

The Biggest Lie

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Ellen was about 25 years old. She was my student in a class in a women's prison in North Carolina. Students for this class were all selected to be in a prototype program that was being piloted in the North Carolina, New Jersey, and Michigan prisons. The prototype was called the VERA Pathways Project. It was being run by the VERA Institute for Justice in conjunction with the state prison systems. VERA is a privately funded organization known for advocacy in justice issues in the U.S. They had obtained funding from five leading philanthropies: the Ford Foundation, the Sunshine Lady Foundation, the Open Society Foundations, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The project involved classes for selected incarcerated individuals who would be released within a year. VERA Pathways made a commitment to help them get into a college, and provide living expenses for two years, as long as they did well in their coursework. My involvement was in two of the NC prisons, teaching the initial courses that would work on life skills, reading, writing, and mathematics. Ellen was taking my mathematics class for two days a week, 5 hours per day.

The problems Ellen had because she was in prison were not known to me. I didn't know how she felt. And I definitely did not ask her. But I am sure about how I felt teaching Ellen. I was just teaching mathematics, but she was teaching me a lot more than math skills. Her eyes were teaching me about *separation*. You see, my math course was allowed to take departures into life lessons for about 1 hour after lunch from 1 to 2:PM, so there were opportunities to get philosophical. Many life issues came up during that time. Increasingly throughout the course the students and I were really discussing separation. "Separation is the biggest lie," I would tell them. "We live in the physical world, so it *looks* as if we are separate. But I'll bet the real truth is that we are connected. Connected to what? To each other, to nature, to everything around us. The physical world is made of separate objects, so from the moment you're born, it is reinforcing that everything is separate. It's a lie, I tell you. The part of you that is not physical – at the very least, your thoughts and feelings – are not subject to physicality and are therefore not necessarily separate. Separation is the biggest lie ever."

Let's go into in my class during one of those hours after lunch. Look around: the women are all wearing the same green, one-piece outfits, though each has a different hairstyle. The

classroom is clean, posters on the wall say encouraging things like "You can be what you believe."

"Hello ladies," I begin, "I hope everyone is well." The mood is attentive. It is clear that they want to be in class, but of course, not in prison. While there is expectancy in the air, an overwhelming sadness permeates every activity.

*Today I brought some new scientific results from longitudinal studies of fetuses as they grow into young children. For example, a researcher in epigenetics, Bruce Lipton (2005, 2006; 2009) claims that the presence of toxins in the surrounding environment in your body can make cells go into a kind of **voluntary** isolation? Why voluntary? Because the cells are making a desperate move to isolate themselves from the toxins in order to survive. The cell separates itself from its normal life and you might say it voluntarily goes into a kind of lockdown. Yes. But, wait, it gets worse. The geneticists contend that if it goes into lockdown, the cell does not perform normal respiratory, digestive, and health maintenance functions. In fact, a continual presence of toxins can even condition a response that shuts down cellular reproduction. Since the body needs to reproduce billions of cells each day, some studies have linked these fetal conditions to producing street-fighter children. Yes, studies suggest that the newborn may start to use these conditioned shutdown responses more and more, eventually believing that this is the normal mode of survival. This means that a child who has too many toxins as a fetus may be something of a street-fighter as a newborn baby. It may be dulled to learning, loving, and laughter. It may choose to conserve, prepare for lack, and well, basically ... survive. Said in other words, newborns that are coming into bad environments may experience an actual voluntary isolation or separation in addition to the separation of birth and perhaps even a separation from some spiritual world. So, while our goal in life should be to overcome separation and try to achieve a oneness with loved ones and nature; toxicity in our environment can push us further into isolation.*

Make no mistake about it; these discussions caused several students a good deal of suffering. I was quite aware of this. I did not aim to make the young women in the class feel bad. They already felt bad without any help from me. Crimes had been committed, and prison

sentences given. Each one of them had been separated from her normal life. Oh yes, each person in my class was miserable. I also was not scolding them or alluding to the way they might have been during their pregnancies. I taught like this because I wanted them to understand two things. First, that they themselves may have had such a birth and therefore had been at a disadvantage from the start. And, second, I wanted to arm them with the best science I knew, so that they could make informed decisions when they got out of prison.

Ellen was the poster child for this kind of learning. You see, she had children at home. The separation from them was killing her. Little bits and pieces of news and comments the women made told me that she wished to help her children, but couldn't because she was here and they were home. No kidding, she was in prison. If you were there, you would see it when you met her. You would only have to look into her eyes. Ellen was tall and had beautiful large eyes. Her face spoke volumes. She wore her heart on her sleeve. One glance into her face and you knew how she felt. Everyone did. She was kind and loving. All of the women in the class pulled consolation from her. I did not regret and I do not regret to this day how sad it made Ellen and the other students to discuss children in this way. At least I was alluding to things they *could* control. What could they control? Well, by this point in the course, they knew I was alluding to the idea that we are not separate. They had heard me say, many times, that while our physical bodies have been separated from our loved ones, our thoughts and feelings may be able to reach them. So, if we could control our thoughts and feelings and steer them away from toxic negativity and 'send' positive wishes, hopes, and dreams toward our loved ones, then maybe we could affect them in a real way. So much control had been taken away from these women, that anything that was still in their control was already interesting for them just because of that. Ellen herself would thank me every single class. You see, it empowered her. It empowered her because every one of my science stories revealed more factors that she could relate to, connect to, and eventually control.

For me, overcoming separation - or what I call, 'realizing the biggest lie' - has been a belief that I came to over the course of many years. I taught it to my own children, however, right from the start of their lives. At the dinner table I would tell them, "Yes, these chicken bones are separate from each other. And our bodies are physically separate from the bones and from each other. But when we touch each other's feelings, we are connected - as if we are one thing. Kids," I would say, "this is what some people call *oneness*."

But Ellen was in prison. She wanted to re-start or kick-start her life in order to regain control of her destiny. Ellen was not one of my children at my dinner table. She was my student and I was her teacher. But somewhere in me, I felt that we teachers could be liberators. I felt that I may be able to help Ellen out of her prison, either the prison of sadness, or the toxic prison of her environment. I believe that as a teacher, I had the chance to help street-fighters release themselves from automaticity and get enough control of their thoughts and feelings to decide what they really want to do with their lives - to find what they love. But to do this, I knew I had to overcome the biggest lie, too. I had to connect with my students. I felt that I needed to get in touch with my own thoughts and feelings enough to remember what I truly love, then bring this love to my students and see if any of them feel at one with it. I knew that I must model to my students how to love what they do - how to achieve small moments of oneness every so often. I had to do what I wished my students to do.

I teach many subjects, but I am always teaching how to overcome separation. Ellen loved when I cited the increasing body of research that suggests that physiological and psychological factors are affected by one's state of mind (Goleman & Boutsikaris, 2006; Goleman & Senge, 2007; Goleman & Whitener, 2005). She realized that this means that our thoughts and feelings have causative effects on our bodies. And of course, the human mind not only affects one's own body; it affects others, as well. I told her how this is especially true with a mother and a child. Again, the pain these discussions caused was outweighed by the hope that Ellen felt. She jumped at the chance to be active. She relished the idea that she could send thoughts and feelings to her children that very night. I pointed out how scientific evidence is mounting to show that when you make a resolve or a prayer, it has real-time, physical effects. I watched the room as many women's faces practically shouted out loud, "That could be done right from prison, without waiting until I am re-united with my loved ones."

I did not write this because I wanted to bleed all over the page. And I certainly did not wish to be an enabler of incarcerated individuals by going too easy on crime. The point of this essay is to express my wish that parents and our educational system would have a better role here. I wish that homes and schools would help individuals overcome the separateness that surrounds us in this physical world. It would be so ridiculously easy to prevent many of the events that led up to imprisonment for most of the people I have met in prison. Why can't we teach school children, teachers, and parents what I have been teaching the incarcerated

individuals. I wish they would learn what Ellen taught me. Ellen silently screamed into my ears, "There is no need to wait until a person is a street-fighter to tell her about the big lie." And she said even louder, "There is no need to wait until you are physically with them." She understood that separation is a lie. She knew that a street-fighter is operating under a set of motivations that should only be used properly for desperate measures in a state of survival.

I long for the time that we might talk about this in schools. Perhaps we could speak not only with the parents and teachers, but also with the children, themselves. I have done this. I've talked to third graders about physical separateness versus feeling connection. I've spoken to teachers about patterns of poor school achievement and how third grade scholastic achievement test scores need not cause us to decide to give up on a student. I've also talked with high school students about studies that make correlations between school test scores and incarceration rates (New York Times Editorial Board, 2014). But I cautioned them, "These are statistics. Statistics have already happened. You are not a statistic. You are still happening. You can choose who you will be." I wonder how many people hear a statistical correlation and inappropriately assign a *causal* relationship. Our own educational profession constantly does this. Schools notice that many incarcerated individuals have poor reading skills and instead of discussing incarceration in open, transparent dialogue, they increase testing and thereby increase stress, which biologically leads to more toxins and more street-fighters. The problem was never that kids were getting poor scores. *Bad scores did not cause crime*. Some children had ingrained habits when they got to school, and our education system exacerbated the situation. It is as if they added to separateness. They stressed that each student should compete against every other to get the grades. Maybe there is too much pressure on the individual and not enough nurturing of the oneness that could come from collaborative projects.

What if, right from the start of life, we began to overcome the separateness of this physical world where everything appears to be built out of disconnected objects. And what if our schools and our teachers helped. The teachers would assist students in establishing relationships – the opposite of separateness - with other people and with the subject matter. They would primarily connect to the students and secondarily teach skills and information.

I remember moments where my class was all together, listening as if we were one. All teachers have had moments where you could hear a pin drop. Picture it. You just taught the class the incredible miracle of birth. Sarah just gasped. Jimmy stopped doodling. Mary looked up like

someone just called her name. The whole class was like one person for a minute. *Man*, I thought, *I wish you could buy that stuff - that oneness. If it were for sale, I know a whole lot of teachers who would line up the night before the store opens to buy moments of oneness for their classes.* And it all began by not believing the biggest lie. Ellen didn't believe it. She taught me. Ask her. She would say, "We're not separate. Anybody knows that. We're connected."

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