

Reading for Life: Portrait of a Prison Ministry

BY A L E S H A D . S E R O G Z Y N S K I

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of literature in shaping moral imagination—to foster
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Scripture admonishes us to develop good character: “make every effort to support your faith with goodness, and goodness with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with endurance, and endurance with godliness, and godliness with mutual affection, and mutual affection with love” (2 Peter 1:5-7). In the Reading for Life program, we work to foster character development in juvenile offenders through narrative, journaling exercises, and small group discussions; and we utilize many of the virtues described by Peter to facilitate those positive behavior changes.

In the Christian tradition the focus falls on seven primary virtues or character traits necessary for a life of discipleship: faith, hope, love, justice, prudence, temperance, and courage. The first three traits—the theological virtues—derive from the Apostle Paul’s teaching that “faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love [*agape*]” (1 Corinthians 13:13). The last four traits—the cardinal virtues—have a venerable origin in ancient Greek philosophy. Thus it is not surprising that Christian theologians like Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) integrated these two lists of virtues to obtain a more complete description of the moral character required for a good life. This forms the basis of the virtue theory that we have inherited.¹ Goodness is more than simply doing the right thing. We should be concerned with the moral agent over the moral action, believing that the cultivation of virtue in a person will produce moral action.²

Recently there has been a revival of interest in using stories to cultivate virtue. Literature is uniquely suited to facilitate moral development because it provides us with vicarious experiences and characters of moral import.³ In stories we meet characters who feel, think, and act as we would like to; our imaginative identification with a moral hero helps us to imagine our own virtuous behavior.⁴

Reading for Life draws these two strands together – virtue theory as it developed in the Christian tradition and the role of literature in shaping moral imagination – to foster restoration, remediation, community service, and affiliation in juvenile offenders. After completion of a baseline assessment, students are assigned to groups based on their reading abilities. Under the guidance of two trained mentors, students select one or more novels to read together. For the next ten weeks, they spend two sixty-minute sessions each week learning about the seven virtues, reading some of the novels, journaling on questions developed by the mentors from the readings, and discussing virtuous character implications found in the readings and their writings. Around week nine, students begin to explore community service options, again facilitated by the mentor. These projects are consistent with themes found in their reading, and mentors use students' suggestions as much as possible. For example, after reading *The Graveyard Book*, Neil Gaiman's Newberry Award-winning novel about an orphaned boy named Bod who is raised by ghosts, a group of boys and their mentors chose to visit Our Lady of the Road, a facility that serves homeless individuals in our community. They cooked and served meals, helped with the laundry facility, and talked to many guests. As one student from this RFL group explained, "We went to The Road because if the ghosts had not raised Bod, he would have been homeless, too."

During week twelve, the students and their parents complete posttest assessments, and students give a presentation to their parents about their experience in Reading for Life and their community service project. To date, 95% of RFL participants have remained out of the juvenile justice system up to one year (versus 75% of referrals in the control condition).⁵ In addition, parents of RFL youth consistently tell us that they see persistent and positive behavior changes. These adolescents *are* learning to become more virtuous people, and they are returning to their homes and schools with a renewed sense of hope.



How do RFL mentors avoid perpetuating the dehumanization of juvenile offenders so often found in the justice system? What are the elements that make RFL a success with youth? In addition to the theological, virtue-laden orientation of the model, there are at least three ways the program restores human dignity to these youth who have lost their way.

First, *we meet kids where they are*. The mentoring relationship is nothing

without a foundation of trust, and adolescents, especially those at-risk, do not trust easily because they have been hurt so often. One way to facilitate a healthy relationship between adolescents and mentors is to select a value-neutral location to meet. This means that we do *not* hold sessions in schools or churches, two locations where students have most often met rejection and disappointment. We also do not dictate a list of behavior regulations, like dress or language codes. We really have just two rules: be on time, and read the book. Most kids respond with respect, although we do see a range of both overt and subversive disrespect. It is very important that adult mentors not pass judgment, display shock, or express disappointment—especially until they build a trusting relationship with the student. We respond positively to the virtuous behaviors we want to see, and ignore the insolent ones we don't.

One recent RFL graduate is a shining example of why it is so important for us to redirect our focus from the superficial to the eternal. Steve came to his first group with an attitude of quiet disrespect. He sat as far from his mentors as physically possible, refused to remove his jacket, kept his arms crossed, and lowered his flat-brimmed hat over his eyes. He barely spoke the first hour, except to obtain clarification about expectations (e.g., “You mean there are no tests?”) and express some surprise over the format (e.g., “Well, this is different”). Despite his non-verbal protests, he liked our book options and found himself more emotionally engaged than he expected or perhaps even desired. His mentors said nothing about his jacket, hat, or posture, although they could hardly see his face the entire hour. Steve wore his hat to the next session, but removed it as he took his seat. He kept his long locks low and his eyes down; that is, until we started discussing Aristotle and the history of virtue theory. Steve had taken

one philosophy class in high school, and remembered quite a bit about people, places, and ideas. His eyes lit up as he realized that what he was reading and learning with us might have some bearing on what was happening in the rest of his life; and as his mentors began

to respectfully converse with him as a burgeoning young adult (which all adolescents are), he responded with generosity, kindness, and enthusiasm. For example, after the third session, he asked one of his mentors how we could afford to just give them books. Steve read eight novels in ten weeks, and indeed he would have finished more if we had received them from book stores quickly enough. He stayed twenty to thirty minutes after every session

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to converse with his mentors, and expressed extreme disappointment that his graduation from RFL was drawing near. He even suggested meeting with one of his mentors to continue “book club” at a library near his home, which he had not visited since grade school! We never saw the hat again.

Second, *we listen – and not just long enough to get in the last word*. The volunteer mentors in Reading for Life are trained extensively in active listening and reflective questioning skills. As parents of teenagers know all too well, these things are tough to do. Often we can see exactly what a young person should be doing (or *not* be doing, as the case may be), and it is both expedient and convenient to just tell them so. This is not, however, the most effective way to change their immediate behavior, or to get them to want to behave differently in the future. Young people need to be heard; and we need to be patient enough to hear them without judgment or condescension, without having all the answers. It is very important that they find the virtuous path themselves.

Recently a group of heavy readers decided to read Scott Westerfeld’s *Uglies*, *Pretties*, *Specials* series. These post-apocalyptic novels give adolescents an excellent opportunity to explore ethical issues such as genetic engineering, population control, cultural expectations of beauty, and harmful behaviors like alcohol and other drug use. Some of the young people in these creative novels engage in excessive cutting, both as a pseudo-religious ritual and for a personal high. Cutting is a very serious issue for many adolescents, so the mentors of this group decided to bring in as a guest speaker another RFL mentor and undergraduate psychology major who had done extensive research and writing on the topic.

Prior to this session, Michelle had been an engaged and active contributor to the group. Her dress and demeanor suggested that she existed on the fringe of social networks at her school, but her quick wit and extremely bright intelligence had endeared her to mentors. She was a completely different person during the session with this guest speaker. She rarely looked up from her book, shifted uncomfortably in her seat, and departed quickly after speaking only a few words the entire hour. Her mentors were understandably concerned; even the guest speaker noticed her reticence. The topic clearly disturbed her.

At this point her mentor was faced with the difficult decision of confronting the behavior head-on or waiting for a good opportunity to discuss the topic, hopefully at the student’s prompting. When Michelle unexpectedly missed the next session and did not broach the topic, her mentor decided to pursue the first course of action with caution and sensitivity. She asked to meet Michelle for coffee outside of the group, and used the observations of Michelle’s contrasting demeanor discussed above to see if Michelle might talk. The mentor did not mention cutting per se, but suggested that there was “one particular session when [Michelle] did not seem to be [herself].” Michelle nodded in comprehension, and volunteered the specific topic. She

then followed with a lengthy account of her own cutting history and successful abstinence, as well as her concerns about a close friend who had some serious identity issues and was at least partially, and unhealthily, resolving those with cutting. When we place ourselves in a position of receptive listening, adolescents will talk.

Finally, *we expect much from students, but never more than they are capable of bringing to the table*. Delinquents are notoriously poor readers. Statistical documentation to this effect has been available since the 1930s,⁶ and recent reviews confirm that a growing body of sophisticated research supports this contention.⁷ Little effort, however, has been made to systematically remedy the problem. We address this issue head on by assessing reading ability during our first meeting, and sorting the students into groups accordingly, effectively ensuring that students are in an environment that supports better reading comprehension and personal life application.

One of our earliest, and most encouraging, success stories comes from a young adolescent boy who was referred to us with extremely poor reading skills and even worse academic prospects. His mentor was a former schoolteacher who specializes in students with reading difficulties, and she worked individually with Darnell. The novel he chose was Christopher Paul Curtis's Newberry winner *Bud, Not Buddy*, a poignant story of an African-American boy who sets out across Depression-era Michigan, with just a shoe box of his mother's belongings, to find his missing father. For perhaps the first time in his young life, Darnell encountered a protagonist with whom he could relate, and a "teacher" who was willing to

work within the limits of his reading ability and help him build better comprehension skills. They read together; he read independently. She asked questions; he answered and she listened. As Darnell discovered small achievements in the RFL group, he began to apply those skills at school and found that he could be successful there as well. His

grades improved dramatically; he made the basketball team; he even won a scholarship to spend a week at a local campground the following summer—something he had never done before. He became a model student and camper: he is now consistently on the honor roll, a varsity basketball star, and junior camp mentor. Recently we saw his mother, who shared that although Darnell has read many great novels since RFL, he still "carries that book

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around with him everywhere." He met our realistic, yet challenging expectations and then just soared.



"Why do you do this? Why did you help my son?" the parent of a Reading for Life student asked me.

"Two reasons," I replied. "One, I don't think that just because you mess up once that society should just lock you up and throw away the key."

"You mean like what happened to me," he interjected. I shrugged as tears came to my eyes, imagining what this father's life experiences must have been.

"The second reason is this: I believe in the infinite value of every single human being. Your son is worth it. Evan is better than this (i.e., a life in the justice system)."

There is no doubt that many of the students we work with need a relationship with Christ. Yet efforts to share the gospel with them have often been short-sighted at best and mean-spirited at worst. For example, one of our students recently asked her mentor, with furrowed brow and disgusting sneer, "Are you a Christian?"

"No," her mentor, Brooke, replied, "not in the way that you think of that kind of Christian. I am definitely *not* that."

This honest exchange opened the door to several weeks of readings and discussions about Christianity, the Bible, the Church, and people in it. In the process, Brooke learned that this girl had been kicked out of church by her youth pastor. His parting words: "You just need to get saved."

"I don't even know what that means!" the girl told her mentor in exasperation.

At-risk youth have very real and corporeal physical needs that should take precedence over any immediate experience of salvation. Our mentors must *be* Christ, so that our youth can actually *see* Christ. Christ is perfectly capable of working their salvation out in his own, divinely providential time.

As Paul reminds us, sometimes the development of virtuous character requires suffering, however ill-wrought it may be: "suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us..." (Romans 5:3b-5a). He well knew that only those who have truly suffered can find genuine, supernatural hope – that is, the hope of Christ. Our students are learning this, too, and we are all the beneficiaries.

NOTES

1 For an overview of virtue theory in the Christian tradition, see Peter Kreeft's *Back to Virtue* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1986) and *Summa of the Summa* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1990); C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1943), especially Part III, "Christian Behavior"; Gilbert Meilaender, *The Theory and Practice*

of *Virtue* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame Press, 1984); and Josef Pieper, *Four Cardinal Virtues* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame Press, 1966). The recent revival of virtue theory owes much to the work of the Christian philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre in *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame Press, 1984).

2 Scott B. Rae, *Moral Choices: An Introduction to Ethics*, second edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 16.

3 Anthony Cunningham, *The Heart of What Matters: The Role for Literature in Moral Philosophy* (Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2001); and Paul Vitz, "The Use of Stories in Moral Development: New Psychological Reasons for an Old Education Method," *American Psychologist*, 45 (1990), 709-720.

4 Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (New York: Knopf, 1976), 9. Bettelheim notes, "It is not the fact that virtue wins out at the end which promotes morality, but that the hero is most attractive to the child, who identifies with the hero in all his struggles...and the inner and outer struggles of the hero imprint morality on [the child]."

5 Students in the control condition are expected to complete twenty-five hours of community service, and participate in a final assessment meeting within sixteen weeks of their initial assessment. This gives them approximately the same number of community contact hours as Reading for Life students.

6 Norman Fenton, "Reading Interests of Delinquent Boys," *Journal of Juvenile Research* 15 (1931), 28-32.

7 Michael P. Krezmien and Candace Mulcahy, "Literacy and Delinquency: Current Status of Reading Interventions with Detained and Incarcerated Youth," *Reading & Writing Quarterly*, 24 (2008), 219-238; and Diana Rogers-Adkinson, Kristine Melloy, Shannon Stuart, Lynn Fletcher, and Claudia Rinaldi, "Reading and Written Language Competency of Incarcerated Youth," *Reading & Writing Quarterly*, 24 (2008), 197-218.



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