EARL SHORRIS

The Art of Freedom

Teaching the Humanities to the Poor

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Earl Shorris

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In 1995, having been unable to answer the most important question about poverty in the United States, I went to the Bedford Hills prison north of New York City to observe its Family Violence Program. I had a book to write, and I could not find an ending for it. For years I had looked everywhere, interviewed hundreds of people, and while I had developed a theory about poverty and its causes, no solution presented itself. I hoped I would find one there in the prison. Like most of what one learns about the poor, the surface life of the prison revealed less than I had expected and the emotional and intellectual depths were greater than I could have imagined. The next seventeen years would be governed by that afternoon at Bedford Hills. I would struggle to continue my work as a writer while the ideas engendered that afternoon threatened to engulf me.

I have written elsewhere about some of the people who participated in the program that came to be called, in much of the world, the Clemente Course in the Humanities and also the Odyssey Course or Venture or Alta Cultura Maya–Hunab Ku or Yaaveskaniryaraq, or simply Humanities 101. The effort, until now, was always to present the theory, with the people no more than illustrative of the work.

This is a book about the people, about the founders of some of the many courses, their struggles, their generosity, and their extraordinary intelligence.

The center of every course is now, in every language and culture, as it has always been, the students who come heroically out of a surround of force, at the edge of hopelessness, to the beauty and clarity of reflective thinking. They and their children are proof that poverty is not a necessary condition of human life.

We teach freedom.

A Prison Romance

I was wrong, not entirely wrong, but wrong. And it took almost seventeen years to uncover the errors.

She was the cause of it all; about that I have no doubt. She was there at the beginning, she and her freckles and opaque eyes. You might say that she was the beginning, and you wouldn't be far off the mark, although it didn't happen quite the way it sounds. It was a series of accidents. I had not gone up to the prison to find romance or a plot line or a character for a novel; my interest was sociological: I went with a cold eye. That much is true. It is also true that a maximum security prison is a writer's dream, for writers are romantics, and I am no exception. Had it been otherwise there would have been no mistake and I would have wandered the world with different intellectual goods in my salesman's kit. I first wrote about the woman in the prison and the work she engendered a long time ago, before I could say what I knew about her or the effect she would have on me and the work I was to do.

The Bedford Hills prison—an hour and a half north of New York City on a good day—was almost a hundred years old when I first saw it. In summer, the road off the freeway curls around and down through stands of tall, spindly trees and runs on beside summer fields. Half a mile in, there is a hint of what lies ahead: a dead and stony field where yellow buses and cars frosted with gray dust

sit parked in the sun, waiting. Nothing moves outside the prison unless the shifts change or the visitors come and go on the yellow buses. The brick buildings beyond the dead square set among the old, heavy trees give off an air of patience. It is a maximum security prison. Every woman there has been sentenced to at least six years, and more than a few will be there for life.

At Bedford Hills I would learn that prison is more violent than the streets. She would teach me. She would be my professor, as I would soon be hers.

On that first afternoon, the prisoners and two social workers and I sat in a circle of metal chairs in a large room somewhere in the center of the prison; I do not know where. The social worker directed me to sit next to a small, slightly chubby young woman. The woman and I shook hands and introduced ourselves in the formal manner I thought appropriate to a prison visit. When she looked at me, her eyes were perfectly opaque—hostile, prison eyes—and her mouth was set in the beginning of a sneer.

We listened to presentations about the abuse of women and heard their stories, saw them weeping as they spoke. There was a videotape of some of the women, more intimate than what they said in the room. After the videotape had played, a tall woman with yellow hair strode to the center of the circle. She stood very straight, her hands at her sides, and spoke plainly in a flat, unaccented voice. She said that she had taken part in the robbery of a convenience store. Her role was to hold a knife to the throat of the store clerk. She did not intend to harm him, she said, but when he struggled to free himself from her grasp, she did not know what to do. She told him to be still, and when he continued to struggle, she slit his throat.

The tall woman spoke without expression. She made only one gesture: she raised her right hand and drew it across her neck as if it was the throat of the remembered man. Then she dropped her

hand to her side, paused, and said she was going home soon. She did not say anything more about the murder, nor did she speculate on the life she would have at home. As she passed close by me, returning to her chair, I saw that she had been weeping.

I did not look over at the woman next to me while the tall woman with yellow hair told her story. I was more interested in the reactions of the circle. No one shuddered, no one shrank away from the woman who confessed the bloody act. Perhaps they had heard the story before, perhaps they had heard it ten times, a hundred. Prison is about repetition; that is the essence of the punishment. The great Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges said that repetition is death, but it is not that. I do not know exactly what it is, but repetition is something different; it is the reason why people who know prison life call it "doing time."

In the respite from stories of violence and redemption on the videotape, I turned again to the woman who sat beside me. Because I did not know what to say and because I had not forgotten why I was there, I asked: "Why do you think people are poor?"

"Because they don't have the moral life of downtown."

"What do you mean by the moral life?" I thought she must be talking about religion.

"You got to begin with the children," she said, speaking rapidly, clipping out the street sounds as they came into her speech. She paused long enough to let the change of direction take effect, then resumed the rapid, rhythmless speech. "You've got to teach the moral life of downtown to the children. And the way you do that, Earl, is by taking them downtown to plays, museums, concerts, lectures, where they can learn the moral life of downtown."

"What you mean is the humanities."

She looked at me as if I were the stupidest man on earth. "Yes, Earl, the humanities."

I was surprised by her use of my name. Hers was not an ordi-

nary name; I did not remember it. I smiled at her, misunderstanding, thinking I was indulging her, not realizing that it was the other way round. I said, "And then they won't be poor anymore?"

She read every nuance of my response, and answered with the sneer now in her voice too, "And they won't be po no more."

"What you mean is—"

"What I mean is what I said—a moral alternative to the street."

She did not speak of jobs or money. In that, she was like the others I had listened to. No one, in all the places where I had been, had spoken of jobs or money. I saw people in every part of America who lived in what I had come to think of as a surround of force—ugliness, violence, hunger, abuse, poor schools, drugs, bad housing, vermin, crowding, brutal police, the nightmare of television and billboards constantly driving home the humiliation of relative poverty—this last perhaps the worst, the least bearable, especially for the children, to have less by comparison, to live in a country where billboards and television commercials constantly remind them that they are the have-nots. It went on and on so that there was never a moment's respite, a time for reflection, nothing was left for them but to react. I appreciated what she said, her solution to the problem of poverty, but how could the "moral life of downtown" lead anyone out of the surround of force? How could a museum push poverty away? Who could dress in statues or eat the past? And what of the political life? The way out of poverty was politics, I thought, not the moral life of downtown. But to enter the public world, to practice the political life, the poor had first to learn to reflect. Was that what she meant by the "moral life of downtown"? I looked at her for a moment, then turned away without speaking. Contempt does not require an answer.

On the drive back to the city from the prison I thought of my own education and of what she had said. If there was a way to give the poor the moral life of downtown, perhaps they would emerge

from poverty, or if not from economic deprivation at least from the surround of force that bound them to a busy and fruitless life of reaction. I put the question aside, and followed her lead. It occurred to me then that she had set the agenda for my thoughts, but I did not dwell on it, for my mind was on writer's work and I thought I had found my way home.

What you mean is the humanities.

Yes, Earl, the humanities.

No one really knows what is meant by "the humanities." The Oxford English Dictionary does not attempt to offer an article about the word. Fowler's *Modern English Usage* says that a person reading the word "humanities" in a newspaper could assign any of four meanings to it, and be correct in every instance. I had accepted the meaning implied by a woman in a maximum security prison. And partly as a result of her definition, I was to spend the next seventeen years slightly but significantly off the mark. She did not mention Petrarch or his definition of the humanities, but I thought that was what she meant, and I accepted what she said. Petrarch had defined the humanities during the Renaissance, and he had left no wiggle room: The humanities consisted of classical works in moral philosophy, art history, history, literature, and logic. No more, no less. If that was not what she meant, she did not tell me so. She controlled by acquiescence, not by dispute or even suggestion. She was by then an accomplished prisoner.

I have one photograph of her, which appears in a book—*Breaking the Walls of Silence: AIDS and Women in a New York State Maximum Security Prison*—that was given to me by the prisoners who wrote it. She is one of the people in a group photograph. The photograph is undated; I do not know if it was made before or after I had begun to teach the humanities in the city and the prison. She is almost unrecognizable—a small, round-faced woman with a child's smile. Of all the women whose pictures appear in the book,

she is the only one who wears the face of innocence. Over the years I have searched the face in the photograph many times looking for the controlling irony, and I have never found it. Perhaps the secret is the secret itself—and the irony is so perfect I cannot see it.

The origins of her ironic self were never entirely clear to me. She said very little about herself, following the informal rule of silence about crimes and sentences that prevailed in prison life. In a women's prison there are families, and only the families know. The confession by the tall woman with yellow hair that had been my introduction to the prison was an anomaly, a woman willing to sacrifice her privacy to bring her closer to home. When I sought to learn what was behind the opaque eyes and contemptuous tone of the prisoner I knew best and least, my questions were quickly rebuffed. Whatever I learned about her came from other prisoners and the staff of the prison. Slowly, bits of detail, terrors, shards of a life, tales and imaginings of a bloody and brutal existence became a narrative.

I saw her again at the end of August in a small prison room. We sat on hardback chairs facing each other. She wore dark red shorts and a green top and carried something in her hand. The end of summer heat lay thickly on our skin. The air in the room was close; the windows had been closed and the shades drawn to keep out the heat. The sun made ochre lamps of the window shades. It was not a good visit. The entrance to the prison, the search, the metal detector, the sliding steel bars that locked one or more persons into a small cabinet had unnerved me. A guard behind bulletproof glass inspected the people inside the cabinet. It was the place in which liberty was surrendered and prison began. Although I always knew I would be leaving in a few hours, passing through the cabinet again on my way out of the prison, I found it an almost unbearable moment.

I told her about the progress we had made in the city and in

the prison, recruiting teachers, and students, developing a curriculum in each discipline. She asked what I would be teaching, and I recited the reading list. "There's something missing," she said.

It was the flat drawl of contempt again.

"What?"

"The Allegory of the Cave."

She opened her hand and I saw two large white pills. She put the pills in her mouth one-at-a-time, and swallowed them. I recognized the medicine, the insufficient dose the prison provided. I formed the question in my mind, "HIV?" But she had already answered with the slow blink of her eyes. The end of the narrative had been foreordained. "Yes," I said, meek in the presence of death. "We will begin with the Allegory of the Cave."

And we did.

In the prison classroom the women sat in rows. Not one was unkempt, not one was angry. One sat apart from the rest. She had assembled the class, she managed the class; for a long time I did not know how. I spoke to her as I spoke to the others, but I did not engage her, she did not participate in the dialogue. She sat apart from the others, in her own place. She made herself different as the social worker was different. She rarely spoke. Her eyes were not like the eyes of the other women. I looked at her often, thinking I might catch the meaning of her eyes in a yearning glance, a wistful stare, focus lost in thought or dreaming. I knew and I did not want to know. I no longer heard contempt when she spoke.

The classes were dialogues, a kind of education none of the women had ever known. Only Judy Clark, who had, like me, been a student at the University of Chicago, was at ease with the Socratic method. She was unlike the others, but not as I expected; they loved and pitied her, perhaps because she had been a tracked prisoner, watched day and night, set to doing the most menial work, denied the few privileges of prison life. Although she was

something like a teaching assistant, she did not distance herself from the class. Only one woman sat in a separate place: Viniece Walker, "Niecie" to those who knew her. She was not the teaching assistant nor was she the teacher, yet the other women permitted her this distance in the classroom. While the others struggled with ideas, tried to embrace Keats in a prison classroom, looked desperately for a distinction between Greek and Roman art, she sat without speaking.

I found her name in the newspapers. There was a picture of her under a headline in enormous type on the front page of the *New York Daily News:*

CRACK BACK KILLERS

The print on the page was too dark and too thick with ink to show details in the photograph. A tiny woman stood before a high bench or perhaps a wall. Her hair hung down straight, uncombed and heavily greased. Her clothes were colorless and seemed unclean. She looked like a fallen child.

The photograph had been made the day of the arrest or perhaps the next day. I could not find the story inside the paper. I did not know what she had done. Whatever it was, it was not a common killing; she had merited the front page of the tabloid. Yet she looked meek, sickly, weary, worse than disheveled, unclean. I did not ask her about the killing or the arrest. She would not have told me. The revelations came out in chapters, like a novel.

Meanwhile the class went on in the city and the prison.

"Why we studying philosophy?" one of the women asked.

"Why *are* we studying philosophy; sentences need verbs unless they are interjections. However, I understand your concern, and I will bring you a book written in a prison cell in the sixth century by a man named Boethius. Philosophy, his childhood nurse, comes to visit him and helps him to escape."

A voice in the back of the room, hidden somewhere among the others, said, "We don't use that word around here." And everyone laughed.

The Consolation of Philosophy did not affect them as I had intended. They preferred history to ideas. They lived in wards or unheated cells. Ice formed on the inside of their cell walls in winter. The students examined the life of the man who had once been a Roman consul, they read the work each in her own way: the thief, the drug dealer, the killer, the embezzler, the weightlifter, the mules, the one who took revenge and the one who could not. They had read the beginning of the book, the page that gave the lie to all the rest. The Boethius whom they knew before they read a word he wrote had been tortured, bludgeoned, and died. They did not think of him freed in his prison cell, but they could envision his death.

As the year went on, I saw the change in them, especially in her. We held a graduation party in a small room in the prison. I managed to arrange for a lunch to be smuggled in from a Chinese restaurant in the nearest town. It was against prison rules, which pleased the women more than the food. We all thought I had done something heroic until the warden came to congratulate the women, whom she spoke of that afternoon as students rather than inmates. Niecie and another of the women talked about an argument they had had the night before the Chinese lunch. They had fought over opposing views of Blake's poem "*Black Boy*." Was it a racist poem or did Blake believe the black boy's skin was dark because he was closer to God? Niecie said it was racist.

I saw her now and again. Years passed. We found a way to speak by telephone, although it was not permitted. People thought we had secrets. I did not even know her middle name. Whenever I spoke to an audience or to a newspaper about the work of teaching the humanities to the poor, I spoke of her. And when people asked

why she was in prison, what crime she had committed, I did not answer. I sent her newspaper clippings that mentioned her name. She gathered them into a folder along with a letter from the former mayor of New York City and another from the editor of *Harper's* magazine. Every two years she assembled a dossier to send to the parole board. When the day for her hearing came, she went alone, for no advocate was permitted. The first time she was still in her twenties, and when she was thirty she went again, and again after she was thirty, and each time the hearing lasted less than a minute. The parole board did not read the material she had prepared. "Denied," the parole board said. "Nature of the crime."

She was born and raised in Harlem, and she had never been poor. I do not know when she met the man who was with her that day. I do not know his name or the name of the prison where he served his time. She did not write to him and he did not write to her. She spoke of him ruefully, if she spoke of him at all. Silence, of course, is not the same as forgetting. There were the white pills that she took every day, and because the pills were not effective and the state did not allow a woman to go home to die, she thought of him when she saw the coffins and when she prayed for the dead.

Of all the memories she had of him, the one she could not erase from consciousness was of him and the bird. He reached into the cage and grabbed her pet bird and while she watched he took it out of the cage and broke its neck. He showed her the dead bird so that she would not forget. After that she did what he required of her. She walked the streets and brought the money home to him. They smoked crack cocaine, and the more they smoked, the more she worked. Theirs was a common story, a New York uptown tragedy.

It was the strangled bird that made it operatic and terrible. The bird was the fulcrum. It revealed a life the girl's mother could not bear to see, for she knew what the death of the bird symbolized. And then the mother died and left her pension and insur-

ance money to her daughter, but because she did not trust her only child, she left it all with the girl's grandmother. The old woman doled out the money slowly, week by week.

They went to the old woman's apartment to get it all. When she would not give it to them, he beat the old woman. Her granddaughter went to the window and looked out on the city and was not there while he beat the old woman. The beating made sounds of crushing and cracking of bones and flesh and the sphere of the skull. Outside the window there was the city, and she passed through the window into the distant city. She was not there in the room, she did not hear the sounds of the bludgeoning of the old woman, and she did not see death or catch the smell of butchery.

Suddenly they fled. Had he finished the old woman by then? Why had they left without taking the bank card or the old woman's credit cards? Was someone screaming? I did not ask her, she would not have told me. Abused women absent themselves from pain; they have no other means of surviving the moment. I do not know when she came aware again or what she saw outside the window. I do not know who was screaming.

Without the bank card they demanded from the old woman, afraid that someone had heard the sounds of killing, they fled. They did not go back to the place where they lived. They were sure the police were waiting for them there. For three days they moved through the uptown slums, afraid to go where they were known. They thought the police were hunting them. They did not eat or bathe or sleep. They smoked rock cocaine and kept moving. At the end of the third day, they had no money and no place to sleep and they were exhausted. They were sick, eaten by desire, withdrawing from crack.

The police did not bother to look for them. They had found the bank card still hidden in the old woman's apartment. It did not require the mind of the philosophers of outlaws, François Villon

and Michel Foucault, to know what would happen next. When she opened the door to the old woman's apartment, the police were waiting there. She did not protest. When the newspaper photographer took her picture, she no longer had the strength to cover her face.

I spoke to her through most of her years in the prison, less often as her study of the humanities diminished the need to talk with me. She earned an advanced degree in English. In the last years before completing her sentence she became quieter, reading more, an unofficial but effective social worker, counselor to the people she called "inmates."

When she passed through the cabinet into the outside world, she left no forwarding address. Terri McNair, the social worker who had been so close to Niecie, could not find her. By then the HIV infection had become acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS). She had needed the "cocktail" of antiretroviral drugs used to slow the progress of the infection. The single drug the prison provided each day was cheap and ineffective.

She died. I do not know where Viniece Walker died or which of the opportunistic diseases finally killed her. She had never known sweet social life amidst the beneficiaries of liberty, but the humanities had given her the excitement of freedom Boethius had found when Philosophy came to visit him in his cell. She understood. She died free.

All but one of other women who attended the Clemente Course in the Humanities in 1995 have been released from prison, and not one has returned. The recidivism rate of women prisoners with some college education, including those released from maximum security prisons, is very low, but zero is extraordinary.

Only Judy Clark, whose confusion about social justice led her to murder, is still in prison, serving a sentence that amounts to life without parole. I am one of the many people who wrote to the courts asking that she be given a new trial.

Since Viniece Walker first told me about "the moral life of downtown," more than ten thousand people around the world have attended the Clemente Course that began in the prison and in the city at the Roberto Clemente Family Guidance Center. For a long time, the course adhered rigidly to a curriculum based on the Western classics. It was exactly what Boethius and Petrarch and Robert Maynard Hutchins and Viniece Walker and I thought was the only possible curriculum. I approached the world like an eighteenth-century British schoolmaster besotted with Greeks and tea. As I traveled the world, I carried my rigid response to life in the surround in my knapsack to one city, one country, one continent after the next. And the world redefined the humanities. Beauty answered to many names, wisdom spoke many languages, the menu of history was beyond the comprehension of one mind, poetry was impervious to translation. I had declared war on the surround of force, the life of reaction, but the varieties of reflection had not occurred to me, not then, not in the beginning. In a freezing village near the Bering Sea and in the Náhuatl-speaking heights above Mexico City, among the homeless of Seoul and the varieties of Chicago, in Africa and Argentina, I would come to understand the democracy of the humanities. By the time I went to San Antonio Sihó, a tiny village in Yucatán, Mexico, I had learned that I was wrong, but not entirely wrong. There was something to be done, and there was a way.

CHAPTER 1

In the Beginning—1995[1]

On September 8, 2006, in a small Texas town not far from the Gulf of Mexico, a tall, slim young woman wrote a letter that finally brought to a close the first year of the humanities course at the Roberto Clemente Family Guidance Center. It had been a long time since I last saw her, but I remembered her. I had interviewed her almost ten years earlier when she came to the center to apply for entrance to the course. She had a good mind and as I recall a stronger academic background than many of the people who asked to be admitted. After talking with her for twenty minutes, however, I decided to turn down her application. There was something wrong. I did not know what; perhaps it was only that a pretty blonde from Texas seemed so out of place on the Lower East Side of New York.

The view from the front door of the Clemente Center in 1995 was one of the best known sights in America. The three buildings directly across the street were used as the opening of the popular television program *NYPD Blue*. Apparently, the producers thought the dilapidated tenements, abandoned by landlords, now occupied by squatters and drug dealers, represented the ugliest, most violent

1 Much of this chapter and a portion of the preceding section in a different form appeared in *Riches for the Poor: The Clemente Course in the Humanities* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2000).

police precinct in America. Dr. Jaime Inclán, perhaps in an act of defiance, had chosen the site to establish the only clinic in the city offering psychological counseling to Spanish speakers. Earlier that summer I had asked him if he would listen to an idea for an experiment in education for the poor.

I explained to him that after nearly three years of interviewing poor people across the country I had seen that numerous forces—hunger, isolation, illness, landlords, police, abuse, neighbors, drugs, criminals, and racism, among many others—exert themselves on the poor at all times and enclose them, making up a "surround of force" from which, it seems, they cannot escape. I had come to understand that this was what kept the poor from being political and that the absence of politics in their lives was what kept them poor. I don't mean "political" in the sense of voting in an election but in the way Pericles[2] used the word: to mean activity with other people at every level, from the family to the neighborhood to the broader community to the city-state.

By the time I presented the idea to Dr. Inclán, I had listened to more than six hundred people, some of them over the course of two or three years. Although my method is that of the bricoleur, the tinkerer who assembles a thesis of the bric-à-brac he finds in the world, I did not think there would be any more surprises. Of course, that was before I met Viniece Walker in the Bedford Hills Prison. I did not know her well when I sat in Jaime Inclán's office that day, yet it had already become clear to me that when she spoke of "the moral life of downtown" she meant the humanities, the study of human constructs and concerns, which has been the source of reflection for the secular world since the Greeks first stepped back from nature to experience wonder at what they beheld. If the political life was the way out of poverty, the humanities provided an entrance to reflection and the political life. The

2 Pericles' Funeral Oration in Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War.*

poor did not need anyone to release them; an escape route existed. But to open this avenue to reflection and politics, a major distinction between the preparation for the life of the rich and the life of the poor had to be eliminated.

Once Niecie had challenged me with her theory, the comforts of tinkering came to an end; I could no longer make an homage to the happenstance world, and rest. To test Niecie's theory outside the confines of the prison, students, faculty, and facilities were required. And the ethics of the experiment had to be considered: I resolved to do no harm. There was no need for the course to have a "sink or swim" character; it could aim to keep as many afloat as possible.

Dr. Inclán offered the center's conference room for a classroom. We would put three metal tables end to end to approximate the boat-shaped tables used in discussion sections at the University of Chicago of the Hutchins era, which I used as a model for the course. A card table in the back of the room would hold a coffeemaker and a few cookies. The setting was not elegant, but it would do.

Now the course lacked only students and teachers. With no funds and a budget that grew every time a new idea for the course crossed my mind, I would have to ask the faculty to donate its time and effort. Moreover, when Hutchins said, "The best education for the best is the best education for us all," he meant it: he insisted that full professors teach discussion sections in the college.[3] If the Clemente Course in the Humanities was to follow the same pattern, it would require a faculty with the knowledge and prestige that students might encounter in their first year at Harvard, Yale, Princeton, or Chicago.

I turned first to the novelist Charles Simmons. He had been

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3 Under the guidance of Robert Maynard Hutchins (1929–1951), the University of Chicago required year-long courses in the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences for the bachelor of arts degree. Hutchins developed the curriculum with the help of Mortimer Adler, among others; the Hutchins courses later influenced Adler's Great Books program.

assistant editor of the *New York Times Book Review* and had taught at Columbia University. He volunteered to teach poetry, beginning with simple poems, Housman, and ending with Latin poetry. Grace Glueck, who wrote art news and criticism for the *New York Times*, planned a course that began with cave paintings and ended in the late twentieth century. Timothy Koranda, who did his graduate work at MIT, had published journal articles on mathematical logic, but he had been away from his field for some years and looked forward to getting back to it. I planned to teach the American history course through documents, beginning with the Magna Carta, moving on to the second of Locke's *Two Treatises of Government*, the Declaration of Independence, and so on through the documents of the Civil War. I would also teach the political philosophy class.

Since I was a *naïf* in this endeavor, it did not immediately occur to me that recruiting students would present a problem. I didn't know how many I needed. All I had were criteria for selection:

Age: 18–35.

Household income: Less than 150 percent of the Census Bureau's Official Poverty Threshold (though this was to change slightly).

Educational level: Ability to read a tabloid newspaper (this would also change, to reading a page of a good translation of the *Apology* of Socrates, because the prose in the tabloids was sometimes incomprehensible).

Educational goals: An expression of intent to complete the course.

Inclán arranged a meeting of community activists who could help recruit students. Lynette Lauretig of The Door, a program

that provides medical and educational services to adolescents, and Angel Roman of the Grand Street Settlement, which offers work and training and GED programs, were both willing to give us access to prospective students. They also pointed out some practical considerations. The course had to provide bus and subway tokens, because fares ranged between $3 and $6 per class per student, and the students could not afford $60 or even $30 a month for transportation. We also had to offer dinner or a snack, because the classes were to be held from 6 to 7:30 p.m. (later extended to 8 p.m.).

A few days later Lynette Lauretig arranged a meeting with some of her staff at The Door. We disagreed about the course. They thought it should be taught at a much lower level. Although I could not change their views, they agreed to assemble a group of Door members who might be interested in the humanities.

On an early evening that same week, about twenty prospective students were scheduled to meet in a classroom at The Door. Most of them came late. Those who arrived first slumped in their chairs, staring at the floor or greeting me with sullen glances. A few ate candy or what appeared to be the remnants of a meal. The students were mostly black and Latino, one was Asian, and five were white; two of the whites were immigrants who had severe problems with English. When I introduced myself, several of the students would not shake my hand, two or three refused even to look at me, one girl giggled, and the last person to volunteer his name, a young man dressed in a Tommy Hilfiger sweatshirt and wearing a cap turned sideways, drawled, "Henry Jones, but they call me Sleepy, because I got these sleepy eyes—"

"In our class, we'll call you Mr. Jones."

He smiled and slid down in his chair so that his back was parallel to the floor.

Before I finished attempting to shake hands with the prospec-

Ms. Nabakaba, who presided over the entire program, had left the room. I had no allies. I soldiered on: American history, I told her.

It was hopeless. The social worker who spoke—the other one was silent—sat in her place in the back of the room, as big as Gertrude Stein and as stony as the famous sculpture of her, and said that the women should not come to the course. And when I asked how many of the women wanted to take this free college course, not one raised her hand.

I resolved to approach these prospective students at The Door differently. "You've been cheated," I said. "Rich people learn the humanities; you didn't. The humanities are a foundation for getting along in the world, for thinking, for learning to reflect on the world instead of just reacting to whatever force is turned against you. I think the humanities are one of the ways to become political, and I don't mean political in the sense of voting in an election but in the broad sense." I told them Pericles' definition of politics.

"Rich people know politics in that sense. They know how to negotiate instead of using force. They know how to use politics to get along, to get power. It doesn't mean that rich people are good and poor people are bad. It simply means that rich people know a more effective method for living in this society.

"Do all rich people, or people who are in the middle, know the humanities? Not a chance. But some do. And it helps. It helps to live better and enjoy life more. Will the humanities make you rich? Yes. Absolutely. But not in terms of money. In terms of life.

"Rich people learn the humanities in private schools and expensive universities. And that's one of the ways in which they learn the political life. I think that is the real difference between the haves and have-nots in this country. If you want real power, legitimate power, the kind that comes from the people and belongs to the people, you must understand politics. The humanities will help.

dates for the thirty positions in the course. Personal interviews began in early September.

Meanwhile, almost all of my attempts to raise money had failed. Only the novelist and editor Starling Lawrence at W. W. Norton, which had contracted to publish the book; the publishing house itself; and a small, private family foundation supported the experiment. We were far short of our budgeted expenses, but my wife, Sylvia, and I agreed that the cost was still very low, and we decided to go ahead.

Of the fifty prospective students who showed up at the Clemente Center for personal interviews, a few were too rich (a postal supervisor's son, a fellow who claimed his father owned a factory in Nigeria that employed sixty people) and more than a few could not read. Some of the applicants were too young: a thirteen-year-old and two who had just turned sixteen. Lucia Medina, a woman with five children who told me that she often answered the door at the single-room occupancy hotel where she lived with a butcher knife in her hand, was the oldest person accepted into the course. Carmen Quinones, a recovering addict who had spent time in prison, was the next eldest. Both were in their early thirties. The interviews went on for days.

Abel Lomas[4] shared an apartment and worked part time wrapping packages at Macy's. His father had abandoned the family when Abel was born. He had seen his mother murdered by his stepfather when Abel was thirteen. With no one to turn to and no place to stay, he lived on the streets, first in Florida, then back in New York City. He used the tiny stipend from his mother's Social Security to keep himself alive.

After the recruiting session at The Door, I drove up Sixth

4 Not his real name, although the person I am speaking about has been one of the grandest successes of the course. His drive and the quality of his mind are exceptional.

ple from losing their lives to drugs. So which is the greatest good for the greatest number?"

"That's what I think," he said.

"What?"

"You shouldn't sell drugs. You can always get food to eat. Welfare. Something."

"You're a Kantian," imputing his answer to the categorical imperative.

"Yes."

"You know who Kant is?"

"I think so."

We had arrived at Seventy-seventh Street, where he got out of the car to catch the subway before I turned east. As he opened the car door and the light came on, the almost military neatness of him struck me. He had the newly cropped hair of a cadet. His clothes were clean, without a wrinkle. He was an orphan, a street kid, an immaculate urchin. Within a few weeks he would be nineteen years old, the Social Security payments would end, and he would have to move into a shelter.

Some of those who came for interviews were too poor. I did not think that was possible when we began, and I would like not to believe it now, but it was true. There is a point at which the level of forces that surround the poor can become insurmountable, when there is no time or energy left to be anything but poor. Most often I could not recruit such people for the course; when I did, they soon dropped out.

Over the days of interviewing, a class slowly assembled. I could not then imagine who would last the year and who would not. One young woman submitted a neatly typed essay that said: "I was homeless once, then I lived for some time in a shelter. Right now, I have got my own space granted by the Partnership for the Homeless. Right now, I am living alone, with very limited means. Finan-

I began asking the teachers, 'Let me know when there is a course so that I can take it. Like I'm always asking Mr. [Bart] Schultz. He doesn't know me, but I'm always sending e-mail.

"It really helped me to get the idea of going to school. I was lucky enough to have those teachers. They really helped me. If I did something bad or stupid [in a paper], he would switch it around; they would totally butcher my paper. *Just leave the title or something!* But they really helped me, because I had no idea, I didn't know anything. They really helped me to feel that I could make it.

"Most of my family, my in-laws and everything, they're constantly telling me that I'm a loser, that I'm never gonna finish school. They never gave me credit for anything that I've accomplished. Even when I went to China. For Christmas they gave me a little backpack. They play really cruel jokes. They just cut me off, in conversations, like that. If it wasn't for those professors, I think that I would quit.

"One of my professors—he was my mentor—he would go to my house and drag me out. He would come into my place, and he would drag me.

"Now, I'm going to Roosevelt [University] and to the Graham School [University of Chicago School of General Studies]. I'm studying psychology and gerontology."

As part of her studies Judy visits a nursing home to comfort the Spanish speakers there. A bit shyly, she said that she also observes them. She did not say that she reads poems to them or sings the love and sadness of her life.

CHAPTER 3

Appalachia in Wisconsin

Emily Auerbach contends that the Madison Odyssey Course is not a Clemente Course in the Humanities. And I suppose that by the strict definition of the course it is not. In Madison, the students come to class once a week instead of twice. They stay longer each time, but now and then they do exercises in the humanities that are less rigorous or dignified than I would like. If the Clemente Course were taught according to the original design, students and faculty would use only their last names preceded by the title of Mr. or Ms. as is common now in formal address. I think it adds to the dignity and order in the classroom. Emily uses hugs.

When the students are at their best in Madison, or so I think, it is often when they are reading and discussing and writing about Emily Dickinson. With Professor Auerbach's permission, I have taken a few paragraphs from their work.

James Horton wrote about Dickinson's #833, which is about poets lighting lamps. He said: "The poets illuminate the path. They are but sparks that create fire. Their ideas last longer than their physical minds. The flames or thoughts continue to allow us to peer through the darkness of the future. Each age is a lens, so as poets dissect the meaning of their lives [environment], it helps all humans understand their place in the world!

"I like writers who write about writing's purpose. One of the

reasons I continue to write is to enlighten myself as well as others. I feel that all we have to contribute to other living beings is what we've learned in our own lives. More than technology, these lessons will allow our species to achieve its true potential."

Edwin Shumpert wrote of #254, which is about hope as a bird: "It expresses 'Hope' as a bird with feathers, to me meaning it has no boundaries, no limits, and can be found not in space but within—the real place to search. The image of the 'little bird' . . . says that regardless of the storms we may come across in life, with 'Hope' we can weather the storm and can be calm [warm] and steadfast . . . even in the midst of troubled waters.

"On a personal note, I was very moved emotionally because I've had to daily affirm within myself to never give up hope, and that hope is always a strength to lean on or call on. Both Gandhi and Dr. King, for example, always maintained hope at all cost or opposition."

Rhonda Johnson said of Dickinson's poem #576, which is about praying, "This poem reminds me of Blake's writings."

Wynetta Taylor said of #248 about being kept out of heaven: "She's asking why men treat women as second class. Why are women shut out of heaven, meaning the world? She felt that for women, being able to do what they wanted to do in life, being free, was heaven. For her, it was openly writing and being respected as a writer.

"For me, it's like racism when men think they're superior to women. I think any time anyone is shut out, fear is clearly at play. Anyone who is secure and sure of themselves would not feel threatened by anyone else. In fact, they would welcome everyone to join them—to spread their wings and fly."

Justin Wilson wrote his text after #1,587, which is about precious words: "This poem is about a man who begins to truly live once he starts to read. The words and concepts allow him