

Not The Place for Dark Sarcasm

Since I recently wrote a post about music played in prison, here's another. Yesterday I heard the Pink Floyd classic, "The Wall", playing in a prison transport van. That's the song where Mr Floyd (♫) sings, "We don't need no education. We don't need no thought control. No dark sarcasm in the classroom. Teachers leave those kids alone." Listening to those words in a place like this is rife with irony for dozens of reasons, but here's my 2-part take on two of them. A second post will follow.

So, BTB readers probably all know that education is a big deal in prison these days: it's Big Business, Big Politics, and big ego. Mostly we get correspondence courses in here, but some colleges actually send professors right into the belly of the beast, and that's where something like that "dark sarcasm" can be found. To be clear, I don't believe many teachers ~~come~~ ^{come} in here with an axe to grind against inmates. Most are caring people who truly want to do good things for marginalized folks, but in my experience it's often been the most genuine bleeding hearts who can be naive enough to inadvertently do the most damage.

For example, one day I showed up to a class visibly upset. I was suffering terrible sleep deprivation from an intensely disrespectful neighbor who loved to play loud music through our shared vent while I was sleeping. By then the only solutions that seemed even remotely ~~at~~ ^{viable} involved violence, so that had compounded my stress as well. The professor noticed all this and asked me what was wrong, which I had trouble explaining concisely, so she interrupted and told me — with all the kindest intentions, I'm sure — that she hoped I could soon sort it all out because she didn't like seeing me "not being my best self." My "best self"? I was taken aback. "You've only ever seen me in a prison," I growled. "What makes you think you've ever seen any part of me that remotely resembles my 'best self'?" Believe me, you haven't.

Like I said, Sleep deprivation.

Her comment had certainly come from a well-meaning place, but the fact is, outside people who come inside hoping to help us unfortunate social discards often strike a sour note simply because they really don't grasp what they've actually stepped into. I advise them all the time, "please don't confuse us with your real-world students. Their problems are not our problems, and vice versa."

Another example comes from a professor who continuously pushed the idea of "self care" onto her caged students. The concept and its connotation, at least in this environment, immediately grated on me: "Self care"? Aw... how precious. I tried to imagine a 1940's version of a social worker traipsing through Buchenwald or Dachau, earnestly counselling those prisoners to not neglect their "self care". The idea is absurd to the point of offensiveness. So why do people feel ok doing it here? I ~~asked~~ ^{asked} the professor if she would've felt comfortable visiting Torquemada's torture chamber and telling someone stretched out on the rack, "Hey, you look pretty stressed. I feel like you're not really being your best self right now. Do you know what often helps me through the rough patches? I like listening to my music and just floating away..."

This of course would not be a helpful comment. ~~In~~ ^{In} fact, I suspect the rack rider would bite the do-gooder's throat out if only he could reach it. It's precisely the sort of tone-deaf comment that might upset someone in the midst of their suffering, and while none of this is really "dark sarcasm in the classroom", it's still the type of thing that can ~~seem~~ ^{seem} a little sarcastic, a little insensitive, to those who feel their suffering is being pooh-poohed by others who enjoy the privilege of leaving this shithole and going home at the end of their shifts. It's not intentional cruelty, of course, but many people do just forget, or fail to ever realise, that prisoners are not people who once upon a time went through something bad and now need to heal from it. No - prisoners are Actively Experiencing a relentless torment and suffering ongoing loss, RIGHT NOW, constantly.

Sometimes I offer this ~~as~~ ^{as} a consciousness raiser: Suppose a man has his hand chained in place above an open flame. You wouldn't then come to him with suggestions ~~for~~ ^{for} coping with the trauma he's had, right? Because the trauma is occurring Now. You wanna help? Wonderful... help him get his hand away from the damn flame! And if that's just not possible, ok, but at least have enough compassion to not bury him in platitudes about self care while his skin blisters. Just nod and be there for him. Just show sympathy. Surely we've all suffered enough in our lives, in our own ways, to recognize it in others, and to understand why our helpful hints and clever quips simply cannot be well-received by those whose palms are still being actively cooked.