

HUMAN CONNECTIONS

Using self-reflection to gain insights for
improving relationships and reducing recidivism



BY KYLE L. ROBERSON AND K. ALEXANDER

Correctional workers have a responsibility to model positive behaviors for inmates in their charge. The more positive roles correctional workers take in the education, rehabilitation and reentry efforts of the inmate population, the safer our prisons will be for staff and inmates, with the added benefit of lowering recidivism rates. A key component of this strategy is to encourage staff to develop a human connection and a degree of empathy for the inmates in our care. This can be done while maintaining professional boundaries. I discovered using reflective writing is a beneficial strategy for learning empathy and for personal growth. It is also a valuable tool to establish a positive culture within the prison walls for staff and inmates alike.

Reflection as a training and mentoring opportunity

Studies have found reflective writing has direct benefits for both physical and mental health. Knowles, Holton, and Swanson in their definition of andragogy, assert reflection is a key element in how adults learn, often using prior knowledge with current learning to develop their conclusions.¹ I feel others can learn from my reflective practices since “studying others invariably invites readers to compare and contrast themselves with others in the cultural texts they read and study, in turn discovering new dimensions of their own lives.”² Considering the benefits of reflective writing, not only does it help relieve stress, but sharing those experiences can be a valuable learning tool and mentoring opportunity within the field of corrections.



In a recent autoethnographic research project, I explored events I experienced during my correctional career.³ Using an arts-based inquiry methodology that included reflection and narrative inquiry, I documented and studied specific events that helped mold my professional self. By reflecting on and studying the decisions and actions I made throughout my career, others may benefit and learn from them, just as I have.

Over the years, I found when I tried to develop human connections between myself and an inmate, I had markedly improved the correctional experience. I tried to connect in a way that lets them see me as a human being who cares about another human being. As you read the remaining sections of this article, I ask you to reflect on a time when you made a human connection that fostered positive rapport with an inmate. I encourage you to share these stories and events with your peers and new staff to develop a culture of shared responsibility in our inmate's rehabilitative needs. One such experience, from my autoethnography, was from an experience I had a couple of years ago. It developed because Monarch Butterflies happened to be making their yearly migration through a botanical garden in Madison, Wisconsin.

A reflection

It starts with a new student who transferred in from another prison and had a bit of a chip on his shoulder, a real bad attitude when it came to following instructions while participating in his GED classes. The problem had gotten bad enough that one of the teachers asked me to intervene. My initial interaction with the student was not

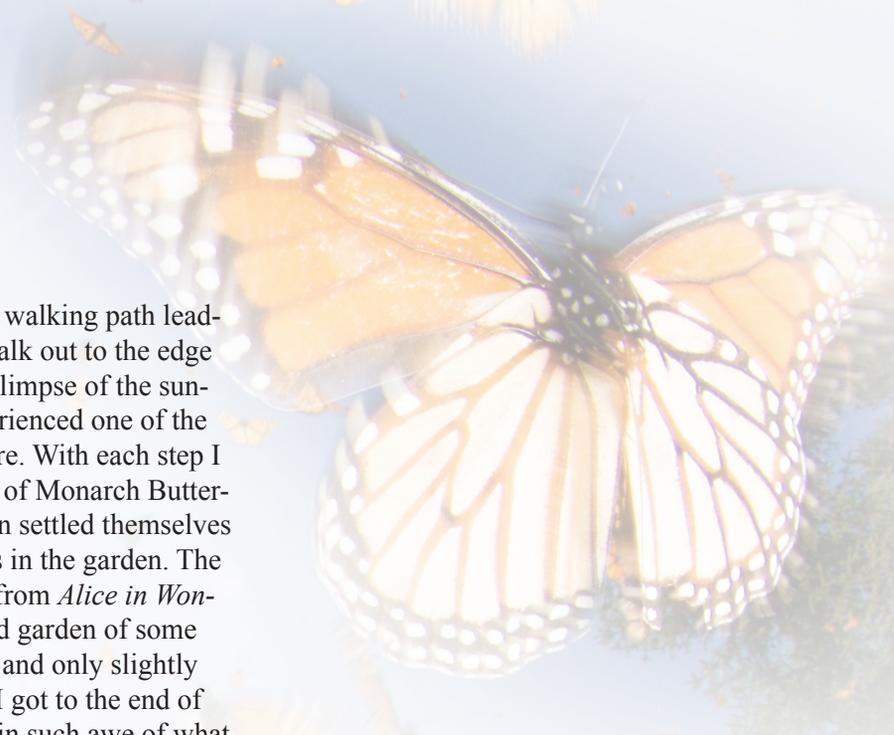


Photo courtesy K. Roberson

Observatory Hill, Yankton, SD, Federal Prison Camp Yankton.

all that great. He stated he had no need for a GED and was only in class because he did not want to lose his good conduct time for not participating. We came to an understanding; if he would not distract other students who were there to learn, he could read a book or magazine for the 90 minutes of class.

Fast forward a couple of months, this same student was still not interested in learning and continued to display the same negative attitude at any sign of authority. I happened to be working a late shift one evening and when managers at my institution do this, we are required to assist in supervising the evening meal. That night, I had posted myself outside the exit of the foodservice facility to check inmates as they left to make sure they were not taking unauthorized food back to the housing units. The spot I posted myself was adjacent to a botanical garden the horticulture program used as a lab for identifying woody plants, perennials, annuals and various other plants used in landscaping. It was a beautiful evening, and I could see rays of sunshine beaming through the lower



branches of the trees and lighting up a walking path leading out into the garden. I decided to walk out to the edge of the garden and see if I could get a glimpse of the sunset. As I walked down the path, I experienced one of the neatest things I have ever seen in nature. With each step I took down the path, literally hundreds of Monarch Butterflies took flight as I passed by, and then settled themselves back down on the multitude of flowers in the garden. The feeling was euphoric; I felt like Alice from *Alice in Wonderland*, walking through an enchanted garden of some kind. The Monarchs were everywhere and only slightly disturbed by my walking through. As I got to the end of the pathway, I saw the sunset but was in such awe of what I just experienced I was eager to retrace my steps back to the dining facility. The experience was the same, I took a step and to flight took the Monarchs. As I passed, they landed back on their flowers as if I had not been there at all. The experience was so amazing, as I stood there now watching inmates exit the dining facility, all I could think of was who could I share this with. On my mind first was other staff who were on duty, but at that moment out of the dining facility walked Mr. *Attitude* student.

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Of course, when I called him over his facial expression was “What does this guy want?” or “What did I do now?”. As he approached, I simply asked him, addressing him by name, “You want to experience something really neat?” He looked confused so I repeated my question, adding I thought he would appreciate something very cool. He agreed and wanted to know what it was. I pointed down the pathway and gave him instructions to slowly walk down the path to the very end and to come back the same way. He was a bit apprehensive

because the pathway is normally out-of-bounds for the general inmate population. Understanding his demeanor and attitude toward staff, I could tell he thought I was setting him up for something that might get him in trouble. Here, I had to overcome the negative stereotype that all correctional staff are only there to harass the inmate population. I reassured Mr. *Attitude*, telling him I was permitting him to walk down the path and just wanted him to have the opportunity to experience something very surreal.

Mr. *Attitude* started down the path with a little apprehension, turning his head around looking over his shoulder at me. I waved at him to keep going. As he moved down the path, I could see the first round of Monarchs lifting off their resting places, but this time I could also see rays of sunshine bouncing off their wings as they fluttered around. I was hoping this experience would mean something to the inmate. It did not take long to realize it had. After having stepped out of view down the pathway, Mr. *Attitude* quickly returned down the path toward me. As he approached, the expression on his face was not of an inmate attempting to portray the image of someone who despised authority and all correctional staff, but of a man who just had a wonderful experience. The smile on his face was from ear to ear, his eyes were wide with amazement, and even his gait was more relaxed. I could tell by the way he approached, he fully understood what was so neat about the little stroll I asked him to take.

As he walked up, I said, “Well, what do you think?” He replied with complete appreciation for letting him walk down the pathway and inquired about the butterflies and why they were there. He commented on the beauty

of the flowers and the sunset and thanked me for allowing him to walk down the path. It was in this moment he saw me as a person, not an authority figure, another person who shared in a wonderful experience of nature. After explaining a little bit about the Monarch's migration patterns, I expressed that I wanted to share that with him because I knew it would be a neat experience. He thanked me again and I told him to have a nice evening. I knew he was sincere in his appreciation, not only because he expressed it, but I could see it in his demeanor and posture. I also saw it as he walked away. He tagged alongside another inmate that was exiting from the dining facility, and almost immediately as he began talking pointed toward the botanical garden as they were walking back to the main part of the compound. I knew he was sharing what he had just experienced.

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Our relationship changed that day because we made a human connection with a little assistance from Mother Nature. From that point on, every time I saw Mr. *Attitude*, he gave me the appropriate greeting of the day, "Good morning, Mr. Roberson" or "Good evening, Mr. Roberson." This is significant because the culture of the inmates, in general, is to not address staff and for many to not even make eye contact when they pass by. In their culture, addressing staff in this manner is a sign of respect. The staff they address this way is a signal they respect you because you see and treat them as a person, a fellow human being, and not just an inmate. This student changed his attitude on the education floor as well. I cannot say he worked any harder on his GED, but he did start treating the education staff with more respect. It would be nice to think he realized we were there to help him with his educational needs and to provide tools and opportunities for him to have a successful reentry.

Empathy as a correctional tool

Through my memories, and the experiences I contemplated through the reflective process, I found empathy is lacking in the correctional environment. This lack of empathy is not only for the inmate but how incarceration affects their families and the community. I found, through the reflective writing process, I could create empathy for inmates from events in my correctional career. This process allowed me to look at an inmate as a son, a father, a husband, a brother, and a student. Developing human connections was a critical aspect for generating empathy. I have personally grown in this regard and feel the lack of empathy and compassion for inmates is a problem that needs to be addressed on a larger scale if those of us working in corrections truly want to rehabilitate inmates, reduce recidivism and make our prisons safer.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Knowles, M., Holton, E., & Swanson, R. 2015. *The adult learner: The definitive classic in adult education and human resource development* (8th ed.). New York, NY: Routledge.
- ² Chang, H. 2016. *Autoethnography As Method*, 33-35. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press.
- ³ Roberson, K., Alexander, K., Lesley, M., & Rehm, M. 2019. *A road never traveled: Using autoethnography to gain insights for improving correctional education and reducing recidivism*. Lubbock, TX: Texas Tech University.



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DID YOU KNOW?

A cluster of Monarch butterflies is called a "Roost".



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