

## Coaching for Healing and Non-Violence, January 2019

### Picture Time

By Damon Gbuduala Azali-Rojas

*It has been a year since Amanda Berger and I first taught the two-day introduction to coaching skills at the California State Prison, Los Angeles County at Lancaster. Since that time, with the help of many of you, we raised enough money to design and implement a six-month long coach-training program: Coaching for Healing and Non-Violence. This January we kicked off the program with the first two of eight in-person training days. What follows is my reflection of our time there and the significance for not just our brothers on the inside, but for coaches, healers and teachers wanting to support radical personal and societal transformation and healing.*

Jiggs (aka Jimmy) surprises me when he says that we were going outside to take a picture of the group. (We had previously tried to make this happen but to no avail.) I go and get my jacket and, with the men and Amanda, I walk down the hallway that connects the education room with the yard. We then wait for the guards to open the door. As we go outside there is a foggy mist embraced in a coldness that goes deep inside me. The cold in the desert compares to nothing else-- it envelops you inside and out.

We make a left before we get to the chain-linked fence that separates us from the actual yard-- the yard where the men spend most of their waking time. For the most part, the yard holds a large dry patch of dirt with patchy specks of grass surrounded by a large concrete oval track. A baseball backstop sits lonely in the distance and two soccer goals without nets...equally disconnected.

We walk over to the Insight Garden Program's (IGP) small plot of land. Dave Mashore, who facilitates IGP and our access to the prison, and Amanda make sure that IGP continues its own transformative curriculum here. We had gone there earlier that morning to look at the plants. The garden itself reflects the truth of the conditions inside the prison. The problem, as Dave explains, is figuring out what plants can withstand the unrelenting harshness of the desert sun in the summer and at the same time, the skin piercing cold and shade of the winter. Prison always balances between extremes, with the human beings inside of it (by choice or not) struggling to establish a more temperate environment.

We gather together in rows for the picture, smile when the time comes, some men have their arms around each other; others touch shoulders in front of them; Jamala, holds up a Coaching for Transformation book-- we all smile. A California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) photographer takes several pictures. The experience feels much like taking pictures with other coaching cohorts I've led or even in my capoeira school when we have a visitor from out of town and we want to commemorate the visit. In these moments, you want to catch the feeling of connection, of family and the joy of welcoming someone to our home.

As we return to the education room, I ask Jiggs if we can also get pictures of the men coaching each other. Jiggs has already taken care of the logistics of reserving our room and making sure that all the men had the proper paperwork to be cleared to be in the training. He smiles and says not to worry. Amanda and I want to have pictures of the men coaching each other—as coaches we call that our presenting agenda, the more surface issue, desire or want. We want to use the pictures in a brochure for both individual and foundation funders to continue and even expand our work in CA prisons.

Pictures are very hard to get inside of a prison. Usually it involves tons of forms and waiting and hoping and fingers crossing. The photographer came that day due to some magical organizing by the men behind the scenes. He tells Amanda and me to sit down in chairs and he invites the men one at a time into the chairs across from us. As we talk with the men during this impromptu photo-shoot, we realize that the deeper agenda for these men, these transformative, loving, gentle men, is that to take a picture with us, two trainers from an accredited and reputable institution, could make the difference between them getting out of prison or not.

Recently, Jerry Brown, the now former governor of California, said that he had a change of conscious. He realized that during his first term as California Governor (1975-83) he made lots of choices that changed laws and policies that led to longer prison sentences and the explosion of the CA prison system. So, in his second round as Governor (2011-19) he, along with many, many grassroots organizations, worked to reverse these ill-conceived and racist “Tough on Crime” policies. In Brown’s most recent two terms, he granted 152 commutations (nearly double the number granted by his eight most recent predecessors combined) and pardoned 1,189 prisoners. Commutations reduce lengths of sentences and pardons clean people’s records when they come out of prison.

The men in the room with us are strong candidates for these commutations. They have done the hard work on themselves and on behalf of others to address systemic oppression, detoxify toxic masculinity, and sit with the emptiness and pain. They took all that distress and turned it into light...a day-by-day, moment-by-moment process. These pictures that we think can help paint the picture of our work here in a brochure, will also go into the men’s “C file” or commutation file. A picture like this one could influence the very subjective nature of the Parole Board’s decisions and allow the men to get out with time served.

Many of the men in the room have already served over 20 years, some over 30. In the 45-60 seconds we sit down with each man, they tell us how deeply grateful they are for us just coming back and sharing these skills with them. They tell us of transformational conversations they’ve had with wives, partners, children, other men on the yard—and the depth of their healing overflows as we talk.

At the same time, several of the men share that having coaching skills will help them to clearly articulate how their needs and values were unmet and how that led them to the crime that they were convicted of. This self-reflection is what they have to rehash in front of the parole board. Now, in language that they have never known, even after all

the GEDs, AAs, and numerous other certificates they've earned inside prison, they can talk about how they have transformed themselves, their relationships and their communities.

It is rare for me to be in conversation with a man on the outside and have complete and unbroken eye contact, to be able to present ourselves and our essence without fear of being judged. Every man that sits in that chair across from me holds an unflinching, compassionate and grateful gaze with me the whole time. Every one! I can't explain the feeling other than it was one of divinity...of synchronicity...of alignment. The super charged energy of this space behind these walls surrounds the coach training, allowing things to evolve in a fluid and exponential manner, unlike anything I have experienced on the outside.

Later that day, I coach Greg in front of the room. He asks for coaching around defining masculinity—what it means to truly be a man.. Let me paint the picture: I am reasonably tall, a little over 6 feet and about 190 lbs. Greg, another black man, surpasses me by around 6 inches and another 100 lbs. As we talk, it is pretty clear that he already knows what masculinity isn't but is looking to others, instead of his own inner knowing, to validate his truth about what masculinity can be. That internal knowing begins to radiate until he truly believes in the deepest and most humble way that he is, in fact, a role model for what being a true man is. Not only that, but he realizes that he has already started to pass this wisdom on to the future generations. During his calls to family, he prioritizes talking to his nephews about what it means to be a man. He bottom-lines as 1) taking responsibility for your own actions and 2) treating women with the utmost respect.

After we are done with the coaching, the men cheer, hug and some even cry. At the end I am so moved that I as the coach create my own accountability. I commit to go home and talk with my 10- and 4-year-old sons (in age appropriate ways) about responsibility and respecting women. In coaching one person, not just that person transforms, but the coach and each person in the room joins in that transformation.

The pictures we carry back with us tell stories of heartache, of resiliency, of love, of connection, of possibility for these men and of the type of transformative healing that is possible even in the harshest of environments.

Stay tuned; we go back March 12-13, 2019.

~Damon Azali-Rojas





