bring peace of mind, and to heal the wounds of broken promises.

For many offenders, the only pathway to hope within such a confinement is the spiritual sanctity of the chapel. Acknowledged as sacro sanct, this refuge offers a respite for the captive and desperate, the victim of their own making. Attraction to the mystical, under such duress, seems natural for a majority of the women inmates.

The magical quality of intangible benevolence, outside of their stained and tattered souls, offers here-to-for denied forgiveness. The unconditional regard, sourced from heaven's perfection, is a place of solace in their lonely isolation... an idea of the all embracing love and acceptance they so desperately want. Here they give their power to a mystical force, convinced they are tainted, bad, and unworthy sinners, and that they could be redeemed by the Savior, only if they repented for their sins.

**PLAYBACK THEATRE IN THE CORRECTIONAL ENVIRONMENT:** It is a rare opportunity to bring an arts education program into a penal institution. Having been given the opportunity to receive grant support, I eagerly went to work and designed the PathFinders Theatre project for women in prison. This was virgin territory for me. My idealistic view of implementing a playback theatre training program was eventually thwarted by in-house cynicism, resistance, and restriction. I eventually became familiar with the myriad of limitations set by standard operating procedures in a high security prison, often tumbling into entrapments compounded by administrative and staffs' personal agendas of power and control. This, I quickly learned, is typical of the culture of the correctional infrastructure, which contributes to

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<sup>5</sup> Abraham Maslow, Motivation and Personality, 2nd ed., Harper & Row, 1970

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a myriad of practices intended to insult and degrade the human dignity of the offender.

**Program Schedule:** I designed and implemented a series of three-month training sessions. The campus housed approximately 750 female incarcerates in a high security environment. Women over 40 years of age were targeted as they are generally under-served by prison programs. Two-hour PT classes were held twice a week over a 20-month period. Five groups of players were sequentially trained, one group every 3-4 months. Each group presented three performances to audiences from the prison population, including staff and administration.

The following poem reflects an offenders incarceration experience. It was written by a PathFinder and performed by the PathFinder playback troupe, using a derivative of fluid sculpture. I place it here because her words clearly express the essence of prison life.

### **PRISON BED**

by Katrina J, May 2005

It's strange the thoughts  
That go through your head,  
When you're laying in a prison bed.

It's hard to think positive and clear,  
When, day after day, they're screaming  
"Inmate, inmate", in your ear.

You walk around  
It's an unreal world,  
Your looking at boys,  
But they're all girls.

You're surrounded by murderers and thieves,  
The crimes, some of these women have committed,  
You would not believe.

You look at pain from here to there,  
Some of the inmates  
Walk with blank stares.

A lot of pain and anger...  
A lot of gut fear,  
A lot of praying to get out of here.

Makes you kind of wonder,  
How you end up in a cell,  
You have to build up strength and courage  
To rise up out of hell.

In here, things don't get better,  
Your happiness boils down to canteen and a letter.  
Yeah, a lot of thoughts will go through your head,  
Laying in a prison bed.

## **DESIGNING CURRICULUM FOR A CORRECTIONAL ENVIRONMENT:**

Remember that female felons typically see themselves as low life, outcasts from society. They are challenged with poor health, poor self-management, self-reliance and communication skills, with issues of personal integrity and self-worth. They lack motivation, joy, and enthusiasm. Jaded by the mundane humdrum day to day prison life, they appear lazy and complacent and few show interest in creative or physically stimulating or expressive activities. For most, prison life is doing what is required, complying with commands, and “getting released”. For “long-termers” and “lifers”, prison life is a dead end; resignation to the futility of their imprisonment mutes their spirit force.

One of the strong attributes of the playback experience is the element of ownership, ownership of your story, of your own reality. This has the potential for transforming blame, irresponsible attitudes, and victimization and for activating a sense of self-empowerment. It is natural for people to seek experiences that empower and satisfy their yearning to know; they want it; they thrive on it. Taking ownership as creators of their own reality is the antithesis of the victim mentality that is so prevalent among female incarcerates. Playback Theatre is inherently selfempowering. This was key to the program’s success.

With the conviction that PathFinders Theatre (PT) could have a lasting and dynamic impact on these women, I formulated a curriculum that integrated movement (*mime, body language, and creative movement techniques*) and self reflective modalities (*meditation, relaxation, visualization, journal and creative writing*) into the playback training.

In addition to standard PT forms, it was important to integrate a variety of strategies that would help transform limiting patterns of thinking and acting. For most, the ensemble of collective enterprise satisfied their needs to belong and to be recognized. I encouraged a atmosphere where freedom of expression (verbal and physical) was encouraged, where group cooperation insured support, safety and trust, and where integrity and respect promoted equality and appreciation. I formulated a blend of exercises that would invite ideas and actions for cultivating new ways of being. This was totally unfamiliar territory for them and although they yearned for escape from the hum-drum depression of their prison walls, many had difficulty engaging in this mode of expressive freedom.

**Some Strategies:** I used a standard ritual for introduction and closure of every PathFinders session. We opened with circle introductions using the statement such as, “*I am...*” followed by their first name and a self reflective statement for them to complete, like, “*What is strong about me is....*” or “*If I chose to be anyone I want, it would be.... (and why)*” or “*I am ...(first name followed by animal)*”, or “*Right now I am bringing the quality of....*” to the group (accompanied by a physical expression of that quality). This intro process was frequently coupled with movement and sound techniques typical of PT circle warm up exercises.

The women responded willingly to these openings, some with hesitation mostly due to the unconventional approach to revealing personal information. These types of statements provided a way of introspection and self validation that was strange yet inviting to them. The statements were a way of enlivening and empowering positive personal attributes. This ritual of self acknowledgment also set the tone for the session, oftentimes leading right into the next exercise (expressive movement, mime, machines, pairs, tableaux, etc.).

I similarly used self reflection at the close of each session relative to what was newly experienced or learned or attitudes and behaviors they noticed about self and in relationship to other. We often closed with a praise exercise as a way of acknowledging our appreciation for self and other. The women also loved singing together, so a group song usually concluded our training session.

After opening circle introductions, one member of the group would speak out a series of affirmations, “I am...” statements, as the others repeated them while randomly walking and using movement to animate each statement. This was a way of acknowledging positive attributes, but moreover as a technique used to seed empowering self concepts in the subconscious. For example: *I like myself. I trust myself. I am responsible. I make positive choices. I am healthy and filled with energy. I forgive myself. I see painful circumstances as lessons, opportunities to grow and change. I forgive all those who may have harmed me. I forgive myself for having harmed others. I now deserve all good. I allow good experiences to fill my life.*<sup>6</sup>

I also used closed eye processes for bringing the inmate into her own inner experience, devoid of visual stimuli. These moments usually focused on a body-mind process where guided visualizations helped them concentrate on images and sensations, their inner sensing. For example: to attain postural alignment and energize the body, I would use closed eye imagery of light or streams of energy, or even ideas of being weightless as a feather to produce an experience of centering, lift, and spinal alignment. There are many ways to use imagery in a closed eye process, all of which are extremely valuable in 1) helping to relax and relieve stress, 2) mobilize and stimulate energy, and 3) address healthy posturing and carriage of the body.

These initial body awareness exercises impacted the participants’ sense of well being. All PT players claimed a new appreciation of their physical presence and a feeling of ease. Many reported how they carried changes in their body posturing into their daily lives. They frequently returned to class with feedback about how they felt physically and emotionally different and about how other inmates (throughout the compound) remarked about the changes in their attitude and physical presence. Most PathFinder participants noticed these changes after the first 4 training sessions.

Games became the ideal vehicle for activating spontaneity, creativity, and interaction. Many of the women were not familiar with one another, so structured games offered a playful way of developing and improving rapport, cooperation, trust, focus, and support. Building this kind of community (outside of the usual prison structures of dorm mates, work mates, or AA club-mates) provided a safe space for taking risks, sharing, and making new friends. There were always two or three women in the group who were loners, who kept to themselves, avoided social contact, and were fearful of physical contact. Their participation was reserved and they appeared withholding from social encounter. They gradually opened up over time and by the end of the program, their group participation and self expression showed vast improvement. Many of women developed new and often bonding friendships as a result of their PathFinders experience.

**PATHFINDER TRAINING OBJECTIVES:** Sessions provided interactive and introspective exercises, geared towards self expression and team work. The following three goals focused on developing performance skills for satisfying the grant requirements.

1. To use theatre as a dramatic form for portraying the human condition relative to interests and stories of female incarcerates.
2. To perform freeze frames, fluid sculptures, pairs, tableaux, spontaneous role plays, and a variety of dramatic storytelling techniques.
3. To have a working knowledge of stage placement/blocking and basic physical characterization for generating theatre realism.

To achieve these learning objectives, I built in specific skill development relative to: listening skills, creative problem solving, coping with stress, resolving conflicts, team building, decision making, working with different social styles, and cultivating positive attitudes.

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<sup>6</sup> Louise Hay: *LOVE YOURSELF, HEAL YOUR LIFE WORKBOOK*

I developed lesson plans for each session (for each group) that integrated cognitive, behavioral, and attitudinal objectives. For example:

1. To exhibit rapport and positive sense of well being.
2. To participate, involvement and interaction.
3. To increase attention and focus.
4. To explore creative ways of expressing ideas and feelings.
5. To focus on and execute single and multiple directives.
6. To exhibit listening skills and an ability to follow directions.
7. To acknowledge and appreciate similarities and differences among group members.
8. To develop observations skills, creative thinking, and self-discipline.
9. To build cognitive, affective, and interpersonal problem solving skills.
10. To demonstrate a sense of community.

I used a fusion of creative techniques drawn from PT, drama, movement theatre (mime and creative movement), and poetry. These exercises also incorporated components for building self regulatory skills such as stress, anger and conflict management, creative problem solving and decision making, values clarification, assertiveness, presentation skills, and healthful living practices.

I included a homework sheet that would begin the self-reflection process for story telling and shaping the performance. Note that these sample statements focused on past memories and experiences. These were later revised (see page 14).

- ♦ What was most significant at the age of 7, 13, 21, 30:
- ♦ (A 6-line poem or paragraph) If I could go back and change anything in my life, it would be:
- ♦ What I always wanted to do but was afraid to:
- ♦ The feelings that own me the most are:
- ♦ Three things I would eliminate from my life at this moment in time:

## **A SAMPLE PATHFINDER LESSON PLAN:**

**ACTIVITY:** Freeze Frames and Tableaus for Scene Development

**ROOM ARRANGEMENT:** Clear open space, group circle formation

**EDUCATIONAL GOALS:**

1. To perform group tableaus and freeze frames in combination with movement and sound for expressing various qualities of being (emotions, attitudes, sensations) and universal themes (e.g., revenge, curious, joy, sneaky, arrogance, peace, war, celebration, pain).
2. To recognize components of group spatial design and relationships in tableaus.

**METHODS:**

1. **SOLO FREEZE FRAME** Explain and demonstrate freeze frames.  
Student move across circle expressing different qualities of emotion using sound and periodic freezes based on a quality of being or theme.
2. **SMALL GROUP TABLEAUS** Groups of three move across circle, expressing specific situations, using periodic freeze frames, e.g. meeting friends, someone just called you a name you didn't like, saying goodbye to someone special.
3. **GROUP TABLEAUS** (snapshot of situation/shared relationship)  
Groups of four to five form Tableaus using body gestures and sound to express a given theme or situation.
  - a. Participants observe and identify specific **QUALITIES** in each character relating to the theme. Introduce **WHO? WHAT? WHERE?**

**INDICATORS OF PROGRESS:** Participants will have used sound and movement to express universal themes and qualities of being (attitudes/emotions) in group freeze frames. Participants will observe and describe the tableaux in terms of WHO-WHAT-WHERE for identifying sub-text and interpreting the moment in the story.

### **INHERENT STRENGTHS IN THE PLAYBACK OF PERSONAL STORY:**

PT naturally supports and sustains the spirit by connecting the common threads of social consciousness among the players and audience. The retelling and enactment of personal story offers the potential for deeper regard and understanding of the self. In so doing, PT can open doors to an awareness of what motivates behavior. This open space in a correctional environment presents new ground for encouraging self acceptance on many levels.

While implementing the PathFinders Theatre project, I came to discover how profoundly PT impacts self validation. These women experienced a freedom of expression otherwise non-existent within the walls of correction. PathFinders Theatre provided an inclusive and non-intrusive way to establish a safe environment for moving beyond the limits of daily routines. Offenders who completed the training showed positive changes in self-reliance, interpersonal skills, personal integrity and their abilities to cope with stress, anger and conflict. They also exhibited a strong sense of community, where mutual support and respect permeated group relationships and interactions.

One strength inherent in PT is the ultimate positive regard and respect for the teller and their story. Another strength, integral to the PT process, is holding all players and audience members responsible for their contributions. As a vehicle for support, PT naturally builds community, trust and mutual ownership of a joint creation. These are appreciative strengths, especially for the female inmate.

PathFinders Theatre provided a creative intervention for restoring essential life skills: self-reliance and self-management, communication, personal integrity and social responsibility. By validating and giving expression to feelings and emotions, these women received the support and encouragement needed to transform negative attitudes and behaviors.

### **OBSERVATIONS AND REFLECTIONS ON BEHAVIORS AND ATTITUDES:**

In our modern age of technology filled with advances in medicine and in-depth understandings of the psychology of being, it is bewildering to encounter a system of punishment built on antiquated beliefs that continue to injure rather than heal. Not surprisingly, the Florida Department of Corrections some time ago was called the Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation. It seems to have regressed rather than progressed out of the dark ages of abuse. The old adage, "As a man thinketh in his heart so is he" (James Allen)<sup>7</sup>. And... so is all that is fabricated out of that mind, wherein lies his ascent or descent. Well, consider the thoughts of the leaders and administrators who are stuck in the past, convoluted by miles of antiquated bureaucratic red tape which blindly covets tradition by-passing any recognition of a needed paradigm shift in correctional practices.

Thence cometh the offender, imbedded in her own past thinking and habits of reactive discontent. She now lands in the halls of provincial punishment to further compound her corrupted self view, the system reinforcing the same old ways . . . of thinking . . . of being.

Certainly, the offender is at fault for the crime that precipitated her incarceration. The reality of prison life, burdened as it is with power struggles in all corners, ultimately bears its lack of insight and outdated practices on the imprisoned. And so, their stories are saturated with the redundant herstory of survival struggles and victimization.

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<sup>7</sup> James Allen: *AS A MAN THINKETH*

**My Playback Experience in the Prison Environment!** From the start of this project I followed the playback processes and guidelines I had gleaned from my PT training and invited stories from the past. I was advised by the Wellness Director to focus on pre-prison stories and events from their younger years. I eventually experienced the inherent dilemma of inviting stories from prison life, having used this invitation in a few training sessions. It gave the inmates opportunities to reinforce heavy attitudes imbedded with criticism, blame, mockery, and degradation. This would have been especially distasteful to the officers and administration if it were included in the performance, as well as detrimental to the project's goals. I had worked earnestly to imbue the qualities of respect and responsible choice, and the value of redressing disdainful attitudes.

Attitude is everything. Conditions of incarceration reinforced jaded attitudes towards power and victimization, lack and doubt, guilt and resentment. It was apparent that reinforcing attitudes about daily prison life would be counter to the intention of PathFinders Theatre. Here was an opportunity to offer possibilities for new ways of being, divergent from their programmed thinking and beliefs. I knew that giving them a hands on experiences was exponentially more powerful than my telling them the benefits of thinking positive and being more open.

With that in mind I opened every session with their proclamation of self using the list of "I am..." statements, affirmations related to qualities of being.<sup>5</sup> In this ritual, each woman claimed her power in body, mind, and spirit. Reinforced over time, the affirmations instilled a way of being. To one degree or another, they influenced individual and group attitudes. It was a great opener to the class, a way of enlivening suppressed or lost aspects of self. Upon reflection, I realize that this affirmation practice served to shape and strengthen the self.

**Stories From The Past:** I had completed a 10 week training session with one PathFinders group and was eager to delve deeper into story and the playback process with the next group. During the trainings sessions, in preparation for the performances, I gathered a series of story invitations. *For example: experiences of your first job; a most significant moment in your life (childhood, teen, young adult) that had impact on you, a time when you were saying goodbye, a moment of surprise in your life, a time in your life when you wanted something and got it or did not get it.* These questions brought forth stories, both with difficult as well as lighthearted experiences.

In addition to stories of pregnancy and birth, these stories were offered:

- ◆ "My mother was ill and dying and I am in prison. I could not be with her... to say goodbye."
- ◆ "I heard that my mother died and I did not get to see or talk with her. I would have liked to tell her how sorry I was...."
- ◆ "During my childhood, my brother was lost and we searched for him. I found him locked in an abandoned freezer. He was dead."
- ◆ Other stories told of family separation, abandonment, betrayal, abuse, and disease.

I found myself half way through the second group's training embarking on the role play of stories when I notice they were becoming uneasy with the stories I had invited. Then they abruptly balked at one playback. I had worked through certain sensitivity issues relating to violence, death, physical abuse and drugs with the first group. The dynamics of this second collective presented a different perspective towards the deeper stories that emerged.

During their training session on this one day, a group member told a story about a gun shooting incident. "I was in a bar when my drunk husband came in and shot me." We managed to portray this event, but not without some reluctance. Then came a morbid story of an inmate filled with remorse and grief over her mother's dying and death. This became so heavy for them, that they refused to playback in any form. So we sat and talked about story, about the process and inherent value. They were adamant.

**Shift in Story Focus:** I had to think quickly to keep them engaged and allow them to find a direction that would work for the group. What evolved out of much exploration, was their preference for lighter memories, stories of hope, and then I suggested “future story”, all of which had a welcomed buy-in. As we continued with this focus, I became more aware of the need for these social outcasts to experience joy and rekindle some sense of hope. To have a future vision of their lives became a catalyst for their regaining hope and dignity, and for recouping connection to family, community, and society at large.

**Understanding the Metascience of Becoming:** I began to integrate my training and knowledge from other arenas, namely psychology, educational technology, movement arts, drama, and meta-science, into the playback training. Remember the James Allen quote, “As a man thinketh...”? He contends that, “As a being of power, intelligence, and love, and the lord of his own thoughts, man holds key to every situation, and contains within himself that transforming and regenerative agency by which he may make himself what he wills.” We now know that what we image in our mind, we realize. This concept has swept the modern world, bearing it’s mark in science where research has proved that thought can create physical distress.

Psychoneurological sciences now recognize that the mental/emotional state of mind directly relates to our physical state of being. Thought has the power to create ease and healing as much as disease and physical ailments. This understanding implies that our thoughts create our reality.

Psychosynthesis (Roberto Assagioli) tell us that “will” is the foundation of our reality, that “will” regulates the direction of thought, prompting us to make choices leading to our goals.<sup>8</sup> It seems likely, that if we willfully create our reality through the power of thought, then why are we continually in struggle, conflict, and pain?

Perhaps we are addicted to the “buy-in” of the messages and the emotions these messages generated in our formative years. Because this becomes what defines our very being, we find ways of reinforcing the story, in one form or another throughout our life, just to maintain this sense of identity. . . or just to prove we are right (in our image of self) . . . or just to preserve comfort of the familiar. We are unconsciously attracted to guilt, fear, pain and suffering so consistently that we become addicted to it. As a result, the unconscious part of the brain controls behavior.

The teachings of Ramtha further clarify how the body is subject to minds opinion. You are wired neurologically, addicted to the chemical heights of emotions repeating the “same old”. The binary mind holds a pattern that does not permit change. It makes sense then, that to tell and replay stories of the past is a way of reliving the loss, and reliving the loss can keep you in loss . . . in your addiction.

Ramtha says, “man is not evil in his soul. Though he lives under the auspices of it, in a greater understanding that allows man the option to create from his thinking whatever he chooses. That is the only reality there is. In that reality, God allows the illusion of evil to be created through superstition, dogmatic beliefs, and the very limited, cloistered attitudes of mankind. And through the continuous observation, judgment, and expectancy of evil, it does indeed exist in one’s reality — but only in his reality, for as he believes, so his kingdom is.” . . . “The source gives to you that which you expect you are worth and only that much.”<sup>9</sup>

“You can take a man and put him in prison, into the smallest, darkest, filthiest pit there is, but you will never imprison his mind and his thinking. A man with his body stifled is still active in thought;

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<sup>8</sup> Roberto Assagioli: *TRANSPERSONAL DEVELOPMENT: THE DIMENSION BEYOND PSYCHOSYNTHESIS*

<sup>9</sup> Steven Lee Weinberg, Ph. D., Editor: *RAMTHA, THE WHITE BOOK*

and he, through contemplative thought, will reason with himself, and teach himself . . . and judge himself.<sup>10</sup>

In his book, *The Path of Least Resistance*, Robert Fritz expounds on the proposition that focusing our energy on solving the problem (what we want to get rid of) only keeps us oriented to the problem. He suggests that when we focus on what it is that we want to create, moves us from where we are to where we want to be.<sup>11</sup>

From these concepts, it is apparent that the aim is to decide on what we want to create and to put that in our vision, something new that never existed before. To me, this is the discovery process in learning, a most effective way of learning, of gaining new knowledge, new skills, and, new behaviors. My work naturally integrated these understanding in formulating the direction of inviting the story for telling in playback. Then I asked the pivotal question for me, for the inmates, for humanity: Where are we directing our will power? Are we content to be resistant... arguing for your own limitations? Are we steeped in problem solving, self-pity and struggle because the story is so repeatedly old?

We Live by the Stories We Tell, whether they are convictions of lack and limitation or stories of our parental and societal lineage. For the repeat offenders, mild or severe, their stories continually repeat themselves, reinforcing their righteous addiction to their emotional encumbrances. Their story line becomes a groove of familiar text, behavior patterns and response mechanisms, repeated again and again. The old stories were filled with hurt and upset, violence and death. And how many of these stories can an already depressed population of degraded outcasts endure?

We live by the stories we tell and that reinforces attitude. These patterns of trauma and abuse are likely reinforced as these offenders keep telling their stories over and over in one way or another: self defeating patterns, recapitulating old wounds, condemnations of self and other. I began contemplating how much of my own “past tense” is repeated in what I think, say and do. Living and reliving history may be just what keeps us from evolving. I am speaking here of history that holds us in stuck places, the history of comfort zones that maintain the familiar emotional charge.

This event that arose among the PathFinders refusal to playback, inspired me to explore the function of story and the deeper psycho-social and spiritual dynamic served by the story. Many questions arose:

1. If we live by the stories we tell, which stories are we living by? Which stories do we want to live by?
2. How much of the playback process reinforces outdated attitudes and beliefs by retelling of the old?
3. Does the playback process heal by recapitulating the past? Or by inventing the future? And what is the depth and quality of that healing?
4. By virtue of our leadership, do we use our skills to propel humanity along its evolutionary path towards our future?
5. Is there power in retelling our history . . . in creating story of the future? Perhaps we need to contemplate and make some distinctions between the stories which empower and those which do not. If so, how do we invite and guide the storytelling?

How many times do we say, “ I’ve been there and done that”? Perhaps there can be satisfaction or even illumination in re-living the past by recognizing unmet needs (love, belonging, recognition),

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<sup>10</sup> Steven Lee Weinberg, Ph. D., Editor: *RAMTHA, THE WHITE BOOK*

<sup>11</sup> Robert Fritz: *THE PATH OF LEAST RESISTANCE*

perhaps even retribution and/or resolve, maybe just the recapturing of a lost feeling.

Yet, we are addicted to our emotions and continually seek to enliven them whether they be “fuzzy” (good feelings) or “grungy” (bad feelings), and, we tell stories to recapitulate that emotional experience. Does this retelling validate fixed attitudes and reinforce the addiction or does it cleanse the impacted emotion from the matrix of neural pathways? Perhaps we would do well to question the attachments that are revealed in the recurring story and explore ways of releasing and ways of moving on to the future.

Certainly, the virtue of telling past story for playback offers an opportunity to see the stories of our lives from an observer’s perspective. This, for the more astute, can become a valued recognition of self in any mode of thinking or feeling. For the chronic victim, struggling to survive or recover from severe trauma, past story telling may not hold the same value.

## **PLAYBACK THEATRE, A MOST POWERFUL TRAINING EXPERIENCE FOR WOMEN IN DISTRESS:**

**Future Stories:** It was evident that future visions opened the doors of possibility for the women inmates, envisioning themselves creating new and different ways of being (attitudes), new outcomes for their lives. Playback of future story empowered them. Consider, how the teller owns their future story completely by virtue of their creating it totally. They are not falling victim to the actions of others unless they design it that way. When these women began to think and speak their future story in the present, they took charge over their lives very differently than when they were engaged in past stories. They were creating a picture of their future destiny in the now.

When I began asking about their future visions, I discovered how this struck a powerful chord in both the teller and in the audience. Future means possibility and, for them, light at the end of a dark tunnel. As stories emerged, the women became hopeful. They began to see new value in their lives, as having a place in the world, no longer being outcast, and once again joined with family, friends and community. They began to value their own ingenuity, to express their rightfulness, to take responsibility as caring human beings. They could belong and love and be loved, sharing in the resources of the world around them.

The future was their salvation. And somehow the past stories of hurt and abandonment, abuse and poor choices, blended into the backdrop of the all too familiar. The past, now blurred by the repetitions of review, gave way to new possibilities. Their creative visions took on new life and they owned it with joy and enthusiasm, not from the outcast victim addicted to misery, but from the victor whose strength and fortitude found a way make her place in the world. And they spoke it and they watched it played back, and they became that which they watched. And their spirit was lifted and inspired with possibility. And they knew their worth and, for a moment in time, realized their heritage as powerful sovereign beings.

One young women told about her reunion with her estranged young child. Tears rolled from her eyes as she watched her little girl slowly approach and touch her cheek and say, “Mommy”. And then there was the duck quacking on the sideline. A simple moment, so tender and so light. In one breath, the audience wept tears and laughed. In that moment it was everyone’s future ... everyone’s connection . . . and love was everywhere in that story. Attitudes were enlivened with forgiveness, gratitude, love, and joy. This moment of restoration lived long in their hearts, seeding the future potential for all who would partake. We live by the stories we tell.

My lesson plans incorporate exercises and games that included the polarities of qualities of being (emotions, attitudes, physical sensations). Including polarities and a variety of themes gave equal recognition to what I call the “grungy’s” and the “fuzzy’s”. This provides a territory of equal value for the full spectrum of feelings. With the women, I used terms like “addicted behaviors”, “old neighborhood” and “new neighborhood”. I revised the worksheet to focus on strengths and

possibilities rather than old scenarios from their past. Sample statements:

- ◆ What is strong about me is (abilities, qualities, talents):
- ◆ I have a talent for:
- ◆ The quality inside of me that has supported my highest good is:
- ◆ When I express or use this quality, I feel:
- ◆ If I could create anything I want, the vision I have for my future is:

The following poem was written by one of the inmates in response to this assignment:

WHEN TOMORROW COMES . . .  
When tomorrow comes . . .  
The thoughts of today are washed away  
The ocean of life becomes my battle  
Along the shores... I heard the rumble  
The sun's great shine  
On all the work of a lifetime  
Emerging from battle I feel triumphant  
And strong to wage the long fight  
Key inside of me  
To belong to one's needs fill the heart  
And the emotions with love and song  
To engulf a journey so great  
One must think it only fate  
To become One with oneself  
Is a journey within itself.

I revised my story invitations to include:

- ◆ A time when you found something that you treasured
  - ◆ A time when you experienced surprise, joy, courage
  - ◆ The biggest thrill of your life.
  - ◆ A time in your life when you wanted something and got it.
  - ◆ A moment when you overcame something... like a great awakening.
  - ◆ Your vision of the future.
  - ◆ A time when you experienced an act of kindness or performed an act of kindness.
- (Suggested by Global Playback)

**PathFinders Performances: An Overview of the Stories from the Outcast:** Each group's performance took on different attributes relative to the issues that surfaced within the training sessions. We experienced the "red thread" among the players' and the audience's stories. The first, *Untold Stories*, dramatized issues of addiction, violence and abuse and self-defeating behaviors with some reflecting the changes in attitudes that support recovery and positive relationships. *Moments in Time* offered similar portrayals while recalling memorable moments from the past and introducing visions of the future. *Stories from the Heart* also brought forth earlier life experiences and visions of the future to life. *Stories That Bind Us* presented stories of transformation and moments of kindness. The last showcase, once again titled, *Moments in Time*, portrayed the journey of transformation, childhood memories, and visions of their future. There were stories that brought tears as well as laughter. The playback gave both the teller and the audience members the opportunity to witness their connectedness. They were able to appreciate that no one is alone in her journey. Ultimately, these performances gave hope in dealing with difficulties and in making a positive transition to the community.

**CONCLUSION:** We are the creators of our reality, of our experiences in life. What I marvel at is how playback gives the storyteller and the audience a view of personal experience. The teller becomes the ultimate observer of their creation and the story becomes the awakening of this ownership. Within the playback process we face the ultimate responsibility for our own lives. This process of observation and ownership contributed to the self-empowerment among these inmates living out their prison sentences.

Whether the story is one of angst or upset or one of joy or satisfaction, the teller, along with the audience, is the observer. By virtue of “watching” the playback story, the teller experiences it from a more detached perspective, thereby disassociating with it to some degree, seeing it from the outside in. The audience member, even though relating to the playback, observes from a detached position. Disassociation with the story offers the viewer a wider panorama of the psycho-social dynamics that are at play. The inherent impact on the subconscious is noteworthy and deserves further exploration outside of this essay. All in all, with the added qualities of recognition, allowance, and appreciation implicit in the playback process, the experience can be profoundly transformative for both the teller and the audience.

**Atonement and Forgiveness in Story:** Additionally, forgiveness was an integral component of the women’s stories. With the stories of failure, wrong doing, blame, remorse, grief, or anger, the potential for observation and self reflection can foster healing and self realization. Further study and analysis may reveal how much this phenomenon occurs. For now I propose it is random at best.

There could be no better opportunity for disassociation from the plague of emotional addictions in a non-therapeutic environment. The women experienced a mutual acknowledgment of common ground through the enactment of the “grungy” and the “fuzzy” stories, past and future. They joined in their atonement . . . at-one-ment . . . in naked honesty. . . and their misqualified love seemed forgiven. . . and the torment of guilt, released. Even if momentarily, I would guess this had a lasting impression that shifted attitudes towards self and other.

The dynamic of forgiveness was especially noticeable in the future stories. Their portrayals took on new dimension, different from the stories of past experiences. Instead of the angst of victimization, the women created future visions of joy and hope of future their lives with family, friends, career, and community life. (See *Appendix A: Program Evaluation*) These stories engendered harmony and communicated a strong sense of empowerment. The audience left with lifted spirit, song spilling from their lips, wanting more of the same. It was their redemption, an encounter with a forever moment, the future now.

**Power of the Playback Process:** Playback Theatre plays a powerful role in service to humanity, from the bridging of cultures to the awakening of a single soul. It is evident by the leadership that gave it life and its world-wide spread, that the Playback Theatre movement rides the wave of love. It journeys upon the footprints of the past, seeking to give voice to silent echoes. It also has the power to explore future creations, giving voice to silent yearnings. It can invite the forging of new pathways that engage the power of will, the foundation of our reality.

Every thought counts. Let us make distinctions between the patterns of distortion (memory) that beg reconciliation and the revelations and choices that build new neural pathways. PT can be a powerful tool for creating new realities. There is great virtue in exploring the ramifications of past versus future story in the playback arena. I invite my fellow playbackers to explore conducting future story with their companies and communities and to document the outcomes and let us discover together.

**A. PROGRAM EVALUATION: Empirical Data based on Program Evaluation**

This evaluation offers Empirical data relative to the impact Playback Theatre had on women inmates in a high security prison. The PT training program instructed performance skills to under-served populations, yet the more striking outcomes were their changes in attitudes and behaviors.

The project offered women inmates opportunities for self observation and changes as well as the learning of communication and performance skills. The potential for self observation and reflection, elements of healing and self realization, are random at best among audience members. Based on individual feedback via conversations, we can only guess how much impact was made by a playback performance. We can better measure personal changes in the trained player via formal written or oral survey and questionnaire. I used both participant assessment tools and an audience feedback form to determine the impact of this program. Evaluation and assessment of the program follows.

**CLIENT POPULATION:** Initial enrollment averaged 22-24 inmates in each PT group. Out of that, a core group of 12 students consistently attended each training session. Each core group completed 20 to 24 class sessions and presented three performances. In general, no new admissions were accepted after the fourth session. A total of 112 clients participated in four or more class sessions. This population was comprised of five sequential groups of inmates. Of that population, 50% completed the PT trainings from start to finish.

Fifty-six offenders did not complete the program for one or more of the following reasons: 1) medical problems; 2) transferred to another institution or to transition facility; 3) released (home or work release); 4) withdrew from participating (personal reasons); 5) schedule conflicts (work or school), 6) lock down restrictions.

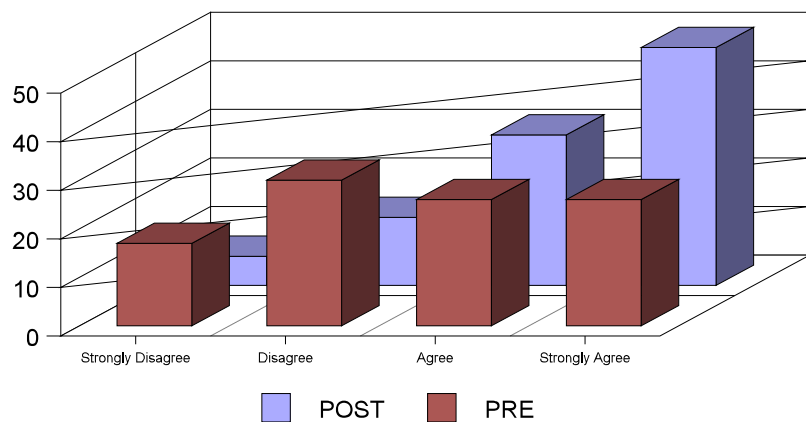
A total of 56 participants (all five groups) completed the PT training program presented a total of 14 shows for selected and general inmate populations, staff, administration and invited community guests. All players received a certificate of completion.

**A STUDENT PRE/POST SURVEY** was administered at the start and at the end of each series. On this self assessment survey, students were asked to what extent they agreed to statements relative to skills, knowledge and attitudes/behaviors. Four components were measured: 1) expressive modality, 2) theatre arts, 3) cooperation, 4) listening skills.

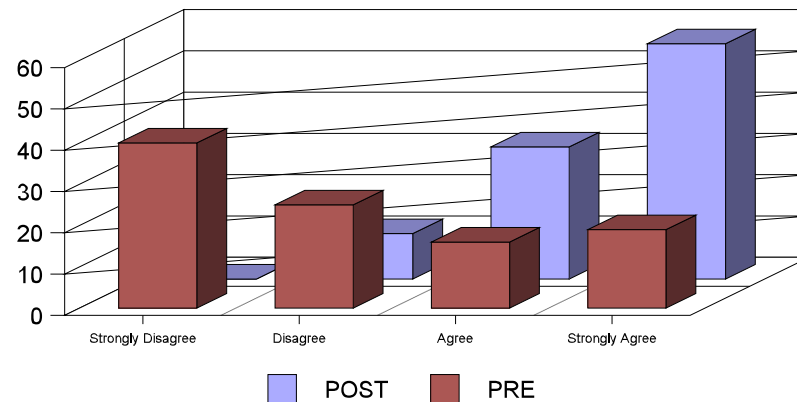
**INTERPRETATION:** Each Component is represented by a graph, charting the percentage of each response: 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Agree and 4 = Strongly Agree. All graphs show a significant improvement between the pre and post measurements.

It would be expected that the Strongly Disagree and Disagree measures would be greater on the Pre-surveys and that the Agree and Strongly Agree measures would be greater on the Post-Surveys and, in fact, did result as an outcome of the PT training program. This is significantly demonstrated in the charts of all components that were measured.

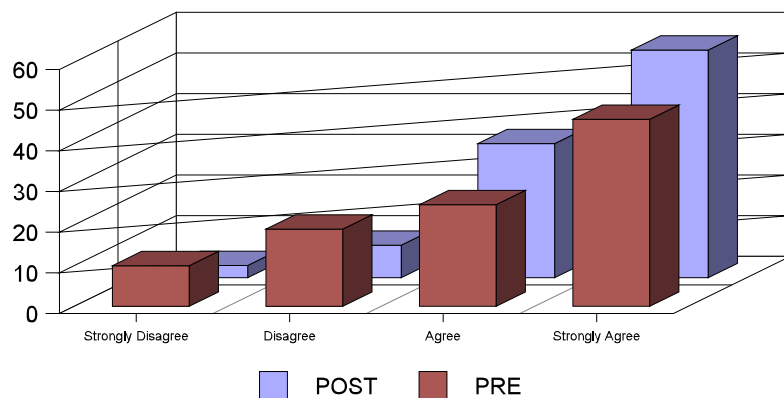
### #1: Self Expression



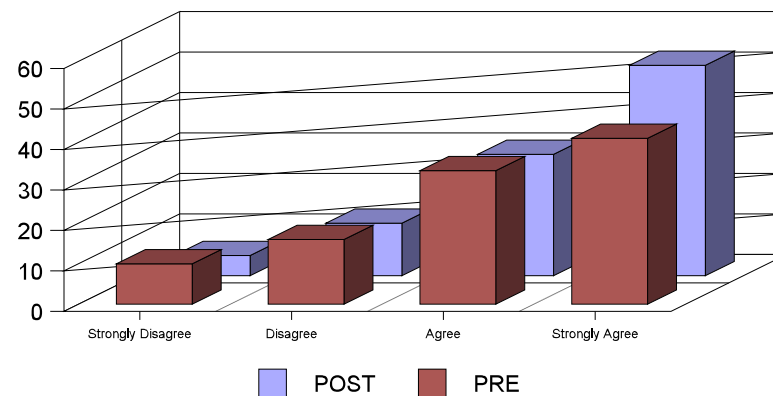
### #2: Theatre Arts



### #3: Cooperation

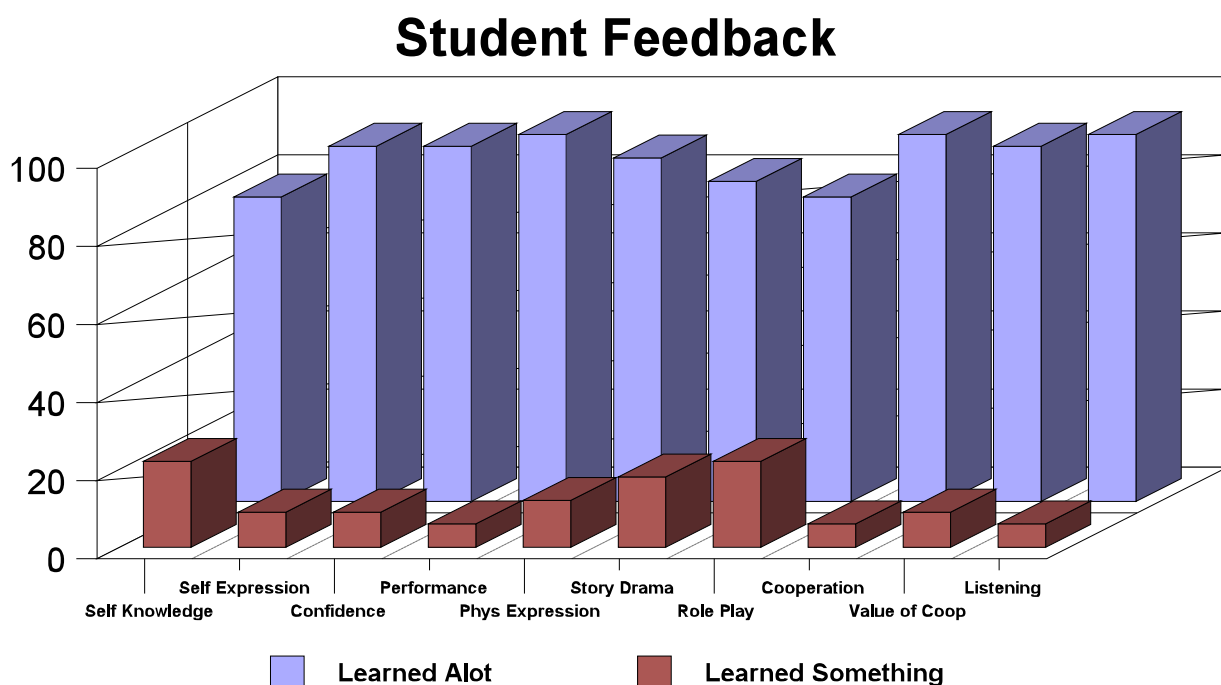


### #4: Listening Skills



**STUDENT FEEDBACK FORM** Each PT group completed a feedback form at the conclusion of their training. Analysis of the Student Feedback Form showed that significant learning resulted from this arts intervention project. Students were asked to indicate how much they learned as a result of their art sessions, on a scale of A lot, Something, Nothing. Parameters included statements on creative expression, listening and communication skills and team work. They were also asked several open-ended questions regarding what they enjoyed the most and the least; what they learned that they would use again; and what experiences changed their thinking.

**INTERPRETATION** It would be expected that students learned a great deal from their PT experience and, in fact, this did result as a program outcome and is illustrated in the chart summarizing student feedback. There was a significant response in the “A LOT” option, with no responses in the “NOTHING” option (not included in graph).

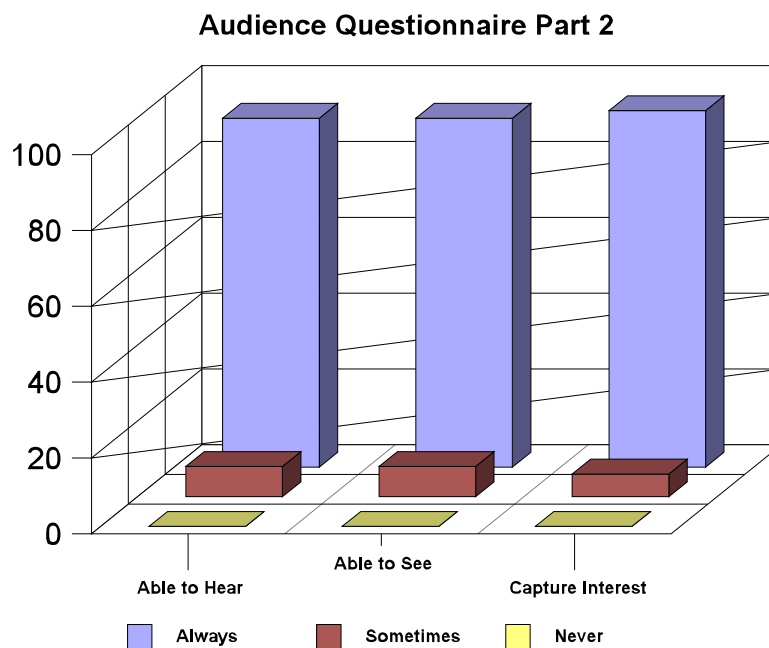
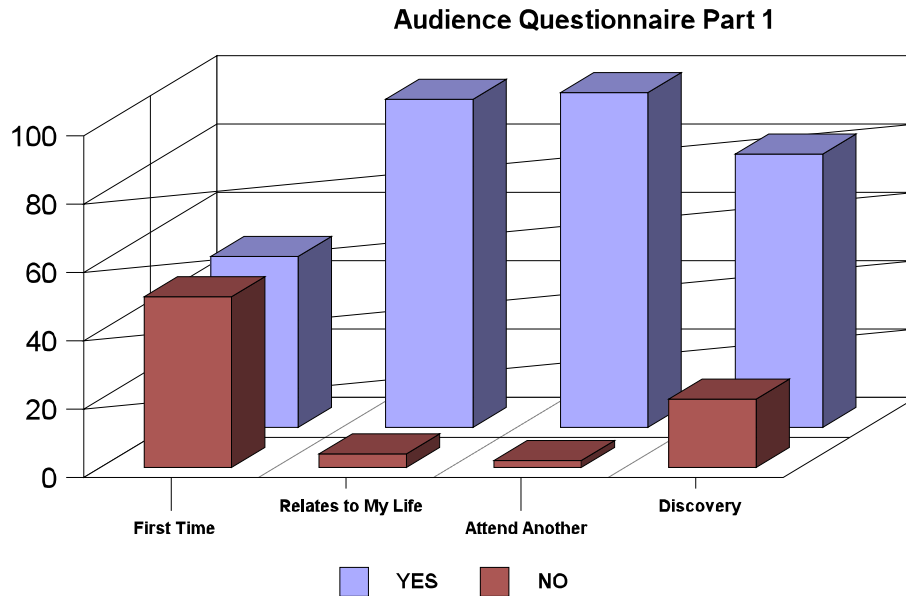


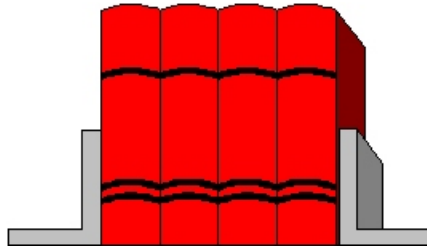
**STAFF ASSESSMENT** Two prison staff members periodically observed the class instruction (5 occasions) and provided assessment of the students level of success on a scale of 1 = None, 2 = Some, 3 = Moderate, and 4 = Great. They gave students’ performance skills and group interplay a moderate and great rating, noting that over time the class transformed their reluctance and hesitation to enthusiastic commitment. They also noted a great improvement in their attitude and satisfaction in having given this class a chance. The students came to love the opportunity to learn ways that freed up their expression.

**AUDIENCE FEEDBACK** Five PT groups presented a total of 14 performances over two 8 month periods, spanning two grant cycles (one year per grant cycle). Each performance seated 100-130 audience members (93% inmates, 4% staff, 3% administration and guests). Of those who attended, 90% were attending for the first time. The continual turn-over accounts for new audiences.

**INTERPRETATION** Their feedback (via 1200 Audience Questionnaire returns) indicated an overwhelmingly positive response to the performances. Many spoke about the relevance and meaning it had for them, their enjoyment of the interactive participation, especially singing and the playback of their personal stories. Audience remarks also indicated a deep appreciation for

the effort of the players, their team work, and their realistic portrayals of personal stories. e.g. improvising scenes and acting out feelings. They found the expressive movement and interactive approach especially encouraging and uplifting. Many requested the scheduling of more performances. Inmates in the Modality Program (addiction recovery) requested that PT be included in their activities. Audience remarks were extremely positive. Studies show that fun and laughter improves health and wellness, facilitates communications and releases tension, and improves relations and increases productivity. It was understandable why so many appreciated the fun and laughter that was also integral to the performances, a seemingly rare experience in a correctional setting.





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