



**TRANSFORMATIVE JUSTICE:
A PILGRIMAGE TO COMMUNITY BUILDING AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION**

By Abu Ali Abdur Rahman

Since January, 2012, Dr. Lisa Guenther, Associate Professor of Philosophy and Vanderbilt, along with her volunteer graduate students from Vanderbilt, has been facilitating a discussion group on topics such as "Community Building," non-violent "Conflict Resolution," and "Transformative Justice," here in Unit 2.

History dictates that along with new ideas and developments there are and will be skeptics. "Holding a group discussion in Unit 2 (Death Row) is down right foolishness," one might say. "What purpose does this notion serve?" another may say. Pondering these questions, it dawns on you that this is the very reason why the vast majority is in Unit 2. It is the attitude. We are in agreement – the human family has been victimized and traumatized enough.

We appreciate the opportunity to nourish our defects with such benefits that will enable this community to evolve wholesomely in the hope that we can produce and offer ideas and insights other communities would consider beneficial to their own well being.

What kind of ideas can we construe by which is interpreted as a measure only to shed light so that the decision and policy makers will lean toward promoting such policies that will generate community building and conflict resolution. Although the human being has "free will" and although that "free will" will bear the consequences if one's "free will" chooses a path that's considered detrimental to the welfare of one's "free will" – it is fair to say "free will" has to be cultivated and understood or that Life Form of its carrier will perish – being misunderstood. This would be a tragedy and unfair.

The interest of this community is bent on seeking to supersede discrimination, anger, hatred, violence, and social discrepancies, with articulating restorative and transformative justice in every sector of community building. We choose to be an interfaith, interracial, and therapeutic community committed to restoring cultivated beings and establishing nonviolence as an alternative idea. Adopting this idea, we are convinced through trial and tribulation is a means that will in turn habilitate disordered behavior and the mentally challenged.

We extend our gratitude to each and every person who has made it possible for this community to enter into a space for the right amount of time where knowledge of wholesomeness and healing can be acquired and thereafter community building and conflict resolution is more than just a figment of one's imagination.

As the sun gives birth to another day, as a community we too will continue to give birth to an idea for a better way.

INDISPENSABLE AGENTS OF CHANGE

By Derrick Quintero

"The most unlikely person, the most improbable situation – these are all 'transfigurable' – they can be turned into their glorious opposites." (Archbishop Desmond Tutu cited by Thomas Cahill in *A Saint on Death Row: The Story of Dominique Green*.)

There have been a deluge of people traversing the cloistered world of my imprisoned existence – Tennessee's Death Row. Most do nothing more than merely pass through. The ones who have been willing or able to stop long enough to seek answers tend to be surprised. They tend to find, "The rest of the story," as Paul Harvey said.

Tennessee's Death Row has always been unique – a model for many other Death Rows in the United States and even other country's non-Death Row prisons. This is due to the behavior modification system which dictates how much freedom – out of cell time – an individual prisoner is allowed. This system of positive behavior allows the prisoners to participate in various programs. These range from work to spiritual to counseling to academic, to mention just a few.

Having been involved in most of the available classes offered and led by a myriad of unpaid volunteers from all walks of life and professions, I have met an eclectic and inspiring mix of people. I have met people who are blue collar workers, doctors, Nobel Prize candidates, and even a Nobel Peace Prize recipient's daughter, Naomi Tutu.

A common theme of most of these classes is how to build and maintain community even in places that tend to discourage or destroy community cohesiveness. A sense of community requires embracing and accepting diversity, honoring individual space, and building community space. It also requires one to understand that they have a responsibility to the well-being of the community.

We have been given space in Building 2A (where TRICOR used to be located) by Warden Colson to facilitate more classes. As I said, it takes space to create community and we are definitely occupying that space with all kinds of positive intent.

We have a warden, Roland Colson, and a chaplain, Jeannie Alexander, who seem to be on the same page in believing in providing Death Row and other prisoners a plethora of educational and spiritual advancement opportunities. This is contingent upon continuing to get the outside community to agree to provide the necessary volunteers to teach these classes.

So far, RMSI stands to be the leader – the model – for what corrections can do if it chooses to do so. The successes here both on and off of Death Row speak volumes.

One of the successes is the college level class provided by volunteer professor Lisa Guenther from Vanderbilt University. Dr. Guenther led a doctoral philosophy class of two women and three men into this Death Row – truly revolutionary but not previously unthought-of. Everything has its own time and space before manifestation.

The Vanderbilt class first started meeting with us on Wednesday nights last February. Twelve Death Row prisoners and six highly intelligent and determined activist oriented scholars – some of whom were slightly scared and puzzled. If I could juxtapose a mental picture of them then as opposed to now, the transformation would be amazing to you who read this. They would probably say the same about us as well.

I am writing this because I want everyone to understand the depth of my gratitude that I have for these compassionate, caring and insightful community members of mine and my fellow Death Row community class members. I am writing this because I want them to hear me say once again how humbled and honored I am to each of them for sharing a part of their life journey with me. I am writing this because this original class of six has four of our members moving on – they are now doctors. They will be teaching others. While their flying the coop on is us sad, we know they will make a positive mark in the world. Even if we on Death Row are now used to having long-term relationships (strange but true that the death penalty gave us long-term friends and families), seeing them leave is humbling.

We have had the opportunity and privilege to influence the minds of several people whom we all know will influence the minds of many others with the knowledge they have acquired with us. And, as this group leaves, they will be replaced by new students and we will start the learning and teaching process all over again with them. Hopefully, as with this first group, we will broaden their understanding of the world and debunk some of the myths and stereotypes about Death Row and prisoners in general.

The relationships we have developed with our sisters and brothers from Vanderbilt are not one-sided. While what they have given us is beyond most others comprehension – or maybe not – we have also given them knowledge they could not have received otherwise. I say often that each of us has concurrent, dual roles in life: teacher and student. Our class has taught and been taught equally to one another. This is the best gift we give one another – transformative knowledge.

I believe that each of us has a responsibility to do something positive with the knowledge that this class has generated. Many in this class have espoused this view. My Vanderbilt sisters and brothers have been inspired by our class to write several books relative to imprisonment and the criminal justice system. They have also created reading groups such as the one here on Death Row at several prisons near the colleges or universities at which some of them will be teaching.

That I could be involved in something so profoundly inspiring is humbling and will always create a sense of pride and awe in me. I hope that we will always carry the torch of compassion and social responsibility for others as they have shown for us.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu in *A Saint on Death Row* spoke of "indispensable agents of change." That could apply to my Vanderbilt sisters and brothers. It could also apply to volunteers Dr. Janet Wolf, Steve Shaffer, Sean Muldoon, Mama Cox, Cliff or Autumn. It could apply to Warden Colson and Champlain Alexander. We can all be indispensable agents of change. It just takes the fortitude to stand up for what is right and just. And we can inspire others to rise up for what they believe is just too. Maybe this is the lesson that we should take from this class.

It is my hope that those who do not want us to have any of these transformative classes understand that for us to learn the fundamentals of community building is a positive reaped by the larger community outside the Death Row community. These classes help speed up the process of where I have already been heading anyway.

May our journey for knowledge, truth, and reconciliation be one in which we join together in peaceful solidarity.