

# Alternatives

Resources for Cultural Creativity

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I've been teaching yoga in prisons for over 10 years. The foundation that formed my perspective and philosophy on this service has not changed. But a recent experience surprised me. I was confronted with a glimpse of my narrow-sightedness—an experience which led me to broaden my sense of this work to include the companionship of Correctional Officers, Probation Officers and Correctional Facility administrators.

First, my perspective, which formed itself initially in graduate school almost 20 years ago... For every part of our collective culture that we lock away, shield off, institutionalize, or marginalize, we also lock away, shield ourselves from, or push into the shadows a corresponding part of our individual experience. Typically, what we shun, dismiss or sterilize in our culture includes our aging process, our mentally ill community members, those living in poverty or consumed by addiction, and those whose survival strategies include crime.

If the larger culture reflects my personal culture, then when I re-claim my physical vitality for all the years of my life, when I engage in the reflective process that supports my emotional and mental well-being in all its depth and intricacy, and when I acknowledge my own survival strategies with transparency and accountability, I become a part of the healing process for the larger culture.

Second, my philosophy... Every person has a longing to be seen in their brightness, their potential and their worth to others. (Through the processes of yoga, we begin to unveil this to ourselves.) But for individuals whose hearts were broken long ago, the road back to wholeness often requires support from the larger community. When children are not seen in their innocence, brightness and curiosity, a sense of deflation in their esteem may result. When coupled with experiences of being harmed, blamed, abandoned, ignored, punished, or ridiculed, the powerful force of shame is unleashed, and the deflated esteem can overwhelm the child's sense of self. As this young person grows into the community, their thoughts and actions will be "shame-based."

If we then see this young person only as their behavior (and not as a fractured individual reaching out for love in unskillful ways), we reinforce the essential "brokenness" that they have come to see as their essence.

If we are to be true healers, our task is to reclaim those aspects of ourselves that our culture shuns, to "take back our shadow," as Robert Bly would say. We must start to see ourselves and those marginalized, institutionalized and disowned persons as somehow connected. Our tools for instilling this sense of connection include yoga, meditation, community, restorative justice, inquiry, cultural competency, and so on.

For years I've been talking with people about my work in prisons (which is now Living Yoga's work in prisons, drug and alcohol rehab centers, and in centers for homeless youth, battered women and people in transition from incarceration back to the community). Audience

Israel Must be Held to the Same Nuclear Scrutiny as Iran  
by Joe Parko

members often fall on one side of a particular fence or the other. Sometimes they “don’t see how these people deserve yoga.” Other times they mention that “the guards probably need this as much as the inmates,” or that “the guards are probably just as bad as some of the inmates.”

VOTE NOW!! Or Forever Hold Your Peace  
by David Tomsic

Well, I’ve never been comfortable on either side of that fence. Because I’ve had a lot more exposure to inmates than to correctional officers, I’ve been able to speak more clearly about what yoga can do for an inmate rather than offer my perspective on the rehabilitative role of the correctional staff. In short, I’d say any activity that helps our students remember who they are in their deepest essence and most relaxed state simultaneously supports their mind to shift gears from shame-based, fight or flight thinking and reacting into a thought process that includes the impact their actions have on their future (even if it’s the next day) and on others.

The Turning Wheel: Astrology for rEvolutionaries Summer, 2008  
by Rhea Wolf

Life Advice from Catherine Ingram

Back to the surprising revelation to which I alluded at the outset of this essay. In June, I attended a conference on Juvenile Offenders sponsored by the Northwest Restorative Justice Foundation. I thought my fellow attendees would be psychotherapists, meditation teachers, prison ministers and counselors, and other professionals on the cutting edge of teen drug and alcohol rehabilitation and homelessness prevention. Thankfully, this is where my narrow-sightedness was revealed.

In the first session of the conference, attendees were asked to introduce themselves. As participants did so, I found myself surrounded by Correctional Officers, Probation Officers, Work Crew Supervisors, Career Counselors, and administrators for several Northwest correctional facilities. Much to my surprise, many of these people had already been utilizing Restorative Justice processes in their work. Others were new to the philosophy, but were actively teaching classes or leading courses for youth offenders to address their thinking and acting processes. When I introduced myself as a volunteer yoga instructor, I immediately discovered ready interest in the work and philosophy of Living Yoga.

What surprised and delighted me most was the level of active engagement from people in direct service with the youth. I realized that, hidden in the background of my awareness was a not-so-flattering judgment about the correctional officers I’d met and interacted with. I had assumed that they were less enthusiastic than me—less inspired, less hopeful, and less personally aware of the complex web of our society and our interpersonal responsibility to each other. But I was wrong!

In the first session of the conference, I “rubbed elbows” with people on the cutting edge of change for our justice system (which they noted is oriented more toward “punishment” than “justice”). One of the foundational changes that Restorative Justice teaches is a shift from perceiving the incarcerated individual as having “broken the law” to seeing that person as having “caused harm.” Restorative Justice also acknowledges that our current system spends enormous resources on the one who broke the law and very few resources on the victim. When we shift from punishing the offender to healing the harm that’s been done, we can begin to address the impact a particular crime has had on the individual, family or community affected.

By exposing perpetrators to the impact of their actions, we break their spell of separateness and isolation. By exposing them to the harm their actions have caused, as opposed to oversimplifying and sterilizing it in terms of “they broke the law” (which has a much different impact than “they destroyed a family’s resources,” as in robbing a convenience store), perpetrators are given an opportunity to participate in life again by recognizing that their actions directly affect others. When a victim and a perpetrator come together in mediation, there can be tremendous healing for both. Often the victim comes to see the offender as more than just their behavior; the perpetrator sees the victim in the web of their life and recognizes that the harm they caused often spreads beyond just the victim.

Conference participants were there to learn not only how to better assist youth offenders to become more accountable for their actions and address the harm they’d caused, but also to learn work skills, communication skills, and thinking skills. My newfound peers were willing to look at the youth offender as more than just their crime or behavior. And they were passionate about not losing a youth to the system where we exact punishment without

healing.

During the lunch break, I was approached by several people inquiring about Living Yoga. How do the inmates take to the yoga? How is yoga a tool for rehabilitation? And how do you see it fitting into the social justice movement?

In simple terms, the inmates cherish yoga. They derive great benefit from having focused time for self-awareness, physical and mental health, spiritual inquiry and the camaraderie of our volunteer teachers. Also, since we rotate the teachers in our classes, students may be exposed to a dozen different teachers, giving them a sense of connection to a much larger yoga community "on the outside" that is supporting them "on the inside." (For more on this aspect of Living Yoga's work, please visit our web page, [www.living-yoga.org](http://www.living-yoga.org))

Yoga as a tool for rehabilitation is a natural fit—which is why both DePaul Drug and Alcohol Treatment and the Volunteers of America include yoga in their treatment protocol. Yoga slows down the nervous system and the mind, giving students room to examine their thinking, acting and reacting. Just shifting a person's breathing pattern can create radical shifts in their mind and body. A shift from fight, flight or freeze to relaxation response often creates enough of a gap between an event and the triggered reaction to the event. In this regard, impulse control is one of the greatest benefits to our yoga students.

Finally, how do I see yoga being a tool for social justice? If the system is going to change from one of punishment to one of justice, how we see each other in the web of life has to change. Also, how we understand healing and restoration of the self must undergo a radical shift. In his latest book, *Blessed Unrest*, Paul Hawken writes, "...inspiration is not garnered from the recitation of our flaws." Hawken's observation is important for anyone who has ever been a cyclical dieter (to use a common cultural example), or anyone trying to improve themselves with retribution, force or self-criticism. Yoga shifts our awareness quite profoundly. We release the spell of separateness and underground shame and begin to live with hope for our radiant potential.

As a student of yoga, I have opened my eyes and heart to see people in their efforts, including their triumphs and their "failures," with much greater appreciation and respect. Compassion arises naturally—as does an innate recognition that my healing and your healing and the culture's healing are interconnected. In that light, I came away from the conference considerably inspired by the efforts many others are making to help offenders.

Yoga also shifts the way our students see themselves; and with even a glimmer of self-respect, the restoration begins. When I witness a student's evolution from withdrawn, depressed and resigned to even moderately curious or reluctantly softening, I feel tremendous hope for all of us and for the justice system. How our students see themselves while they're incarcerated is hugely important. But how they see themselves when they get out—and how we see them—is critical to us all.

**Sarahjoy Marsh** is the Founder and Board Chair for Living Yoga, a non-profit yoga outreach organization based in Portland, OR. For more information, to find out how to volunteer, or to make a donation, please visit our web page at [www.living-yoga.org](http://www.living-yoga.org). Join Sarahjoy and Living Yoga for the first Yoga and Social Justice Retreat at Breitenbush Hot Springs, October 16-19. For more information on Sarahjoy, please visit [www.yogajoy.net](http://www.yogajoy.net)

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