OVERDUE

Overdue

A Dewey Decimal System of Grace

Valerie Schultz

A *Give Us This Day* Book

LITURGICAL PRESS
Collegeville, Minnesota
www.litpress.org

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Portions of some of the essays in this book previously appeared in THE BAKERSFIELD CALIFORNIAN, AMERICA, HUMAN DEVELOPMENT, LIGUORIAN, and THE LEVAN HUMANITIES REVIEW.

Names have been changed to respect privacy.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Schultz, Valerie, author.
Title: Overdue : a Dewey decimal system of grace / Valerie Schultz.
Description: Collegeville : Liturgical Press, 2019. | Summary: "Valerie Schultz shares what she learned and the grace she received during fourteen years working inside an American prison"— Provided by publisher.
Identifiers: LCCN 2019012523 (print) | ISBN 9780814664117 (pbk.)
Subjects: LCSH: Church work with prisoners. | Prison libraries—Miscellanea.
Classification: LCC BV4465 .S364 2019 (print) | LCC BV4465 (ebook) | DDC 259/.5—dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2019012523
LC ebook record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2019980012

For the Men of Facility D

300 Social Sciences

400 Language

500 Pure Science

600 Technology

700 Arts & Recreation

800 Literature

900 History & Geography

Introduction

"When I was in prison, you visited me." Hearing these words from the Gospel of Matthew many times while growing up, I never imagined they would one day describe me. I never imagined that I would visit a prison, much less spend time with prisoners. I lived for eighteen years in a California community that included a prison within its boundaries before I ever went inside one. Prison was dangerous. Nothing good ever happened in there.

The way I started as a volunteer facilitating Catholic Communion services was an O. Henry-like story of a mix-up of ministry meetings at the local parish. I had recently resigned from a parish position and was at loose ends spiritually. Two new ministries were starting up at the time: a St. Vincent de Paul chapter and a detention ministry group. My husband volunteered us for St. Vincent de Paul, but the same woman, Emma, was taking sign-ups for both groups. Emma mistakenly told me that my husband had signed us up for detention ministry. This kind of freaked me out, conjuring up every book and movie I'd ever seen that dramatized the terror of prison.

"Emma called to remind us about the detention ministry group organizational meeting," I told my husband, hesitantly, one evening.

"Oh. Ohhh-kaaay," my husband said with a similar hesitation. Curiously, we didn't discuss it any further. We both went to the meeting in secret trepidation, each thinking that we were supporting our mate's out-of-the-blue calling. Was it odd or was it God?

Long story short, we went "inside" and were blessed beyond measure. We'd expected the inmates to be scarier, like characters

from central casting, but the reality was that they were just folks—young, old, short, tall, thin, stout, bald, well-coiffed, English-speaking, Spanish-speaking, outgoing, shy, articulate, silent, funny, stern. While they were sometimes tattooed to an alarming extent, they possessed all the quirks and gifts and flaws, the nobility and the sin, that define humanity. The men we met in prison profoundly enriched our lives. They gave us much more than we gave them.

As my stint in prison developed from volunteering to working in a clerical position to running a library on a yard, I came to see the prisoners more each day as human beings, created by and beloved of God. For the most part, the men I dealt with were respectful and even considerate. Some, of course, were certifiably psychopathic; some were mean or misogynistic; some had fallen in with a gang; some were actually innocent of the crime for which they'd been convicted; some had done something stupid and regrettable; some were addicts and alcoholics. In short, they were much like the non-incarcerated population. My fourteen years inside were a time of grace and learning. It was no challenge to find God in all things in prison, because God was palpably everywhere.

I think of re-imagining our prisons as places for rehabilitation—an ideal that our present criminal justice system does not meet—not only as a political struggle but as a spiritual one. Along with being disproportionately handed to people of color and people of limited monetary means, prison time is mainly punitive. Taxpayers often see no need to provide inmates with any services beyond those necessary for physical survival. Many people think that, as ugly as prison time may be, these transgressors deserve whatever they get. They should be thoroughly and satisfyingly punished: justice as retribution rather than any kind of restoration. And anyone who has ever been the victim of a crime understandably wants the perpetra-

tor of their suffering to suffer in equal measure. I totally get that deeply human response to being hurt, and I have been there myself. I know the thirst for revenge. Compassion for the convicted is not easy to come by.

This book is not an academic study of prison issues. It is a witnessing of sorts. I do hope to prompt an engagement in some soul-searching about our criminal justice priorities and policies, about the racism and classism they perpetuate, and about revamping the system to lift our fellow sinners up to healing and wholeness.

I have organized these essays around the Dewey Decimal System of book cataloging to honor the prison library where it was my privilege to work and to partake of God's grace in many forms. The Dewey Decimal System has been largely replaced by the Library of Congress cataloging system, but smaller collections, like those in elementary schools or prisons, still utilize Dewey. Life is rarely so well organized as Dewey, but we can dream. I also ask the reader to keep in mind a prison maxim: "Today's inmate is tomorrow's neighbor." This may alarm us, but it's true: most inmates will be released back into the community. Most intend to fit into society. Most know that the deck is stacked against them. Most can be rehabilitated. And most will respond to a kind word or an extended hand.

We can be good neighbors to anyone the good Lord plops down next to us. We can be the face of Jesus no matter where we work or live. We can be part of the solution, which is, always and of course, love.

Here's the Deal

The first time I walked into the library that would be my home away from home for the next five years, I noticed the windows. Soaring up to the high ceiling, the bank of windows at the south end of the unexpectedly large and spacious room admitted the spring morning light in a way that made me feel like I'd come home. Dust motes diffused themselves in the sun's rays, as I saw with surprise that the room looked much more like a library than a penal institution. Of course, that impression was countered by the rows of uncomfortable-looking orange plastic chairs flanking low, heavy, mismatched wooden tables that had been built decades ago in the Carpentry vocational shop by inmates no longer around, not to mention the cages encasing the few windows that actually opened. The room, devoid of patrons, smelled like books. More precisely, it smelled like a secondhand bookstore. I learned later that this library was unusual for a prison because it had open stacks the inmates could browse. Most prison libraries, constructed after this dinosaur of a prison, were small rooms with closed stacks; all books were behind a counter and the patrons could only choose their reading material from an inventory list. This library was unusually bookish. On the shelves that lined the walls and formed aisles down the middle of the large room, there must have been ten thousand volumes, their mysterious wisdom beckoning.

But no humans were there to respond to the call of the books. The library was empty. For months, it had been open

only rarely, due to a lack of staff and a statewide hiring freeze. I had been transferred from another position under a special dispensation from Sacramento. The prison library must be functional, because the law mandates that the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) provide its charges meaningful access to the courts. So inmates in California are guaranteed at least two hours per week for the purpose of pursuing their own legal work, four hours if they can show a verifiable court deadline within thirty days. The law also assures their access to recreational reading materials, like books, newspapers, and magazines.

The legal side of the library included computer terminals loaded with massive files of legal statutes and court decisions, as well as bookcases crammed with traditional law books in print, and the necessary county, state, and federal forms to file legal actions when acting as one's own attorney. Which was the case with most of the law patrons. Some of them might be working on appeals or motions for resentencing or civil lawsuits or filing writs of habeas corpus (which my beginner legal brain translated as "show me the body!"). Some might be preparing for parole board hearings. Some might be fighting for custody of their children or going through divorce proceedings. The library was the place for legal research and resources, including forms, envelopes, copies, and commiseration.

On the recreational reading side of the library were current and back issues of magazines and newspapers, various reference volumes, and fiction and nonfiction books. The magazines stayed in the library and, I soon learned, had to be monitored to discourage the surreptitious ripping out of pages featuring beautiful women or sports heroes. The books could be checked out two at a time. The security level of this particular facility permitted hardback books; some higher levels did not, and library staff there had to remove any hard covers, because they

were considered "weapon stock." Some of the library books were purchased through the state budget, and some were donated, by prisoners or by kind strangers. Some were fairly recent, and some had filled these shelves for a long time.

Before my appointment, the skeletal staff of the prison's education department had been barely meeting the legal requirements for a functioning library for several months. Teachers had been pulled from their classrooms to open the library for an hour here and there, doing the minimum of checking out books and providing court forms and making legal copies. The teachers, as one might imagine, were unhappy about this task. Now it was my job to get this library open and running, mainly so that the inmates' complaints and legal appeals would stop. I was also charged with opening another library on the minimum security yard in the same prison, which was also unstaffed and hardly ever open. I would spend three days a week on my home yard and two days at the minimum yard, until more staff could be hired.

Both of these yards at the time were designated as a "Sensitive Needs Yard," or SNY. Prisoners who wouldn't fare well on a General Population (GP) yard were housed here for their own safety. The SNY population was mostly composed of sex offenders, homosexual or transgender inmates, "snitches," those whose offenses had harmed children or the elderly, and gang dropouts. SNYs were unusual for their racial mix, because unlike on the strictly self-segregated GP yards, SNY inmates had to agree to live alongside those with whom they disagreed or who might even be their former enemies. (SNYs were not without their own unique problems, and the CDCR has since discontinued the designation in favor of "programming" yards.)

After two days of training, courtesy of a staff library aide on loan from another prison, I was on my own. Well, not exactly on my own, as I had six inmate clerks on each yard under my

supervision. I already knew some of the inmates on both yards from my time as a Catholic volunteer, but I didn't know any of these guys. And they didn't know me. And so the dance began.

Although the inmates referred to me as "the librarian-lady," I was not a librarian, as I lacked a master's degree in Library Science. My job title was Library Technical Assistant, or LTA. But I was in charge of the medium-security library, and I planned to make it the most positive and generative place it could be under the circumstances. I wanted it to be an oasis, a little patch of serenity within the strictures of the institution.

The job duties of the inmate library assistants, or clerks, were to check books in and out, reshelve and repair books, monitor the door as patrons signed in and out, provide customer service at the legal counter, and clean the library every morning. They'd done their jobs for way longer than I had done mine, and they were delighted to be back at work full-time after the long shut-down time. But they were still figuring out what my deal was, meaning what kind of boss I was going to be.

I had taken in so much information in my two training days and had made copious notes, but I soon found that the reality of supervising inmates and serving the eager and deprived library patrons on each yard was of more immediate concern than differentiating between the forms for the civil and criminal courts. I was surprised and pleased by the high level of legal expertise among the clerks. In their capacity as paid clerks, they were not supposed to dispense legal advice or to accept any extra recompense for their services apart from their state wages. (Their pay, upon being hired, was fifteen cents an hour. They topped out at thirty-two cents an hour. My total monthly payroll for each yard was never more than two hundred dollars: our tax dollars at work.) Inmates could, however, help each other as peers, and there were known "jailhouse lawyers" on both yards.

Allow me to make your acquaintance with some of the clerks who worked in the library over the years. Here, and throughout the book, their names and some biographical details have been changed to respect their privacy. (I usually called my clerks by their first names, a habit carried over from my time as a religious volunteer, even though a sergeant once roared at me, "WHAT is every inmate's first name? INMATE!")

Neil, the savviest law clerk ever, turned sixty during his time in the library. He was a lifer. A life sentence is not necessarily life without the possibility of parole, known as LWOP, but can be 15-to-life, or 25-to-life, or something-to-life, which is how the court builds a tiny possibility of freedom into the sentence. Neil had already served decades of his term. He was a former heroin addict who had unintentionally run over and killed a person during a robbery. He was given to hyperbole and was never shy about expressing his opinion. Regarding legal matters, Neil was self-educated and usually right. He probably could have passed the bar exam. He had a natural curiosity and was always looking to learn, especially about technology. As the traditional print law books were in the process of being phased out in favor of computer-based legal resources, Neil took it upon himself to encourage the other old timers to familiarize themselves with the legal research computers. He patiently taught many men who had never touched a computer how to navigate the rivers of information available therein. Neil had married and divorced a pen pal at least once while he'd been incarcerated but had never had children. He was a father figure to many of the younger inmates, though, steering them through the choppy waters of their legal appeals and motions and writs. I often saw Neil on one side of a table listening intently to an inmate seated on the other side, his head bowed like he was hearing a confession. And maybe in a way he was: Neil the priest needed a true account of the inmate's

misdeeds before he could direct him to possible legal recourse. Neil, not making eye contact as he listened, used an old parenting trick: kids open up more if you appear to be looking elsewhere. When Neil was finally found suitable for parole, after many unsuccessful appearances before the parole board, he left prison and rejoined a society he hardly recognized. A life-long learner, he soon discovered Facebook. That's how he reconnected with his high school sweetheart and married her.

George was a former leader of a Latino gang. He had spent many years in solitary confinement on account of the gang activity he'd continued even after he'd gone to prison for dealing drugs. He'd finally left the gang, been debriefed by prison authorities, and worked his way down to a minimum security SNY. Three things he told me about solitary have stayed with me: that the 24/7 fluorescent lighting had permanently messed with his eyesight, that he had talked to himself in two languages to keep from going mad, and that when he was finally sent to the SNY, he caught every cold and virus going around, because he hadn't been exposed to anyone else's germs for so long. His rap sheet was as thick as a legal reference book, but he'd become a mellow old-timer. Before he paroled, he showed me pictures of the grandchildren he would finally be on his way home to meet.

Trevor was in for ten years or so for molesting a young man. I should say, a younger man, because Trevor himself was a young man. He was one of the few clerks I had to fire. It seemed he had not really kicked his drug habit, and he was pilfering supplies from the library to trade for prescription painkillers from cunning inmates who had not swallowed their own. A conflicted gay man who'd been brought up in an ultra-religious home and had been closeted until he came to prison, Trevor also traded sexual favors for his necessary fix. Of course, I found out all of this later, after I'd hired and then

had to fire him. I'd believed that he was clean and sober. I'd thought he was smart. I knew he was well read from all the books he'd checked out of the library before he worked there. I sympathized with how he'd never been able to be honest about his sexual orientation while he was growing up. If he ever got clean, he'd need therapy just for that. Only after he left did I realize that all the manic organizing he'd done of the legal forms, as well as the system he'd been in the process of creating for easier access to the resources of the law library, made no sense. It was as devoid of logic as an addict's mind. No one else could follow it.

Earl was a lifer in his fifties. Most people were scared of Earl and his time-tested mean scowl. He'd done hard time since he was a teenager but had asked to be transferred to the SNY for personal reasons: his mother was aged, and he felt it was high time to go home and take care of her. He well knew that a transfer to SNY indicated to the parole board that a lifer was earnestly trying to take advantage of rehabilitative programming in order to be deemed suitable for parole. Earl was fiercely loyal to me and to the library, to the point that he offered several times, *sotto voce*, to take a rude patron outside for me and teach him some manners. I suspected that he would have killed someone if I'd asked. I always thanked Earl for his thoughtfulness but assured him I could handle myself. I could do the job I was paid to do. (Also, I tried never to miss an opportunity to preach gender equity.) Earl was incarcerated because he had injured a man while he and his buddy were trying to steal the man's car in order to go to a concert: they had thrown the man in the trunk. Because this was technically kidnapping, he'd gotten a seven-year-to-life sentence. The fact that he was still in prison over thirty years later, though he'd been eligible for parole after just seven, showed that he did not play well with the parole board. Honest to a fault, Earl had

no patience for pretense or mind-game-playing. His gruff and menacing manner fully camouflaged his good heart. The parole board eventually saw this, and he did get to go home.

Ramon was about the sweetest man I'd ever met. He and his brother were (literally) partners in crime and had received twin life sentences for a gang-related murder, but thanks to the capricious twists of an uneven justice system, his brother had already been released. Ramon's way of expressing himself was low-key. He usually only spoke after prompting, and I suspected his lack of the gift of gab had not served him well at parole board hearings. But nothing mean-spirited ever came from him. He was quietly generous to everyone. Ramon's book learning was limited, but he could fix anything. He totally understood the mechanics of how things worked. As these same mechanics are a mystery to me, I frequently relied on him for this skill. His Mexican name and appearance led me to assume he was bilingual, but his Spanish was not much better than mine. "I'm from Texas," he said, shrugging. "Even my mom says my Spanish is terrible." He had an infectious laugh, the kind of high-pitched giggle that is always surprising when it comes from a tough-looking guy with serious muscles. Ramon was one of my favorite people.

"Karma" was a nickname. When he first asked me to call him that—he assured me that I would not be able to pronounce his real Vietnamese name—I told him that I would not call him by anything that had been his gang moniker. But he said that his family had nicknamed him Karma, because he had survived the dreadful circumstances of being born aboard a boat of refugees fleeing Vietnam. He had joined a gang as an alienated teen and, of course, had broken the law. Specifically, he'd used a gun to help his homies rob a business and terrorize the customers. No one was hurt. He'd been sent to adult prison at the age of sixteen, something that, thank

God, we no longer do. Consequently, he had grown up fast and furious. Now in his thirties, Karma struggled with his anger. He could go from sunshine to full-on combat in the blink of an eye. But he also looked out for the less-able inmates, the ones who were mentally slow or weird or shunned, and who could be easily taken advantage of by other inmates. Karma was a gifted poet and visual artist. A prison journal even published some of his work. Hyperactive to the core, he redecorated the library with whatever supplies he could scrounge. I called him our own Martha Stewart, not because of the prison sentence, but because of his eye for color and style and flair. Ironically, even though he'd been born on a boat, when Karma was released, ICE promptly took him into custody, where he had to fight deportation to Vietnam, a country he'd never inhabited.

"Cuba" was also a nickname, referring to another young man's place of birth. Cuba was one of the original clerks in place when I started at the library, so he came with the job. At first I tried calling him by his actual given name, which was an uncommon one, but he didn't respond, and no one else knew whom I meant. So, Cuba it was. He was slow-moving and slow-talking. He actually seemed to know very little about the law, the area where he was stationed, but he was affable and well-liked by everyone. He'd been a youth offender who had "graduated" to an adult yard when he turned eighteen. Cuba was transferred to another facility not long after I started and has since been released. His commitment offense involved following along with the crowd more than any malevolence on his part, and I hope that, as an adult, he now hangs with a more law-abiding crowd.

I was going to say that Don had been a Marine, but according to Don, once a Marine, always a Marine, *semper fi*. Don had the crew cut and the tactical skills of a career military

man. Don's coworkers didn't always appreciate his abrupt, snapping manner, but he got things done. (I was always surprised by the number of incarcerated veterans; they even had their own support group on the yard.) Don was instrumental in my ambitious plan to overhaul the physical layout of the library to make it more user-friendly. One administrator took an instant dislike to Don when she realized that I was relying on his spatial intelligence in this endeavor, as her mindset was that inmates were never to be trusted. She made unhelpful and frankly ignorant modifications to the proposed floor plan, just to show him who was in charge. (I noted over the years that the heavy-handed management style of several supervisors would befit the Hogwarts Grand Inquisitor.) We quietly went with Don's plan anyway. Don was going to have to register as a sex offender for the rest of his life because he had threatened a female acquaintance with rape while in a PTSD-induced blackout. He had come to his senses before committing the rape, but the attempt was enough to convince him to take a plea deal rather than risk a trial and perhaps a life sentence. He had kids. Don was one of the few inmates I observed who actively tried to parent his children from prison. He spoke to his wife and children on the phone as frequently as possible and kept apprised of their lives. Don didn't want his family to visit him for several reasons: he didn't want his kids to see him incarcerated, the trip was a long and expensive one, and his wife was undocumented. Don worried all the time that his wife would be deported and his kids would be placed in foster care, which was where he had grown up and which had been terribly damaging to him. Several times, he mailed his wife all the instructions and forms she needed to apply for US citizenship. I don't know if she ever successfully submitted them.

Billings. Ah, Billings. My first clue that maybe I shouldn't have hired Billings came when I asked one of the vocational

instructors why she hadn't written him a recommendation for parole. "Because I fired him," she said. "He could *not* follow directions. And he's creepy." That gave me pause. When I hired him, he seemed like a good fit with the other clerks, and he was personable with our patrons. He was a fast learner. Maybe too fast. He read all the urban fiction books in our collection, which could be borderline pornographic, and when he discovered that I facilitated a weekly writers' group in the library, he thought he'd try his hand at writing some similarly provocative fiction. One afternoon, as the clerks were leaving for the day, Billings asked me to read the massive manuscript he'd written. After half a page, I realized that the sexy object of desire in this explicit first-person sexual fantasy was *me*. Granted, it was a younger, sultrier, far more suggestive version of me, but unmistakably me. Worse, it was unmistakably Billings as the narrator with an impressive erection. Yikes. I gave his handwritten tome to the disciplinary sergeant and fired Billings the next morning. I had to write him up for totally inappropriate behavior. "WHY would you think this was OK?" the sergeant reportedly asked him. "I thought she liked writing," Billings said, unfazed. He was sent to another yard, but for a few days, the officers had a little too much fun by subtly referring to some of the juicier passages in my presence. Dear reader, I did not keep a copy, so I can't quote word-for-word from Billings's purple prose.

Andres was a smooth talker, good-looking and articulate and persuasive. He was intelligent and picked up languages easily. He was an excellent interpreter and translator for the Spanish-speaking population on the yard. His four life sentences for gang-related murders were intended to run long after his natural death, but recent changes in the law with regard to the decision-making capabilities of adolescent offenders offered him a glimmer of hope for release someday. I

discovered after I'd hired him that Andres was a rather careless worker—he'd cross off books as returned when they had not been, or he'd shelve the returns haphazardly—but he had charisma. Along with his ease with languages, he had a dead-on ear for dialogue: as a member of the writers' group, he was working on a horror novel that was formulaic, but the dialogue he'd written sparkled with authenticity and wit. I encouraged him to turn it into a screenplay. He was a natural.

Caleb had been a high school teacher. It was a good bet that a middle-aged white guy with no tattoos who was housed on an SNY was in for some kind of sex crime, and Caleb fit the profile. He had molested a teenage girl who babysat his children. As a result of his conviction, he'd lost career and marriage and family. I didn't think he was a serial predator, but I also knew that just because this had been his only arrest didn't mean he hadn't taken advantage of his position of authority and abused other young women he'd been responsible to educate. I met him when he was a clerk for the Catholic chaplain and hired him when he had termed out of that job; inmates were only allowed to keep a job for two years, in order to discourage over-familiarity with staff. Caleb was extremely organized, almost obsessively devoted to detail, and he whipped the legal area into shape after Trevor had left behind that aforementioned unfinished and nonsensical filing system. I trusted the integrity of his work and wrote him a letter of recommendation upon his release.

Eduardo was an unassuming, quiet, short man, and he put up with every short joke on the yard with good humor. Eduardo had participated in a gang-related murder and was serving a life sentence. Like so many inmates, he would be deported if he were ever found suitable for parole. He hadn't lived in Mexico since he was a little boy, but family members in Mexico were prepared to take him in, to give him a place to live and

provide him with a job. Eduardo was bilingual after so many years in the US, but he still struggled to pass his GED. He had actually passed the language part, but he'd failed the math part a couple of times. Many years after the fact, he realized that he had started skipping school and getting into trouble because he had an undiagnosed learning disability and, like many teenagers, would rather have been known as a troublemaker than as dumb. Eduardo was a living example of the generational cycle of prison: one of his nephews was now incarcerated. His nephew wanted to believe that Eduardo was still a bad-ass convict whom he wanted to imitate. He didn't want to hear that Eduardo had decided to change his ways and become a model prisoner after his father had died and he hadn't been able to attend the funeral or comfort his mother. His nephew saw the old Eduardo as a role model and scoffed at the new, improved Eduardo, which hurt Eduardo's heart. He wanted to save his nephew from the many wasted years of pain and bad decisions in prison that he himself had known. His sister, the nephew's mother, begged Eduardo over the phone to do whatever he could to straighten her son out, but his nephew wouldn't listen to him. "Welcome to the world of parenting," I told him.

These character sketches represent many library clerks with whom I worked. Clerks came and went over the years, often with little notice of their departure. They could be transferred to another facility or unexpectedly released on parole or reassigned to a vocational or educational program. The library was not considered a priority job, even though I sometimes fought with the Inmate Assignments office to keep a good worker employed there. I usually lost the argument.

The library clerks had to walk a fine line between being an inmate and doing their jobs. They had to use their people skills. They had to be tactful and professional, on time and well

groomed. Displeased patrons sometimes accused them of "wearing green," an insult meaning that they were acting like correctional cops instead of like inmates wearing blue. The clerks were tasked with applying the library rules to everyone, which didn't always go over well with their friends, who perhaps expected preferential treatment or sketchy favors.

During those first days, my scant official training left me in a position of having to rely on the clerks to teach me the ways of the library. Which meant that my BS monitor had to be fully charged. I had high expectations for my clerks, but I knew they weren't always saints.

I owe much of my legal education to Inmate Cummings, a desiccated string bean of an old man who was the most litigious inmate on the yard. Cummings realized within my first days in the library that I had no legal background. Rather than treat my ignorance dismissively, which I'm pretty sure would have been his go-to behavior, Cummings decided to be magnanimous and show me the ropes. He explained to me things like the hierarchy of state and federal courts and how to obtain the proper forms for each court and how many copies of a motion each court required and the complicated process of filing an appeal and following it to its natural end. He would have made a good teacher in another life. Cummings predicted that someday, as a result of his stellar and unceasing work on his case, inmates in the future would cite *in re Cummings* as a precedent. This was not to be. Some months later, bonier and frailer, Cummings was transferred to a medical facility. I was genuinely saddened when he died of cancer.

Back to the physical library. My office was a room carved from the library's expanse. Its walls were made of windows from waist-level up to ceiling, so I could see everything going on in the library. Even the door was half window, contributing to the fishbowl feel of my work setting. Fortunately, the win-

dow into the inmate restroom just behind my office was painted opaquely about halfway up, sparing me an inadvertent look at any intimate details. The blind spots out on the floor among the shelves were made visible by those parabolic mirrors you see on blind curves on country roads.

My office door locked, so that my computer and phone and files—and my person—could be secure in any time of upheaval. I'd been instructed to lock it any time I was not in it, even if only for a moment. My office was considered a "red zone," which meant it was a no-go for inmates: the words "OUT OF BOUNDS" were painted right onto the floor outside my door, as well as on the approach to any other areas of the library that were off limits to patrons. The library clerks could only enter my office with my permission. Ensconced there, I was like a dictator of a small country: my word was final.

Although those of us who worked within the confines of a yard, rather than in an area outside of a secure yard perimeter, were not permitted to bring personal items into our workspaces, I found ways to de-institutionalize my office. I scrounged around for posters from the education department and taped them to the faded walls. I smuggled in seasonal decorations. Karma painted the trim around the windows a murky lavender; Lord only knows where he got the paint and brush. He stenciled hearts onto my metal trashcan, then asked me not to tell anyone that he had been the artist. As though no one knew.

Outside of my office, we plastered the bulletin boards with colored paper, on which we rotated news clippings or other interesting items. We posted a "Quote of the Day," a "Word of the Day," and a "Book of the Day." I printed out NPR's *Weekend Edition* weekly puzzle and awarded a star-sticker to whoever solved it first—glimmers of normal fun in the library.

Sometimes my office hosted night visitors, first watch officers who left evidence of their presence. My phone might be

moved, or there might be boot prints where on-duty slackers had propped their feet against the desk. There might be sticky coffee cup rings or crumbs of food. I imagined the empty library was a tempting place for an officer to steal some sleep on an overnight shift. Occasionally, my computer showed signs of use. Rarely, my office door was left unlocked. For some reason, on several three-day weekends, someone used the urinal in the inmate bathroom and did not flush it, leaving a sour pee smell to greet me on my morning back. I complained to the sergeant, but since my daytime shift was during second watch, he wasn't the sergeant for the wee-hours (pun intended) first watch, so he didn't much care. I also complained when parts of my "WELCOME" sign just inside the main door were strategically erased one night to read "WE CUM." Seriously? They might be highly compensated correctional officers, but some of them reveled in a frat-boy culture.

These untidy transgressions were even more noticeable because my office usually sparkled with spotlessness. When I hired Earl, he made himself the chief deputy of cleaning my office. The first time he stripped and waxed and buffed the linoleum floor in my office, we discovered that its actual color was closer to lime green than olive. My floor gleamed like a miniature ballroom dance floor in the middle of a prison. It was so beautiful that I felt badly when my shoes made scuff marks. Earl insisted on waxing it every week.

I was often struck by how meticulous about cleanliness and hygiene most of my clerks were. Because they had so little to call their own, they were extremely careful with and protective of what was theirs. They also had so little personal space that it was important to keep it in order. Plus, when you had little control over your life and the minutes and hours of your day, maybe you were hyper-super-predisposed to control anything you could. Anyway, the library and my office were kept much

more spic-and-span than my house was. Compared to these men, I was sloppy about my office and my stuff. I was glad they couldn't see my home. I have too much stuff even to catalog.

With experience, I felt at home in the library. The busy days flew, and in no time flat I felt like a fixture. Some days I suspected that I could be replaced by a robot that could use a copy machine, but other days I felt that one irreplaceable thing I brought to the library was humanity. Really, I was part mom, part cheerleader, and part walking dictionary, but most of all I was a human, interacting with other humans. This should not have been rare in prison, but apparently it was.

People used to ask me if I was scared to work so closely with inmates. I wasn't. I joked that it was more like working at a day care center. They may be grown men, but they have so many questions! So many needs! So little patience! But these inmate coworkers were my work family. The library was a sunny spot in the prison, a place of information and learning, a community of human beings being determinedly human.

And for me there was more—the breath of the Holy Spirit in my face as I sometimes looked down the rows of regulars, each one unique and baffling and sometimes aggravating, concentrating on their tasks, sitting on their unyielding orange chairs, daylight streaming through those high windows, faces absorbed by their stacks of handwritten motions and appeals, and I felt a love that can only come from God.