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Go to [title page](#)

Go to this issue's [contents](#)

[Download this paper](#)

Attica remembered: a personal essay

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Abstract

This essay is a personal and intellectual autobiographical analysis of the roots and dynamics of the development and conclusion of a cultural icon in the history of American prisons, the Attica Prison Rebellion. In 1971 Attica Prison in New York State became the scene of one of America's bloodiest prison conflicts with most of the blood spilled by agents of the government in the retaking of the prison. This personal essay about the Attica conflict weaves historical, sociological and cultural threads into a tapestry of meaning and understanding which is viewed through the lens of the personal development of the author. The threads of the tapestry are colored in race and slavery, the social and political upheaval of the 1960's, the cultural imagery of prisoners and prisons, political rituals and the power of the state against the power of the people.

Descriptions of the personal experiences, political and intellectual development of the author, who has studied and taught about prisons and violence for 25 years, and their links to the events at Attica allow the reader to see the subjective and personal meaning of the social and political conflict and the human costs of placing imagery over substance in conflict resolution.

Key words: prison violence, collective violence, experiencing violence, prison conflict, Attica.

INTRODUCTION:

This paper was written as a "memoriam" to those involved in the events collectively known as ATTICA. Working in New York State's prisons at the time of Attica and having studied and written about prisons and violence for the past 20 years I felt a need to return to these personally formative events. In doing so, I was able to give voice to my feelings and understanding of the events. Writing this essay allowed me to explore what I brought with me from my life before Attica, what I felt at the time Attica was occurring, what I have learned since these events, and the source of my academic perspectives on conflict and its resolution and the commitment I bring to my work as a teacher and scholar. The essay, thus represents an integration of personal experience and academic study. This essay was originally prepared as a "reading" and presented to friends, students and scholars as a personal testimony.

A DECADE FOR REMEMBERING:

The mid-1990's is a time of remembrance. The anniversaries of a great many events which helped shape two generations fall in this decade. (I am not sure if anniversary with its connotations of celebration and enjoyment is the right word, but it will have to do). The mid-1990's is a time when two war generations will be reliving their pasts as no generations have before. One generation will be reliving and commemorating the golden anniversary of the horrors of World War II, the holocaust, the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The necessity, meaning and morality of these events will be memorialized in writing, in conferences, in film and in televised documentaries.

Another American generation, the children of World War II will be celebrating the silver anniversary of its youth with its triumphs, joys and challenges and its war, Viet Nam. This generation of the 1960's and 1970's will be reliving its past for the younger generation as no other has before. This generation's experiences accompanied an explosion of mass media and instant communication and, indeed, for the first time "the whole world was watching" its struggles.

While newsreels brought World War II into the theaters, television brought the Viet Nam war and the war at home against the war (the anti-war protests and government attempts at their suppression) into our living rooms. The sixties and seventies were very self-conscious decades. Those involved felt they were actively doing something to the world and not just reacting to its streams of history. But people also knew that the world was watching as the media of the popular culture permeated, captured, and displayed life's events around the globe as it had never done before.

The mid-nineties is also a time of education for a new generation, a generation who will begin to see the world which shaped their parent's lives and perspectives. Woodstock, a legendary rock music festival held in 1969, was reenacted (though many of its participants are dead). In what is fast becoming the "era of fragmentation" the "era of community" will be recalled. In a time of war and hatred of those who are "different" in Bosnia, Northern Ireland, Rwanda, Indonesia, a time of "give peace a chance" and "he ain't heavy he's my brother" (popular song lyrics of the 1960's) are being, have been and will be repeated, recalled and rerun.

The experiences of youth which will be remembered were formative experiences. They shaped perceptions, world views and personal histories of a great many people. One event, a form of collective violence (Lombardo 1999), which I hope does not get lost in the stream of remembrances is a prison riot which came to be known as ATTICA. Attica was an event that shaped my life and led me where I am today. In this essay I explore the personal connections between Attica and myself and the understandings and meanings of Attica looking back over the past twenty-five years. Through this personal exploration I hope to provide an experiential context for the understanding of the cultural and historical roots of a specific conflict and the human lessons for resolving conflict in the future.

In the autumn of 1971, ATTICA, a small Western New York town, added its name to list of places and events which needed to be remembered 25 years in the future. This small prison town is one that **must be remembered** in the long and tortured history of the American prison. But Attica clearly goes beyond the American prison. In today's world where disaffected Americans blow up a federal building and cause massive death, where members of previously thought of fringe groups (members of the militia

movement) are invited before Congress to express their disaffection with government; where the 'Unabomber', in a manifesto against technology and government, expresses what many viscerally feel but cannot face or find the words to express; where citizens suspect government involvement in the 1980's crack epidemic, surely we must understand that Attica was also about the relations between the American people and the American government.

ATTICA'S CONTEXTS:

On a cold, damp September afternoon in 1971 the normal grayness of a prison yard was reinforced with the gray smoke of gunfire, gunfire that resulted in the deaths of many prison staff and the prisoners who held them hostage. It was as if the gunfire and death were to punctuate the ending not just of a prison riot, but also the **ending of our understanding** of what led to Attica, what occurred at Attica and how and why Attica ended as it did. The smoke those guns produced that day also clouded our ability to assess Attica's human meaning and social and political significance of the conflict.

Attica seems to be one of those conflicts that was much easier to understand **before** it happened than **after**. Before Attica the politics of crime and punishment were central to national criminal justice debates. Before Attica racism, poverty and abuses of power were central concepts in understanding the prison, and the nation's urban and political violence. National commissions of the late 1960's saw that we were moving toward two societies: one black and one white (Kerner Commission, 1968: 1)

In the 1990's, not the Rodney King verdict, not the most recent Los Angeles riots, nor the O.J. Simpson trial can lead us to an in-depth understanding of race, poverty and abuses of state power that culminated in Attica and that Attica represented. Today's headlines seem a caricature when compared to the multidimensional sculpture of headlines and discussion that was taking place in America at the time of Attica.

After Attica and today more than ever it seems that we see crime only in the criminal. Today we watch William Clinton, a "liberal" president, sign bills expanding the death-penalty and limiting prisoner access to the courts. After Attica and today we understand prisons only in terms of cells, locks and keys and last resort places of employment for downsized workers. We understand prison violence

only as a representation of unmanageable cons or inept administrators. When the state killed the prisoners and their hostages at Attica, the state also killed our understanding of the politics of justice and imprisonment as well as the politics of poverty and race. How would we have understood today's killing of prisoners at Corcoran Prison in California at the time of Attica? How would we have understood today's concern with limiting prisoner lawsuits then?

A PERSONAL ENDING AND BEGINNING:

Though Attica ended with 43 deaths and countless retaliatory beatings and other horrors; though Attica continues today with no state officials being held accountable in the 25 years that have passed; perhaps its remembrance and memorialization will serve as a break on state inflicted violence. One can still and only hope.

Attica for me was both an ending and a beginning. Attica ended a faith in and enjoyment of the political process nurtured by childhood experiences. Attica shaped my personal and political values and the substance and approach to my career. After Attica political rhetoric would no longer be convincing. Slogans and ideologies would no longer suffice. There had to be more to explain the world.

After Attica, political rationalizations and justifications were no longer enough. Such rhetoric seemed only to mask the ability of governments to do harm and often limited government's imagination to do good. Vision is important, but without matching life affirming, humanly supportive actions, what does vision matter?

Attica also began in me a long search to understand the forces and processes that produce the world's violence. It is Attica that lead me to my present career and my political and practical interests. In the early 1970's Attica and coincidence led me to graduate school to understanding of violence, of prisons and the relations between the two. In my study and teaching about prisons, violence, violence against children and women, prison violence, the media and crime and justice my personal politics and political concern would be focused on what happened in convinced me that everyday life as it is lived and experienced is what needs understanding, our positive actions and personal struggles that need affirming, not intellectual detachment.

After Attica, the more I studied violence the more I believed that the sidelines were inappropriate when it comes to life and death, to the purposeful infliction of pain. Now year after year I teach students to understand that the violent person can be any one of us. Violence will only stop if we take control over our own behavior and empathize with those we hurt before we decide to hurt them: physically, emotionally, socially. Whether we inflict pain on children in the name of discipline, paddle school children, in the name of order; rape and sexually harass because we feel we have privilege; hate because we need an enemy to confirm ourselves; fight wars and commit genocide to solidify power; or use violence to control and execute prisoners, it is all the same. Pain, the infliction of pain on human beings who are the targets. **I need to teach** students how to understand, how to start to turn away from believing all this pain in the name of good is necessary. If we each stop the violence within us, take control of it, whether as individuals, as governments or as states, what violence is left? These impacts of Attica continue to provide a personal commitment and passion to my academic work.

Attica is the reason I cannot finish a book on prisons. I think of those times (before Attica) and I think now in the 1990's and ask, what's the use? Is it possible through writing to pierce the collective-delusion of crime and punishment perpetrated by the political-media myth-making complex? Suppose I completed my book, what would be the difference? While it is nice to say that the truth shall set you free, today's mantra seems to be "the truth shall be avoided".

As I watched the political-media crime and justice theater of the absurd play itself out in the 1980's and 1990's a frustration, an anger wells in me. Year after year I see politicians playing the same games played at the time of Attica. I watch us structure the legal system to create more "them's". I watch prison populations grow and grow and grow forever and ever, seemingly without end, Amen. Attica taught me that our personal and collective appetite for personal and political self-delusion is as insatiable as our appetite for the money that comes to those who offer easy continually failing answers to our perceived problems. Want to stop crime? Raise your hand. Give the answer! You know it!! "The infliction of more and more pain." Give this answer and you will receive a \$100,000 consulting fee. If only there were money in kindness. Why bother? Attica is why. People are why. Perhaps after writing this essay I can finish my book.

ALMA MATER: AUBURN PRISON:

Where was I in September 1971? Where was I when Attica began, and when it ended for some when the shots were fired? I was in my hometown Auburn, New York, about 75 miles from Attica. I was working in Auburn Correctional Facility the nation's longest continually operating prison which opened in 1816. I was a teacher. For eight hours a day, five days a week, I taught prisoners English, reading and Spanish. When Attica occurred I had just completed my second year as a full-time teacher at the Osborne School of Auburn Correctional Facility. The school was named after Thomas Mott Osborne a leading prison reformer of the early 1900's and former mayor of Auburn and warden at Sing-Sing and Auburn prisons. This was my first full-time job after college. I started at Auburn in September of 1969. Prison teaching was the only job I could find. I was in Madison, Wisconsin from 1967-1969 and I began prison teaching in 1969 after a series of coincidences. In the Autumn of 1968 I injured my back working in a plastics factory; in July of 1969 I was rejected by the draft board (bad back)sparing me what I felt in my bones would be certain death in Viet Nam; I did substitute teaching in the public schools for three days (a clearly impossible task); my brother called a friend to get a rug to take to college; my mother remembered that the friend's father worked at the prison and asked him if they were looking for teachers. He said yes. Three days later I had the job.

As I started my prison teaching career, what did I learn? How did I cope? I instinctively reacted to the prison teaching environment in which I was to teach by "being myself". This was also the "training" I received from the inmate teachers who introduced me to the prison world. No other training was provided. If I didn't know something, I'd say so. If I said I'd do something, I did it. I listened to people. Not as prisoners, not as an authority figure, not as a teacher, but as a person who was going to do the best job I could do in the most honest and forthright way I could. Race would not matter, except to learn about the impact of race in American society and in prison life from those whose race was different from my own. Ethnicity would not matter, except to learn from those whose ethnicity was different from my own. The "criminal " label would not matter. That only brought these men to my classroom, Room 4. From then on I was the prisoners' teacher, instructing them in subjects I was paid to teach. My students were **my teachers** instructing me about their life experiences, and the things that mattered to them. Not to judge, just

to listen, to question, to allow men to talk and vent and express. To raise objections, to challenge openly, honestly and directly. Mutual understanding and learning was the goal.

Soon after I began my prison career I learned that my biggest problems would not be the prisoners. Rather, the institution, its administration, its structure, its bureaucracy, its distance from and confounding of human reality would complicate the simplest of reading lessons. Newsprint paper, old worn books, rickety desks perpetuated an image of poverty. These things should have reduced expectations of the prisoners and my own expectations regarding prison education. But neither the prisoners nor myself seemed to lose hope or our intensity.

As I struggled to teach prisoners I also struggled to understand prisoners and to learn from them. To understand my students I felt a need to understand the prison environment in which they lived. I needed to understand the street environments from which they came, and the impacts of these environments on them. To understand this prison environment I had to understand the history and politics and society that produced the institutions, the prisoners and the prison staff.

To understand what I was to do I had to understand myself. I had to get a firm grip on my reality because it seemed that everything I would encounter would be form with questionable substance loaded with multiple meanings. In the world of the prison I was learning that reality was up for grabs.

Only a year after starting my career at Auburn it was quite unsettling to read about the August 1970 disturbances in the Toombs (New York City's Jail). The Toombs riots challenged jail conditions, bail procedures and pre-trial detention; unfairness and racially discriminatory practices of the criminal justice system. It was clear the Toombs riots were directed at politicians and the public, not just jail administrators. Prisoners were clearly becoming actors in educating the public about the politics of prisons.

All during the autumn of 1970 the staff at Auburn often talked of a possible riot. In November it came. It was as if all of our predictions had willed the riot to happen. When Attica occurred a year later, Auburn Prison was still struggling with the impact of one-day prisoner takeover and hostage-taking. The resulting court cases,

correctional officer protests, and "Free the Auburn 6" [six prisoners prosecuted for participation in the 1970 riot at Auburn] demonstrations that took place in my community introduced me to the politics of the institution in which I worked. Union negotiations, union meetings, strike votes and staff meetings introduced me to the politics of economics of prison management.

When I left the prison after 8 years I received a painting from my prison students. The faces of Martin Luther King and John F. Kennedy. A Black hand and a White hand shaking. Written on the back were many good wishes from Black, White and Puerto Rican prisoners. In addition, I left with an incredible criminal justice education which my students and the "times" provided.

OF VIOLENCE, RIOTS AND STATE RESPONSES:

Though the prison context was new to me in 1970, the consistency and patterned nature of the violence and the state's response to it made it seem all so predictable. The sloganeering, posturing dodging of accountability in the state's response to the Toombs and Auburn riots provided a flashback to the explanations for the student disturbances and police riots that I had seen in Madison, Wisconsin two years earlier. I was a graduate there, studying Latin American history and politics and learning about covert operations and government overthrows and government abuses of power (often instigated by the American government). At Madison, I was also observing and struggling to come to grips with campus disturbances, anti-war protests and violence just as I was now struggling to come to grips with prison violence. [See Glenn Silber's film / video documentary on anti-war efforts in Madison Wisconsin "The War At Home".]

Explanations for the Toombs and Auburn disturbances simply replayed what I had heard in Madison concerning the anti-war protesters, replayed what I had heard in analysis of the 1968 Democratic Party convention in Chicago [See "Medium Cool" a film / video documenting this convention]. At the time of that convention I was writing a paper on the politics of Black protest and the government's explanations for the Viet-Nam war. In the aftermath of the Auburn and Attica prison riots the explanations, excuses, recriminations and political dancing seemed to repeat a pattern I had seen and heard before. Blame new breed of prisoners,

black people and students, blame the interference from the courts, the civil rights movement; blame the lack of political leadership and guts; blame law enforcement's hands being tied by the constitution, blame the Marxist-Leninists, the interference of outsiders, the 'do-gooder' bleeding hearts, the liberals. All of these things, so it was said, were to blame for unnecessarily stirring up the calm *status quo* of the prison world and the outside world. Or so it was said.

On the outside and in the prison it seemed to me that grievances were not heard, they were labeled and dismissed. People with grievances were not seen, they were stigmatized and dismissed. No one other than governors of the universities, prisons, states had the legitimacy even to raise questions and let alone to provide answers. The reality of the world of the policy maker, the decision maker was certainly not one which could ever mesh with the world of those of us at the bottom, much less mesh with the world of the prisoners, convicts, and criminals who were certainly below the bottom.

None of this seemed reasonable. None of it reflected the reality I was experiencing and seeing and learning about as I went about my work teaching at Auburn Prison.

THREE STUDENTS AND Attica:

Three of the men from whom I learned many lessons during my first year of prison teaching were killed at Attica: Mr. Malloy, Mr. McNeil and Mr. Hicks. I always called the students "mister". A student once commented that somehow when I said "mister" it was really a sign of personal respect not the fake mocking "mister" heard from some of the guards.

I remember discussions with these men. Before they were transferred to Attica these men were students in an English class I taught at Auburn Prison. They were all in the same class. Fifth period. Second class in the afternoon. Malloy, McNeil and "Big Hicks". As I taught English we discussed the politics of prison life and the politics of economics and real life. We debated the issues. We learned to respect a challenge and to come to grips with the others' reality. They were cooperative. They did their assignments. They offered me help.

One Saturday, when I "played guard" while guards were taking a

civil service exam, I asked him how to get to the mess hall from the cell blocks. I had no idea. I had never been in the blocks.

Everyday, Mr. Hicks would walk into my classroom and announce in a booming voice, "Don't nobody panic, Big Hicks on the scene!" When I heard this I thought to myself, "How does he do this? How does he keep this sense of who he is?"

As a teacher I respected these men because they thought, they felt, they would not let the institution bury them. Perhaps because these thoughts were also my first thoughts when I started my teaching job (they came to me after 6 hours and no previous contact with the prison) I resonated to what they said and they recognized a person (not an image or a role) within me.

I didn't realize it until recently that the circumstances under which each of these men died at Attica were somehow questionable. According to Malcolm Bell(1985)who worked on the Attica prosecutions emphasizing prosecuting agents of the state, Mr. Malloy was shot 12 times and shot through the eyes, by a state police officer. Mr.McNeil was shot while supposedly trying to hit an officer with an ax (when no ax was ever found or visible in any pictures taken during and after the riot). Mr. Hicks seems to have been shot and his body moved to link him to the shooting of a St. Police officer. According to Bell, all were killed by the state police.

All these men were students in my fifth period English class a year earlier. All very cooperative students but also very independent, outspoken street-wise thinkers who tried to make their feelings about race, economics, politics and crime and justice clear. They were articulate and they were challenging. Certainly that should be no reason to be killed. As I read Malcolm Bell's descriptions of the questionable circumstances surrounding these men's deaths I wondered how it was that these three in particular would all be killed under such circumstances. The state police didn't know them. The correctional officers who probably knew them and their ideas didn't kill them. Who knew these connection between these three men in my class room? Who knew their ideas? Somehow understanding the times and reactions of prison officials to such ideas, coincidence seems a weak explanation. I must wonder.

As I watched and listened to Attica unfold, I had a deep personal sensation that what was happening was more than just another prison

riot. Attica was more than a breakdown in security, more than just another example of administrative failure. Attica was more than prisoners venting frustration at the conditions of their confinement.

Attica AND PERSONAL POLITICS:

Attica brought together many the many political events I had experienced in my life. Attica gave these experiences coherence. Attica made the distinctions clear as no other event did. it laid bare the follies of justifications, the hypocrisy. At the same time, it expressed and communicated the elemental human struggle involved in wanting to do the right thing, trying to do good but being caught in a political ritual which one knows will only produce bad results in the end.

Not even the Civil Rights movement and the Viet Nam War and their protests made all this clear for me. In college during the middle years of the 1960's my university didn't experience sit-ins, building takeovers or violent protests. I do remember "teach-in's" where voice was given to the idea that the government did not know what it was doing and did not understand why it was doing it. In 1966 I did hear about American pilots pushing prisoners wrapped in barbed wire out of helicopters as an interrogation strategy, after Attica it made sense. It seemed to me that the government was providing ritualistic explanations, which, upon reflection, did not stand up. Years later, Secretary of State during that period Robert McNamara would confirm this (McNamara, 1995).

But for me, before Attica there was still a faith in the processes of democracy and in the people who worked it. I was raised on a politics of participatory democracy, party organization, and personal influence. A politics where ritual involvement bred party loyalty and personal contacts. Work for the party and when you need something, have a problem call the supervisor and you can get a response. When I was 11 working for the party was an adventure, an exercise in personal independence and involvement in that world outside of myself, my family, and my church. This was working to get people to support "my candidate". It didn't matter that I didn't know who my candidate was. All that mattered was that I knew the Democratic Party campaign slogan from 1952 and 1956 presidential elections "I like Ike (Dwight Eisenhower, Republican candidate), but Adlai Gladly" (Adlai Stevenson, Democratic candidate). What was

involvement? Going to party headquarters, volunteering to help out and being given a stack of flyers to put flyers on windshields. Participation meant going to political rallies with my mother and grandfather (my father was a postal worker and politics was out for him). The smoke filled halls, the smell of rye and bourbon (not too much beer here, this was too important) , the action, shaking hands everyone together for the Democratic Party. Watching political conventions on TV, the chaos of the action on the floor, the suspense of the nominating process and the slow tallying of the votes shouted from the floor, all of this was fascinating. Out of the conflict and chaos came a candidate. Despite differences, disagreements a candidate was chosen and the "rallying" behind the candidate could begin. With such good feelings about politics, how could one doubt?

The war of my early childhood was World War II and the reminiscences of my father and his "army buddies" who once every few years would meet in our kitchen and share camaraderie. The Christmas cards exchanged for years between my mother and the wives of other soldiers. These personal bonds were what war was about. And after all, the government made good choices then and Hitler was clearly an enemy. Could the war in Viet Nam be any different? There had to be a good cause.

Years later in Madison, Wisconsin, protests, violence challenges to government were all around me. As I listened and observed and talked, cried from the tear gas, saw the rifles and bayonets guarding campus buildings, saw political leaders being killed, I still found it hard to believe that the ask what you can do for your country spirit of John Kennedy, the visions of Bobby Kennedy, the non-violent virtues of Martin Luther King would not prevail.

Cynicism was growing, but it was still difficult to believe that the faith, beliefs and ties and emotions built from those childhood understandings of politics and government were somehow wrong. Faith was being shaken. But maybe the problem was only in Viet Nam. Maybe here bad decisions were made. Maybe politics and its processes still had some meaning and politicians could still do good. All of the decisions being made about these issues were at a distance from me. I didn't know what Viet Nam was, what was happening there. I did know what Attica was. I was part of this correctional machine. This was very personal and I felt it.

Attica--ROOTS CAUSES: PERHAPS...

For me, the conflicts at Attica were the culmination of the elemental political struggle I was learning about. The struggle was not simply a struggle for control over the activities taking place within the prison's walls. Nor was it a struggle for increased prisoner freedom. In its most basic meaning, Attica was a rebellion against hundreds of years of social, psychological and political ostracism and dehumanization of America's problem populations. Attica was America having to confront the failure of the American dream. A failure personified in the racial, political, economic and cultural characteristics of the men who, for a short time, publicly took control of their lives and the prison that September. Men who were for centuries invisible were for a few moments becoming visible.

The point at which Attica began is hard to determine. Perhaps Attica can be linked to a time when people first found it possible to conceive of other human beings as less than human. It might be linked to the institution of slavery; of seeing prisoners as slaves of the state as provided for in the 13th Amendment to the United States Constitution which provides that involuntary servitude, except as punishment for a crime, was not constitutional.] and slavery's devastating social destructiveness i.e., the destruction of even the possibility of human social relations between white and black America (Sanford and Comstock, and the construction of America's perpetual race dilemma (Myrdal, 1944).

Perhaps Attica began with the American Revolution which provided a model and mythology for the legitimate use of violence to throw off the yolk of tyranny and to suppress challenges to tyranny. Possibly it was the transformation of a people in rebellion into a self-governing democracy after the revolution, a democracy that needed to defend itself more from internal threats (real or imagined) than from outside enemies. Perhaps Attica started with the need for the new American economic and political elites to legitimize and maintain their newly created constitutionally provided for sources of power.

Perhaps Attica can be linked to very invention of the penitentiary and the seeming immutability of its basic contradictory underpinnings: the purposeful causation of pain and the altruistic desire to reform; the image of power and unquestionable state authority and the perpetual inability of state officers to exercise

control over prisoners; lofty ideals and the pettiness and hypocrisy of institutional practice; constitutional protections and nothing more than symbolic legal accountability.

Perhaps the Civil War with its massive death and destruction, power shifts and changed race relations were involved in Attica. The theoretical empowerment of America's slave populations spawned new mechanisms of racial control and civil dehumanization of newly freed, former slaves. Following the Civil War, perhaps it was the industrial revolution and waves of immigration from abroad and internally from the South to urban centers of the north which brought new "threats" and challenges to American economic and governmental institutions.

Perhaps expressions of violence against technology, labor union challenges met with violence and lynchings to maintain white privilege set the stage for what happened at Attica.

Perhaps Attica was spawned in World Wars of the 20th century the great wars and the "wars to end all wars". Maybe our "modern" rationalizations for genocides and atomic annihilation made state use of violence in almost any conceivable context acceptable and justifiable and soon forgotten in its memorialization.

Perhaps Attica was born in the "silent generations" of the 1950's, the "beat generation" and its howlings. The an impetus to believe that they could change the unchangeable.

Perhaps it was Martin Luther King and Malcolm X, SOUL ON ICE (Cleaver, 19) and BLACK POWER (Charmichael, 1968). Perhaps it was the end of colonialism in Africa and the taking off of white masks and the emergence of black skins of Fanon.

Perhaps, it was the expressions "power to the people" and "We Shall Overcome", challenging and changing the nature of social and political relationships that spawned Attica.

Perhaps it was Rosa Parks, a black Montgomery, Alabama seamstress, refusing to give up her seat on the bus in 1954.

Perhaps Attica was born in the campus riots of the late 1960's, the urban riots, anti-war protests, the Hippies, Yippies and the counter-

culture.

Perhaps Attica was promoted by the defenders of tradition, the way things were, are and should be. When previously unquestioned authority was challenged the world watched authority strike out at the 1968 Democratic convention in Chicago and at Kent State, a university in Ohio where in 1969 National Guard troops fired upon 1,000 student protesters killing four.

Perhaps when power is questioned and challenged, when it is asked to justify itself and its actions but can not, rather than accepting the emperor with no clothes, the emperor believes that violence truly cloaks his nakedness.

Attica grew out of many things but it cannot be said to have its genesis in one simple faulty gate (McKay Commission, 1972,P.108).

THE ENDING AND THE LIE:

Attica was many things. Its meaning and significance like all things depended on ones perspective. Is what is remembered about Attica the actions of the prisoners? Is it the actions of the state and the prisoners during the period when the prisoners had dominion over the prison yard? Is it the actions of the state and its officers in the process of wresting the dominion from the prisoners? Or is its meaning to be found in the aftermath as it affected the families of all involved either directly or tangentially.

When the assault and retaking of Attica occurred on the morning of September 13, 1971, I don't recall if Auburn Prison was in a state of lock up, but it probably was. I remember a sense of relief when it was announced. My assumption was that the "take-back " of the prison would resemble some of the club swinging police melees I had observed in Wisconsin and had watched during the Democratic National Convention. I could not imagine that gun-fire into prisoners and hostages would accompany the use of force.

The first report I actually remember was New York State Department of Corrections spokesperson Gerald Houlihan's report that hostages had died when convicts had slashed their throats. Oddly at this I again felt some sense of relief. Having watched and listened to correctional officers and staff and read the reactions of prison administrators after the Auburn riot, I knew there would be

some hell the prisoners would have to pay when Attica was finally over. The Auburn prisoners were locked up for months after the November 1970 riot, I couldn't imagine what would happen after Attica. If the inmates had slashed the officers throats then at least there would exist something to legitimize the repression that would surely follow.

Twenty-fours later, a different story. All nine hostages killed during the assault died of gun shot wounds. What? No slashed throats? Did I hear right? The bastards. Incompetents or liars it didn't matter. There was no excuse. To me this was worse than any of the lies the government told during the Viet Nam War. The hatred, fear, stereotyping of the prisoners that the earlier announcement of throat slashings had produced was out there. It was the public perception, it was the public mind. It would shape public perception from that day forward. "See, the prisoners are brutes, uncivilized, slashing the throats of helpless victims." For me, someone who had faith in the good judgment those incarcerated, that first announcement had killed any chance of enlightening the public about prison conditions and moving in a positive direction. If it were true it would be harder to convince people of my position. If it were true, but it wasn't. And the timing of the announcements would make sure that the truth would not matter. The present state of incarceration in the United States is a testament to that.

After I heard that announcement, that all hostages died as a result of gun shot wounds, for the first time in my life I felt the urge to do violence. I know I didn't have the knowledge to do it, I know I didn't have the guts to do it, but I wanted to do it. I wanted to get some explosives and just blow up the 30 foot walls around Auburn Prison. Smash them all to bits. I remember the feeling of anger as if it were yesterday. I could and still can visualize chunks of concrete flying every which way and prisoners running out. "Get the hell out of here," I would shout as the walls crumbled. "What the hell right do we have to hold you for what you did?" Get out!" If it happened in reality and not just in my mind, I wouldn't have cared.

Attica: POSSIBILITIES LOST

Attica was not only the destruction of people and place it was also the destruction of possibilities. Clearly property was destroyed., even before the state forcefully ended so many lives. But Attica was the

culmination of the possibility of destroying two of America's most powerful cultural stereotyped images: that of prisoner and that of the African-American man.

The docile Sambo of children's stories, the dangerous, irresponsible Zip Coon, the animalistic, savage brute Negro of popular culture (Dates, J. and Barlow, W, 1990), merged with images of the docile prisoner, the devious and dangerous prisoner, the brute, animalistic prisoner. These images justified in the public mind the ideas that Blacks and prisoners were often childlike and irresponsible hedonists, or genetically uncontrollable brutes. Together these images meant that white/law abiding society needed to control, care for and direct both the prisoner and the African American man. When Blacks or prisoners were permitted or attempted to escape from these stereotypes there has always been a reaction, often a violent one.

As the four days of Attica unfolded, the life and human concerns of an underclass given voice and expression. As these voices were raised in the prison yard, they echoed the voices which were raised in the race riots of the early 1900's, in the life of Marcus Garvey (founder of the Universal Negro Improvement Association in the 1920's), and the songs of Woody Guthrie (song writer and folk singer of the 1930's, 40's and 50's), in the legal efforts leading to Brown v. Board of Education (the 1954 U.S. Supreme Court Decision declaring 'separate but equal' education for American Blacks and Whites unconstitutional). in the 1940's and 50's, in the civil rights, Black Power, Black Panther, Black Muslim movements, community empowerment war on poverty, due process revolution, and anti-war counter-culture of the 1960's were focused and played out in the prison yard.

The contradictions of democracy and slavery, freedom and imprisonment, riches without social concern, and the American dilemma of race which made the life and experiences of the African American population essentially invisible to the majority white population came to at head at Attica. For me, it seemed that two hundred years of underground life and history flowed like lava from within the walls of the volcano which had grown within the walls of the prison.

This underground life was exposed to the light of television cameras and reporting by the national press, in the descriptions and feelings

of the Observers Committee, a group of nationally known figures which the prisoners requested to mediate the conflict. At Attica, the expressions of individual humanity of the underclass poised against the power of the state represented both an opportunity and a challenge. The opportunity was a chance to break a two hundred year old pattern of social relations and recognize the humanity inherent even in those who break the law.

Attica provided a chance to recognize commonality and put differences aside. Attica provided an opportunity to substitute a state power aimed at control for a state power designed to empower others. (Indeed, this was what I felt my job as a prison teacher was, empowering the prisoners to take control of their lives. I always felt good when prisoners challenged me. It made me feel like they were waking up from the dream-like state prison life demanded).

In addition, Attica had in it the possibility of showing that violence by the people did not always have to be met with violence by the representatives of the people.

When the prison was retaken, these possibilities were lost.

The time of Attica was a time when those who publicly validated invisible people were regularly being killed and jailed. John F. Kennedy, Malcolm X, Fred Hampton (a Black Panther Party leader in Chicago), George Jackson (a prisoner and author, see Jackson, 19 at California's San Quentin Prison), Martin Luther King, Bobby Kennedy, civil rights workers, members of "the movement"; students at Kent State. The deaths of these people were not distant historical events. When Attica happened these deaths were part of the immediate and living consciousness of the prisoners at Attica. These now dead were their brothers and sisters who had taught them to begin to validate themselves.

It's April 1994. I'm reading the New York Times. Ralph Ellison died. April 16th 1994. Reading his obituary I see the seeds of Attica, its root causes, in the INVISIBLE MAN. The man we don't see or don't care to see. But nevertheless the man is there. Struggling, working, living a life against the odds. Ignored, put down, defined away with such disdain and ignorance that he feels and recognizes that his ability to validate himself is being wrestled from his soul. He knows that his existence is one that others cannot validate. He knows his validation will diminish the others and he knows that, if his being

were recognized, nothing would ever be the same.

It's 1994. President Clinton says "We will empower residents to build safe neighborhoods, and we'll help to organize tenant patrols to ride elevators and look after the public spaces in these high-rise public housing units."(Clinton, 1994). Dangerous talk this. It was especially dangerous in the 1960's and 1970's when Bobby Seale, Fred Hampton and others spoke of empowering the People. "Power to the People". Self-determination. Saying such things and doing such things as the people (not the government) lead to FBI infiltrations and investigations in the 1960's and 1970's. (See Churchill and Vander Wall). Such self-help among the Invisible people was a threat to government self-perception. It was a threat to the common sense idea that government isn't necessary to take care of people's problems. This was all part of the consciousness with which the prisoners at Attica lived.

It is important to remember that Attica was not isolated criminal justice event. In New York State criminal justice during the late 1960's and early seventies, challenges to the legitimacy of concrete criminal justice operations were everywhere. Most visibly and directly related in the Toombs riots of early 1970. In the Riot at Auburn in November 1970. It's 1971. Nixon is President. Nelson Rockefeller is New York's Governor. We need to remember that ? Rocky' was a continuously "potential" Republican presidential candidate. A presidential contender could not give in to prisoners. He would become vice-president under Gerald Ford, the only president whose electoral mandate was derived from the few thousand people who voted for him in the 1972 congressional election in Michigan.

OSWALD AND THE END:

As the riot progressed it appeared that Russell Oswald, New York State Corrections Commissioner, understood the opportunities presented. He was negotiating. He was talking. He understood the prisoner concerns which focused on prison issues. I felt sorry for Oswald as I watched television reports which showed him in the yard. I remember meeting ,Russell Oswald who became Commissioner of Corrections in January of 1971. It was just months after the riot at Auburn and just 9 months before Attica. I remember Oswald coming to Auburn (probably in the spring of 1971). When

he was appointed I sensed an infusion of positive energy into the Department of Correctional Services an agency that previously seemed to have little purposeful direction and a great deal of organizational inertia. Prison reform would once again come to New York State.

With the political reality of the 1960's and now early 1970's, New York was now responding with a person who spoke to staff and prisoners about positive contributions, he discussed responsiveness expressions of prisoner discontent. No longer would there be a passive, status quo mentality. Contributions from staff, prisoners, administrators. Newsletters would be produced to keep everyone informed mission, goals, practical solutions to problems. We could no longer simply sit back. Correction was going to become corrections.

I felt he was talking to me and the concerns I felt. My initial reaction to the prison world was not to be a part of it. Work there, do my best, get my check, but remain separate from the tedium, cynicism and lifeless inertia. Could this round little man speaking to a crowd of teachers, shop foreman, vocational instructors and other staff change all that? For the first time since my prison career started, I began to have hope. He seemed to talk with words that were welcome to me and to many. Prison life would not be the same I thought to myself. I had hope for purposefulness in my new career as a prison teacher.

Could Oswald take advantage of the negotiation opportunity and end the Attica riot peacefully? As I sat in my prison classroom during those days, heard the rumors about bringing in the troops and the calls from the community and the staff for taking back the prison, I hoped talking would prevail and the opportunity presented by Attica could be won.

But Attica also represented a challenge. Attica was a challenge to the state. The idea that representatives of the people had the responsibility and the right to control the lives of those who violated the laws enacted and enforced and judged by those representatives. Attica challenged the fundamental concept of the politics of imprisonment. The social definitions of prisoners as 'deviants' as criminals, the stereotypical images were challenged by the visibility of the negotiation process, the meeting as equals between the commissioner (Russell Oswald) and the prisoner groups. The equality of essential humanity was beginning to be recognized.

Attica challenged the visions we (the law abiding) held of ourselves. Our complicity in the crimes of the prisoners was beginning to emerge from the chaos that seemed to reign within the prison yard.

Reading Russell Oswald's account of the events at Attica (Oswald, 1972) I felt for him. His prison reform credentials and experience were caught in a web of national politics the he in part recognized but with which traditional political responses could not deal.

As Oswald put it:

Attica was, in a sense, the pressure point at the heart of a massive, national complex that could be broken apart. As George Jackson put it--he was the famous "Soledad Brother" who had been shot trying to escape from San Quentin less than three weeks before Attica:

I'll reiterate that I feel that the building of the revolutionary consciousness of the prisoner class is paramount in the over-all development of a hard-core left revolutionary cadre.

On the eve of Attica, then, the disinherited and the villainous, the alienated and the pawns, the flotsam and jetsam of society, and a new generation of revolutionary leaders focused on prisons as their point of leverage. Here was where the Establishment could be made to buckle and the class issue could be most clearly defined (p.12).

What was the Establishment response, Oswald's response to this:

On the eve of Attica, also, the Establishment was moving toward its own intramural test. Almost all the governors of almost all of the states watched the growth of organized militancy in the prisons, anticipating trouble but unable to mobilize the tens of thousands of police and troops that would have been needed to contain all the correctional institutions. When the first prison "blew" how would we react? With instant repression, instant grants of inmate demands, or with a professional "sorting out" of legitimate grievances from revolutionary ultimata? The real test would be to extend the steady momentum of prison reform itself--to turn our correctional services into *an asset* of our society in which all of our citizens can participate and take pride.

In the crisis at Attica, caught in revolution and holding off

repression, I chose reform (p.12).

I believe Oswald. I felt for Oswald. Listening to the guards and others at Auburn while the negotiations were taking place I recognized the enormous pressures he was under and the risk he believed he was taking by negotiating. Watching him on television going into the yard, meeting with the prisoners I couldn't help but applaud.

But somehow what was taking place did appear to be ritual, did appear to be symbolic. I do not mean to negate the distance bridged by the days of negotiations. But it was still "prisoners" and the State. Convicts and the "establishment", We and They. Not person to person. Not people of equal value. The "prison reform" Oswald chose missed the point as much as did the instant repression or capitulation options that Oswald rejected.

In my discussions with Malloy, McNeil and Hicks and others it was always the common human dimension that we came back to, the mutuality of humanness on which we could ultimately agree. It wasn't power that the revolution was about. It was people, their images, their diversity and mutuality, their every day needs. This as Thomas Murton argues is what real prison reform is all about. It is what the "professional reform" of Oswald and the political web in which it was enmeshed could not even recognize let alone acknowledge. I felt truly sorry for him as I watched events unfold. Though he may have wished to stay the state's hand of violence, in the end he could not. If only he had an Attica to remember.

Perhaps Attorney General Reno would have been better served in dealings with the Branch Davidians (Heymann, 1993) by remembering Attica than she was by listening to the 'profilers' who see the world as 'them and us'. We often forget that while the government was struggling and eventually inflicting death in Waco, Texas, a prison riot with hostages was unfolding in Lucasville, Ohio. Ohio Governor John Gilligan knew Attica while the week long stalemate dragged on. Governor Gilligan (1993) remembered Attica when he said:

I keep remembering that in my first year in office there was a riot at Attica prison in New York. Gov. (Nelson) Rockefeller finally yielded to those who said troopers should storm the place. They did and 43 people were killed. It seems to me that it's better to sit tight,

to hang tight, at Lucasville rather than make a bloodbath."

Perhaps Governor Gilligan's statement and actions are the most sincere memorial and remembrance of Attica. A memorial to stopping the violence. A remembrance of the importance of the humanness inherent in us all.

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