



Lift Every Voice:
The Humanizing Work of Children's Testimony
in Response to the Effects of Parental Incarceration

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My friend, Malcolm Ramos, is in his early thirties like me. Ramos was born in the Dominican Republic and grew up in the Bronx. His mother has a master's degree in education and was the principal of a school before her retirement. Neither of my parents went to college. We talk about our boys when we get together. Ramos has two; the oldest is moving swiftly into adolescence and the younger boy is only a few years behind. My son is almost three—the same age as his oldest son when Ramos went to prison.

I met Ramos in a series of classes offered by the Theological School at Drew University in a prison for men in New Jersey. Those of us from Drew's campus were known as "outside" students and the people from the prison were known as "inside" students.¹ Drew faculty members teach the courses in the PREP program, and the students, inside and out, are co-learners. As in any classroom, intellectual curiosity and personal experience overlapped, but it took time in this unique setting to trust each other enough to talk about our families. Inside a prison, giving away too much information about family members can make one susceptible to manipulation.

Eventually, in the course of talking about scripture, church history, or ethics, someone offered a thought about life, as he knew it. Those were watershed moments because the stories that poured forth over the next three semesters gave personal depth and dimension to an "issue" that I had previously known only as the Prison Industrial Complex (PIC).² One particularly gripping narrative came from a man who was sentenced to life in prison when the younger of his two daughters was three weeks old. Thirteen years later, the two girls visited their father for the first time. Their father, Stanley, told us in only a few words of the enormity of that moment. They came to let him know that their mother was dying. She had confessed to withholding every letter and birthday present that Stanley sent the girls when they were children. Stanley described

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¹ The courses offered at two prisons in New Jersey are part of the Partnership for Religion and Education in Prisons program at Drew University. For more information, see <http://www.drew.edu/theological/current-students/prep>.

² For a concise history of the formation of the Prison Industrial Complex, see Eric Schlosser, "The Prison-Industrial Complex," *The Atlantic*, December 1998, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1998/12/the-prison-industrial-complex/4669/>.

feelings of rage and bitterness mingled with ecstasy and relief. I was dumbstruck. I could only imagine a tormented and awful childhood for those young women. In that moment, I realized with unfathomed clarity that the impact of parental incarceration on children is immense and must be measured in both stories and statistics.

To understand the full impact of mass incarceration in the lives of children we need a sense of its endemic scope. “In 2007 there were 1.7 million children in the United States with a parent in prison, more than 70% of whom were children of color.”³ The impact of parental incarceration is described by scholars and activists in the starkest terms: “Children of incarcerated parents are more likely to drop out of school, engage in delinquency, and subsequently be incarcerated themselves.”⁴

Most immediately, children experience severely restricted access to their parents. Among children whose mothers are incarcerated, only about 1 in 3 are living with their fathers, while more than 10% end up in foster care within 21 months of their mothers’ imprisonment.⁵ The rest of these children are with extended family members or community members whose resources and motivation as caregivers are likely strained. For most children, visits to an imprisoned parent are limited to only a few per year. In 2004, only 12.5% of those in state prisons and 14.7% in federal prisons reported seeing their children monthly. More commonly, children of the incarcerated have no visits with their parents at all; 58.5% of state prisoners and 44.7% of federal

³ Marc Mauer, Ashley Nellis, and Sarah Schirmer, *Incarcerated Children and Their Parents: Trends 1991-2007* (Washington, D.C., The Sentencing Project, 2009), 1.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 5, 9.

prisoners report that they have never had a visit with their children during their sentence.⁶ With more than two-thirds of the US prison population between the ages of 25 and 34, the bulk of American prisoners are in the midst of their primary years of parenting.⁷

These children are among the most vulnerable members of U.S. society because of the confluence of widespread poverty, lack of parental support and presence, the ongoing effects of racism, and the lack of representation in political and social systems. “Approximately half of children with incarcerated parents are under ten years old.”⁸ The young age of these children heightens their vulnerability because of dependence on adults—especially adults outside their families and communities whose policy decisions, lack of advocacy, and, in many cases, social segregation demonstrates little regard for these children’s interests. And the vulnerability is unevenly spread. African-American children are more than seven times more likely than white children to have an incarcerated parent; Latino children are two-and-a-half times more likely than white children.⁹

I feel myself shrivel under the weight of this grim scenario. And then another conversation with Ramos about his hope for his sons renews my spirit and reminds me that the future is, in fact, not yet written for children with parents in prison. As it exists, discourse regarding the PIC strives, in most instances, to advance justice and reconciliation for the people most directly affected by inordinately high rates of incarceration—the imprisoned and their

⁶ Ibid., 7.

⁷ Lauren E. Glaze and Laura M. Maruschak (Department of Justice), *Parents In Prison and Their Minor Children* (Washington, D.C., Office of Justice Programs, 2010), 3.

⁸ Ibid., 6.

⁹ Ibid., 7.

families. Scholars and activists have succeeded at describing the relatively short time in which the PIC has become a monstrous force in communities around the country with its primary target being poor people of color.¹⁰ A smaller group of advocates have contributed analyses of programs with successful records of rehabilitation and significant advances toward consideration of the varied needs of children whose parents are incarcerated.¹¹ However, scholars and activists, on the whole, have not been successful at differentiating between the quantitative impact of mass incarceration and the impacted people themselves. Further, when referring to children, there has been a tendency to portray young people as passive recipients of a tormented reality and pre-determined future. In our best efforts to describe the immensity of the Prison Industrial Complex and its impact on individuals, families, and communities, we have forgotten the resilience of the human spirit.

In this article, I strive to expand the narrative about the impact of parental incarceration on children by demonstrating how exclusively quantitative portrayals actually perpetuate the expectation that these children will inevitably become criminals themselves. I will treat children as those primarily impacted by the “contracted” nature of this discussion and feature *Children of Incarcerated Parents: A Bill of Rights* as exemplary work by scholars and activists who have been successful at raising children’s voices to the surface of the conversation about the PIC. To present this redirected methodology, I turn to Paulo Freire’s groundbreaking work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, in which the voices of those dehumanized by marginalization are the catalyst for

¹⁰ For an exhaustive collection of work regarding the rise of the Prison Industrial Complex, see the Sentencing Project: <http://www.sentencingproject.org/template/index.cfm>. Also see The National Resource Center on Children and Families of the Incarcerated at Families & Corrections Network: <http://fcnetwork.org>.

¹¹ See the work of The Osborne Association: <http://www.osborneny.org/>. Also see Friends Outside: <http://www.friendsoutside.org>.

liberation of both the oppressed and their oppressor. In dialogue with Freire, John Wall's *Ethics in Light of Childhood* has relevant insights regarding social responsibilities to children of the incarcerated and the power of narrative to break the self-fulfilling qualities of the current discourse. I propose that as we hold up children's voices, expressing both their joys and concerns, we will find spaces in the conversation about the PIC where hope is realized because of the ways these children defy, overcome, and transform the difficult realities facing them.

I seek, above all, to recognize the full humanity and agency of children acting morally in very complex and difficult circumstances. As the testimonies of children with incarcerated parents are recorded and seriously considered by scholars and activists, we stand to both better our research and humanize the children for which many advocate. Of course, not all of the stories will inspire optimism. When we fully acknowledge children's agency and ability to respond, even at very young ages, to poverty, racism, lack of parental support, systemic neglect, and criminal opportunity, then we will certainly see them making choices that both defy and perpetuate these difficult realities.

Stories That Incarcerate

The scholarly conversation regarding children with incarcerated parents spans several disciplines and almost four decades. Criminologists, sociologists, psychologists, and ethicists have taken a keen interest, and activists from a variety of organizations and agencies have attempted to represent the children's interests and make recommendations based on quantitative data. In spite of the multiplicity of participants, discussions take a similar tone with regard to

these children's futures. As I will demonstrate, children with imprisoned parents are described in anguish, stigmatized by the world, neglected by caregivers, intellectually feeble, lured into a life of crime, and ultimately destined for their own involvement with the criminal justice system. Statistical evidence used on its own supports this bleak depiction.

Scholars acknowledge a variety of factors contributing to the outcomes of children with incarcerated parents. Still, the arguments unfold along similar lines either implicitly or explicitly. In *Good Punishment: Christian Moral Practice and U.S. Imprisonment*, James Logan describes the phenomena of the “lock-down consciousness” and the “depenalization of imprisonment.” Lock-down consciousness refers to the transmission of language, customs, symbols, and other aspects of prison culture into the communities where incarceration is most prevalent. Logan says, “A locked-down consciousness results in the reduced ability of many residents to imagine a greater world of possibility and potential beyond the limitations placed on community flourishing by the routine and normalizing effects of large-scale imprisonment.”¹² Because the locked-down consciousness so severely restricts individual and community flourishing, a response has been to “depenalize” imprisonment in communities where it is most widespread, embracing the experience, instead, as a rite of passage.

Citing the work of criminologist Todd Clear from his paper at the 1996 conference of the Vera Institute for Justice, Logan says that programs intended to expose youth to prison as an attempt to curb criminal behavior have not only failed, they actually facilitate the transmission of

¹² James Samuel Logan, *Good Punishment? Christian Moral Practice and U.S. Imprisonment* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008), 89-80.

prison culture back into communities. In fact, prison has become known as a productive place because of the significant number of people from the same neighborhoods, as well as the opportunity for inexperienced criminals to hone their trade and expand their network. Logan cites the fact that 80% of the inmates at Riker’s Island come from only seven neighborhoods in the boroughs of New York City.¹³ Further, in communities where incarceration is prevalent, “many young people, especially young men and boys, view surviving prison as a rite of passage, wherein one’s ‘rep’ and ‘street cred’ get firmly established—or not.”¹⁴ In this case, individuals and communities most impacted by mass-incarceration have created a means to transform the stigma associated with imprisonment. Unfortunately, the lock-down consciousness keeps individuals and communities locked in the never-ending cycle of crime and incarceration.

Logan attempts to explain the challenging circumstances facing children and also to describe the unintended incentivization of crime in neighborhoods and communities where mass-incarceration is prevalent. However, the presentation implies that the conditions could produce nothing but criminality. Further, this analysis proposes an active valorization of criminal behavior by the people with the most to lose in light of mass-incarceration. Some might suggest that depenalization is a way to survive in the face of brutal realities posed by the constant threat of violence, crime, and imprisonment. Be that as it may, this survival is a mere myth because it requires a dehumanizing acquiescence to violent living conditions and the internalization of a criminal identity. There must be children living in the neighborhood who make choices everyday

¹³ Ibid., 83-87.

¹³ Ibid., 86.

¹⁴ Ibid., 83.

to resist parts or the whole of exported prison culture. The presence of children's voices in the presentation of the "lock-down consciousness" and "depenalization of imprisonment" may confirm the reality of these phenomena, but would also expand the narrative to reveal the cultural and contextual locations where children are resisting criminality in their lives and communities. Further, their voices would likely give those who seek to reverse the effects of these phenomena first-hand accounts of how best to do so.

Joan Moore, speaking of the "routinization" of imprisonment in inner-city communities, a very similar phenomenon to the lock-down consciousness, says:

Every additional inmate released to the community increases the chances that community youth will learn directly about prison and become yet more persuaded that prison lies in their own futures. For inner-city youth, anticipatory socialization to prison is exacerbated by the fact that prison permeates the national youth culture, well beyond the ghettos and barrios.¹⁵

Moore and Logan employ developmental psychology that depicts children with little or no ability to resist community norms. Describing the developmental model, John Wall says, "Humanity in light of children starts out neither pure nor unruly, according to this view, but in a state of fundamental ethical neutrality or blankness."¹⁶ In the best case, according to the developmental model, children's ability to act morally increases as they age and become more rational.¹⁷

¹⁵ Joan Moore, "Bearing the Burden: How Incarceration Weakens Inner-City Communities," *Oklahoma Criminal Justice Research Consortium Journal* vol. 3 (1996): 8.

¹⁶ John Wall, *Ethics in Light of Childhood* (Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2010), 25.

¹⁷ For a more complete description of developmental psychology see Wall, 25-30; and Van Debra Ausdale and Joe R. Feagin, *The First R: How Children Learn Race and Racism* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2001), 1-10.

The developmental model is widely employed by scholars when discussing the impact of parental incarceration on children. A shortcoming of developmental psychology is that it presumes that children's lack of rational development makes it impossible for them to exercise moral agency. Wall describes developmentalists' perspective on childhood as such: "Childhood is to be understood as a path or passageway to something other than childhood. Adulthood, in contrast, is usually considered somehow complete, or at least more complete. To have developed fully is to have reached some kind of non-childlike humanity."¹⁸ Developmental psychology, then, is part and parcel to discourse that dehumanizes and denies the agency of children with imprisoned parents who not only face extraordinarily difficult circumstances but are also considered developmentally unable to exercise moral agency in response.

In the developmental model, the absence of a positive parental model can be significantly detrimental to moral development. Fritsch and Burkhead conclude from a study of incarcerated parents regarding the reported behavior of their children since incarceration that, "in agreement with others, [the study] found parental separation to be associated with the problematic behavior of children. Unlike other studies, however, sex of the absent parent was shown to be correlated with the type [of] behavior exhibited, absence of the father with acting-out and absence of the mother with acting-in behavior."¹⁹ Children whose fathers are imprisoned are likely to exhibit violent behavior, while children whose mothers are imprisoned are more likely to daydream or cry a lot.²⁰ Here, the authors present their findings in gender categories that reinforce problematic

¹⁸ Wall, 29.

¹⁹ Travis A. Fritsch and John D. Burkhead, "Reactions of Children to Parental Absence Due to Imprisonment," *Family Relations* 30:1 (1981): 83-88.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 85.

assumptions regarding appropriately male and female behavior. Even the categories used to define “acting-out” and “acting-in” leave children little room to exhibit any response at all that might be considered appropriate or productive.²¹ It may be that the acting-out observed in children with incarcerated fathers is more related to a form of the depenalization of imprisonment present in their communities. It is also likely that children who cry are experiencing real grief because of the lack of contact with their mothers and the myriad ways that their lives have changed as a result of their parents’ incarceration. The article reinforces an unhelpful idea that children whose fathers are imprisoned lose the “authority figure” and children whose mothers are imprisoned lose the “nurturer.”

James Fowler, a prominent developmental psychologist and theologian at the Candler School of Theology, speaks at length regarding his perception of violent cultural values that he says are a direct threat to the wellbeing and moral development of young people in the United States. Fowler says:

Students of the generations have characterized youths in today’s United States as part of a cohort that has been the most aborted in history. Observers say that today’s teens, whether conscious of it or not, carry a collective sense of survival guilt because of the large number of their brothers and sisters or agemates who died as fetuses, never having their opportunity at life... They see overwhelming violence, in quantity and destructiveness, in the media they watch; violence in the streets where many of them live; violence on roads and highways; violence in their schools. Then we note the reportage of an unprecedented level of domestic violence, including sexual abuse inflicted on one in every four girls and on one in every six boys. Even the violence in the talk shows around them and in the rock and rap music to which they listen floods them with verbal and visual images of the degradation of human bodies and dignity, and cultivates the sense of a ‘waste them,’ throw-away attitude toward human life and dignity.

²¹ For descriptions of “acting-out” and “acting-in,” see Fritsch and Burkhead, 85.

Nowhere is this “waste them,” throw-away attitude more present than among black youth—especially males—in our society. In a sadly familiar statistic, we are told that more than one quarter of all young black men are incarcerated, with many others involved in parole or under court supervision. The erosion of a culture that supports schooling, and the seductiveness of the economic payoffs of drug trafficking, have made creating alternatives to street life with its dangers difficult to successfully commend. For many black youth, the myth of the ‘pretty corpse’ reinforces a sense that gang life and making it big in the streets is the best way to go, even if it leads to an early death.²²

Here, Fowler makes a direct, albeit implicit, correlation between what he perceives as a large number of abortions in the United States and violence among African American youth. Fowler gives no regard to the history of scholarship in which systemic factors related to race, economy, class, education, and gender have demonstrated, at the least, a very complicated scenario for women, couples, and families considering abortion.²³ Fowler exemplifies the developmental model discussed previously to portray children as unwittingly susceptible to the corrupting influence of talk shows, rock and rap music, other forms of media, and community pressures—holding up African American youth as quintessential examples of a “waste-them, throw away attitude” that celebrates violence in U.S. society.²⁴ Fowler claims a “sadly familiar statistic” to say that mass-incarceration among African American youth is the end result of cultural norms that prefer drug-markets to schools and glorifies crime, even in the face of violence.²⁵ Fowler presents youth, especially African American youth, as void of any moral agency that might be

²² James W. Fowler, “Perspectives on Adolescents, Personhood, and Faith,” in *Christ and the Adolescent: A Theological Approach to Youth Ministry* (Institute for Youth Ministry, Princeton Theological Seminary, 1996), 6.

²³ See Kathleen McDonnell, *Not an Easy Choice: Re-Examining Abortion* (Toronto: Second Story Press, 2003). Also see Traci West, “Policing the Sexual Reproduction of Poor Black Women,” in Kathleen M. Sands, *God Forbid: Religion and Sex in American Public Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 135-154.

²⁴ Fowler, 6.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

employed to transform or overturn negative cultural values and violence.

Finally, contributions to scholarly conversations regarding children with incarcerated parents that most explicitly present children as passive recipients of a doomed destiny suggest that these children, along with eye color, hair texture, and other genetic traits, actually inherit what has been referred to as the “crime gene” from their incarcerated parents. In a conference paper given at the Vera Institute for Justice, “The Next Generation: Children of Prisoners,” criminologist John Hagan refers to studies seeking to determine whether or not criminal behavior is genetically determined. Hagan concedes that the work of determining causality is immature, but does not dismiss the notion that genes may be at the root of crime. Citing the work of Christopher Jencks, Hagan leaves open the possibility that criminal behavior is hereditary.²⁶ This type of research is not at all uncommon. Nell Bernstein describes the pursuit of the “crime gene” poignantly:

The last century may not have taken us as far from this worldview as we would like to believe. The 1990s saw a rash of federally funded research aimed at pinpointing a “crime gene,” in the hope that hereditary criminality, promptly identified, could be curbed through the use of pharmaceutical prophylactics. This research included a study in which black and Latino boys as young as six, whose older brothers had been adjudicated as delinquents, were injected with fenfluramine (the primary ingredient in the banned diet drug fen-phen) in the hope that the drug would curb their predicted—though as-yet-unmanifested—aggression.²⁷

²⁶ J. Hagan, “The Next Generation: Children of Prisoners,” *Journal of the Oklahoma Criminal Justice Research Consortium* 3 (1996): 19–28. For more on Jencks’ study of boys in non-relative foster care with incarcerated parents, see Christopher Jencks, *Rethinking Social Policy: Race, Poverty and the Underclass* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).

²⁷ Nell Bernstein, *All Alone in the World: Children of the Incarcerated* (New York: New Press, 2005), 219.

The search for the “crime gene” epitomizes what we recognize in scholarship as a dehumanizing tendency to deny the moral agency of children with incarcerated parents. Still, all of the examples demonstrate pessimism regarding the futures of children with imprisoned parents, as well as the strength of social forces at work against them. Without the voices of children to counterbalance these portrayals and discredit the most extreme examples, scholarship and activism that seeks justice may actually continue to perpetuate the dehumanization of these children.

A New Methodology

The work of John Wall, professor of religion and childhood studies at Rutgers University, will be a primary resource in this effort to resist the tendency to pacify and vilify children in their relationship to criminality and the PIC. *Ethics In Light of Childhood* sheds new light on the use of narrative as a liberating tool for children and adults. Drawing on the work of phenomenologist Richard Kearney and quoting him directly, Wall reminds us, “some stories congeal and incarcerate, others loosen and emancipate.”²⁸ As we have seen, much of the material regarding the PIC lends itself to the former type of story with regard to the lives of children—so much so that children are pursued as genetic carriers of criminality. An interruption of the discourse regarding the effects of parental imprisonment on children is required. Just as stigma has long been believed to be a guaranteed result of incarceration, and now we find that incarceration has been de-stigmatized in communities where incarceration is prevalent, we must also interrupt the

²⁸ Wall, 51-52.

conversation about the PIC when it strives to make other claims about the impact of incarceration as though they are monolithic and guaranteed.

Danna Nolan Fewell, in *Children of Israel: Reading the Bible For the Sake of Our Children*, suggests a method by which readers may “interrupt” texts in light of problematic moral claims or implications. Fewell says that individuals and communities should interrupt “as a way of stopping and questioning the text—of recognizing that, ethically, something is amiss in what we are being told.”²⁹ Those of us who know someone in prison are aware of the duality that exists between the grim realities of crime and imprisonment on the one hand, and the hope that persists from being in relationship with the person on the other. Similarly, when scholars, activists, and other advocates talk about the impact of parental incarceration on the lives of children, we must remember: while the facts of the situation may paint an awful scenario, when we record and seriously consider the voices of children, they will show us where to find hope and work for change.

The methodology that I am proposing, then, requires scholars and activists to break from depictions of children that portray them as moral non-agents who have no capacity to resist criminality or identify for themselves places in their lives and communities where transformation and resilience are possible. This methodology acknowledges children as fully human moral agents with the capacity to make sophisticated choices in the face of complex realities. John Wall proposes a definition of humanity that “must move beyond abstract analysis to the investigation of human being as lived experience... Each of us is born into a social world whose shape has

²⁹ Danna Nolan Fewell, *The Children of Israel: Reading the Bible for the Sake of Our Children* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 33.

already been constituted through time, but which each of us cannot help but also reshape over time into meaning for ourselves.”³⁰ In essence, every person born is both an interruption of the world and also a new creator of meaning in the world. In light of this definition of humanity, we turn to the humanizing work of the oppressed in the scholarship of Paulo Freire.

In his groundbreaking work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire decrees that the historical work of the oppressed is to work for both their own liberation and the liberation of their oppressors. Oppression, says Freire, is the denial of the full humanity of the oppressed. More completely: “Dehumanization, which marks not only those whose humanity has been stolen, but also (though in a different way) those who have stolen it, is a *distortion* of the vocation of becoming more fully human.”³¹ In the relationship between the PIC and children of the incarcerated, we might be inclined to name any number of individuals, communities, policy makers, policies themselves, corporations, or others in society that benefit from mass incarceration as the oppressor of children of the incarcerated. Given the statistics, the case is easily made. However, as we have already said, scholars and activists contribute, albeit in different ways, to the perpetuation of dehumanizing stereotypes and policies that present incarceration as an inevitable end for children with parents in prison.

This is a difficult reality to face. Many scholars and activists work out of a deep distress for the exceedingly difficult realities created by mass-incarceration. In fact, most detest bias in the justice system that targets the poor and people of color. In Freire’s words: “Concern for humanization leads at once to the recognition of dehumanization, not only as an ontological

³⁰ Wall, 36.

³¹ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 2000), 44.

possibility but an historical reality. And as an individual perceives the extent of dehumanization, he or she may ask if humanization is a viable possibility.”³² Herein lies the shortcoming of much scholarship and activism: upon realizing the devastating impact of mass-incarceration in the lives of children, a humanizing alternative has seldom been presented in the words of the oppressed. Certainly, advocates have spoken at length about the dehumanization of the incarcerated, their families, and members of communities where incarceration is most prevalent. However, when advocates present only the grim reality, even zoomed in at the individual level, and fail to account for the possibility of a humanizing alternative arising out the lives of the oppressed themselves, they actually perpetuate dehumanization. In Freire’s terms, we can refer to the work of scholars and activists as a “false generosity” when, while seeking to promote justice, they actually fortify the social order that condemns children to a dim future in which incarceration seems the only imaginable possibility.³³

When I speak with the men that I know in a New Jersey prison about their relationships with the people caring for their children while they are in prison, their faces sour almost immediately. In one case, Leroy tells me that his mother is raising his son. Leroy speaks with them regularly. He reported that the greatest difficulty he faces as a parent in prison is the need to continually remind his mother not to speak ill of him in an attempt to improve his son’s self-esteem. Leroy says that his mother regularly tells the child that he is “better” than his father and that the child does not need to worry about what others will think of the fact that his father is in

³² Ibid., 43.

³³ Ibid., 44-45.

prison. In effect, says Leroy, she plants seeds of doubt, fear, anger, and shame where they may not have existed before.

Like the grandmother in this anecdote, the scholarly and activist conversation about children of the incarcerated takes a perpetually and prematurely defensive posture. In fact, advocates have so internalized the rhetoric that an alternative appears unimaginable. Like the grandmother, many seem sure that children will end up like their parents. Some have lost sight of any way to talk to and about these children without reference to their parents' incarceration. An article by the Gotham Gazette about the relationships between children and their incarcerated parents quotes at length the testimonies of young people:

“Toward junior high school and high school it was a lot of pressure because everybody be like, ‘Oh, don’t mess up like your mother; don’t be like your mother, you got to do good.’ It was too much pressure on me,” Cagle said. “Instead of people supporting me and telling me ‘figure out what you want to do and make sure that you’re the best at whatever you want to do,’ everybody’s always just like don’t mess up.”

“Some of the young people and the kids do struggle with what their destiny is. And then, with so many people assuming the apples don’t fall far from the tree... they don’t see bright futures for themselves,” Krupat said. “Then things happen in their lives that affirm that for them, even if it’s unintentional like a teacher accusing them when something’s missing from the classroom or misunderstanding their anger that they can’t be with their parent. And, then they may get sent to special-ed. Their possibilities get limited more and more.”

This not only leads [to] individuals having lower personal expectations. It also affects the expectations of entire communities.

“For me it wasn’t such a big difference because I grew up in Bed-Stuy/Crown Heights. All my friends, most of them their father was locked up. So, we were the cool kids kind of,” said Duncan, who will be headed to college in the Fall. “I wasn’t embarrassed by it at all for some reason. I’m not saying it’s normal, but for where I live at it’s kind of a common thing.”³⁴

³⁴ Jason Lewis, “Helping Parents Behind Bars be Parents,” *Gotham Gazette*, <http://www.gothamgazette.com/article/socialservices/20110823/15/3590>. Accessed October 19, 2011.

This account affirms the fact that many young people with parents in prison are treated as though there are only two possible responses to parental incarceration: 1) defensive posturing and heightened moralizing from adults that creates pressure in the lives of children; 2) passivity and acquiescence to the inevitability of incarceration. But the same young person who experiences and testifies to the pressure created by defensive moralizing also presents the solution when she says, “Instead of people supporting me and telling me ‘figure out what you want to do and make sure that you’re the best at whatever you want to do,’ everybody’s always just like don’t mess up.”³⁵ Children impacted by parental incarceration are able to identify for themselves, caregivers, community workers, and policy makers the support required to return to a discussion of possibility, hope, and liberation. The job of child advocates is to make these children’s voices prominent in the conversation.

Narrative Testimony as Interruption

Not long ago, aware of the “issue” of mass-incarceration, I enrolled in my first semester of learning at the prison. My expectation was to connect with marginalized men, let them know that I was aware of the great injustice in the American prison system, and fulfill the Christian mandate to visit the imprisoned.³⁶ I expected nothing in return. This expectation, or lack thereof, was rooted in my own false generosity. What I discovered in the prison, instead, was the in-breaking of hope. As my relationships with the imprisoned men grew, I became increasingly aware of the sharp juxtaposition between the hopelessness inspired by the facts about the PIC

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Matthew 25:31-41

and the hope required to be in relationship with friends who happen to be incarcerated. It was not my proximity to the oppressed that produced the humanization. Nor was it my knowledge of the facts regarding the American prison system. Rather, it was the relationship—the shared stories and intersections of our lives—that allowed us to become more fully human together.

These moments of intersection are critical if children are to lead in the work of liberation. Freire says, “In order for the oppressed to be able to wage the struggle for their liberation, they must perceive the reality of their oppression not as a closed world from which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation which they can transform.”³⁷ Perceiving the reality of oppression is the work of the oppressed. When the oppressor defines oppression, it merely reconstructs the oppression in a form with which the oppressor is more comfortable. According to Freire, the work of the oppressor is to stand in solidarity beside the oppressed. The work of liberation, then, is initiated by those at the margins of power, but requires an oppressed/oppressor partnership for true liberation to be realized. Freire asserts:

Although the situation of oppression is a dehumanized and dehumanizing totality affecting both the oppressors and those whom they oppress, it is the latter who must, from their stifled humanity, wage for both the struggle for a fuller humanity; the oppressor, who is himself dehumanized because he dehumanizes others, is unable to lead this struggle.³⁸

As much as quantitative data may reveal about the impact of the PIC in the lives of children, we will perpetuate young people’s oppression without the qualitative value of their voices prominently featured in discourse about the PIC.

³⁷ Freire, 49.

³⁸ Ibid., 47.

How can we make the voices of children prominent in the conversation about the impact of mass-incarceration? I suggest testimony as an available resource. Children involved in the criminal justice system are not only aware of the word *testimony*, they understand the authority of the action.³⁹ Children whose parents are imprisoned may have been called upon to testify in the trial that resulted in their parents' incarceration.⁴⁰ In those instances, children may have strong reactions to the act of testifying once again to their relationship with an imprisoned parent. Still, some children may have positive experiences giving testimony in the legal system, and there are other contexts in which testimony carries significant positive authority.

In an article on the importance of testimony in African American churches, Regina Shands Stoltzfus says that testimony is a way of "truth-telling" in the midst of community.⁴¹ Testimony gives members of the community the opportunity to tell their stories to people with a common experience, who in turn hear the stories in an act of humanizing acknowledgement and speak back edifying words that give strength in the midst of struggle and oppression.⁴² Stoltzfus says:

Testimony is the act of people speaking truthfully about what they have seen and experienced. This speaking is offered to the community for the edification of all who hear. It has roots, of course, in the testimony of God's people in the scriptural witness.

³⁹ The New York State Unified Court system defines testimony as an oral declaration made by a witness or party under oath. <http://www.nycourts.gov/lawlibraries/glossary.shtml#T>. Accessed October 21, 2011.

⁴⁰ For an introduction to child testimony in legal cases, see Gail S. Goodman and Bette L. Bottoms (eds.), *Child Victims, Child Witnesses: Understanding and Improving Testimony* (New York: Guilford Press, 1993).

⁴¹ Regina Shands Stoltzfus, "'Couldn't Keep It to Myself': Testimony in the Black Church Tradition," *Vision* (10: Fall 2009): 42-49.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 45-47.

In testimony, the individual speaks about what he or she has experienced and seen, then offers it to the community so that the experience becomes part of the community's experience. The reality is bigger than the individual. It has meaning for the whole. Testimony is more than just telling other people what happened to you; it is a way of announcing your humanity in encounter with the divine. It is a way of edifying and encouraging one another.⁴³

Two aspects of testimony thus described are immediately applicable to the experiences of children with incarcerated parents. First, the opportunity to tell the truth is unique. Children whose parents are in prison may have only a limited number of emotionally and socially safe spaces in which they can speak the truth about their thoughts and feelings related to their parents' incarceration. Yet, telling the truth about this experience is exactly what advocates require if we are to uncover the real effects of parental incarceration; children need safe spaces to speak the truth about their lives if they are to find hope and meaning in their experiences. Second, testimony allows children to understand the communal causes and responsibilities behind the realities associated with parental incarceration. In short, testimony allows children to honestly name the realities created by mass-imprisonment and parental incarceration and to understand those realities as something that society has a hand in creating and should work with children to reform.

Natasha Tarpley, in *Testimony: young African-Americans on self-discovery and Black identity* [sic], speaks poignantly of the meaning of testimony throughout the history of African American experience.⁴⁴

⁴³ Ibid., 45.

⁴⁴ Tarpley presents a compelling explanation for the unique capitalization of the book title in the Note to the Reader, following the Table of Contents. Natasha Tarpley, *Testimony: Young African-Americans on Self-discovery and Black Identity* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995).

The act of testifying or giving testimony has deep roots in African American history, reaching back to slavery (and before), to the places our ancestors created—behind someone’s wood cabin doubling as a makeshift church or meetinghouse, or in a nearby clearing—where they opened themselves up to one another, showed their scars, spoke of their day-to-day life, their hopes and dreams, prayed to their God, and tried to remember everything they had lost.⁴⁵

Testimony has served as a humanizing expression for individuals who, at several points in American history, had no legitimacy or protection under the law. Tarpley describes testimony as an inherently embodied experience that unites members of a community through common experience and “is also a way to define and redefine one’s humanity.”⁴⁶ Testimony, then, is immediately relevant and useful to children, many of whom are African American, who are ignored and dehumanized by the criminal justice system, as well as those discussing the impact of parental incarceration in the absence of their voices and stories.

The work of John Wall provides insight as to how we can be in solidarity with children as they give testimony to the impact of their parent’s incarceration. According to Wall, the story of our lives extends toward infinity in opposite directions. While some measure life linearly toward death, Wall suggests that life be measured from birth as a way of acknowledging that many events occurred in life prior to the present moment, and many events will also occur after.⁴⁷ Further, measuring life from birth makes serious consideration of the events that occur in childhood and how those events not only form future adults, they have real significance in their present moment. Our lives unfold in light of the past (not just the past that occurred during our lifetimes) and we will construct the future, in part, in light of the many choices (ours and others’)

⁴⁵ Ibid., 2.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 3.

⁴⁷ Wall, 66-67.

those past events present us.⁴⁸ Wall says ultimately, “the aim for children and adults both is to interpret one’s life story with growing temporal wholeness. It is to create one’s time into an increasingly expansive story.”⁴⁹

Helping children with incarcerated parents understand their lives as a part of the longer human story allows them to situate their experiences not only in reference to their parents’ imprisonment, but also in reference to aspects of family, community, national, ethnic, and evolutionary history. This, in many ways, presents a hopeful alternative as it allows children to do the work of identity formation with a variety of resources—to understand their own life’s story as an extension of the resilient human spirit that has innovated and thrived across the landscapes of history. Further, allowing children to make integral connections between their own life stories and those of others helps shift the burden of responsibility for the challenges facing them as a result of their parents’ incarceration from their shoulders alone to the interconnected community. Further still, the realization of interconnection between people, events, communities, and social systems presents children with the opportunity for reflection on the oppressive policies, laws, and systems that may have contributed substantially to their parents’ incarceration. Wall cautions, “such a view can be taken too far... no one creates their own life’s meaning merely for themselves. Furthermore, insofar as each person does have a narrative gift from birth, this gift is not purely good but can also narrow and distort itself.”⁵⁰ Children of the incarcerated must contend with and make meaning of the particular reality forged by their parent’s crime, the

⁴⁸ Ibid., 67-68.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 68.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 69.

presence of the justice system in their lives, possible stigma, changing family structures, and the myriad results of parental incarceration that manifest differently in each child's life.

Dave was nine when his mother was arrested, leaving him to care for his younger brother until a neighbor called Child Protective Services and they were both put into foster care. Now in college, Dave recalls the events surrounding his mother's arrest:

I was nine when my mom got arrested. The police came and took her... They arrested her and just left us there. For two or three weeks I took care of my one-year-old brother and myself. I knew how to change his diapers and feed him and stuff... I wasn't really afraid. I was just trying to take care of my brother... I was sent to a temporary foster home and my brother was in a different foster home. Then I got placed in the foster home where I live now. I've been there for about eight years. I felt bad about being separated from my brother. I should have had visits with my brother, to at least know where he was. I just prayed that he was doing OK. During that time we were split up, my mom died. So then I was really mad because my brother was the only person I had left of my family and I didn't know where he was. I think when the police first arrested my mom they should have looked around the house and seen that we were there by ourselves... They should just be honest with you and tell you what's going on.⁵¹

Dave's testimony demonstrates the revelatory power of testimony to open up space in our conversations about the impact of parental imprisonment. Several issues come to bear in light of his testimony, and these might be undiscovered if we content ourselves to talk about Dave and his brother in statistical terms alone.

First, Dave is left alone in the house with his one-year-old brother. This child has the wherewithal to provide care and nurture to his sibling in the absence of an adult. As Dave asserts, the police should have known that children were alone in the house. Do police receive proper training regarding arrest making that takes into account the unique circumstances that arise in the

⁵¹ San Francisco Children of Incarcerated Parents Partnership, *Children of Incarcerated Parents: A Bill of Rights* (San Francisco: San Francisco Children of Incarcerated Parents Partnership, revised 2005), 5.

presence of children? Second, did Dave's mother have no public records and make no admission following her arrest to indicate that her children were living with her and may still be in the residence? Was Dave not in school before the arrest and did his absence alert no one? It took two or three weeks for a neighbor to notice Dave walking unaccompanied in the neighborhood with his younger brother. Did no one in the neighborhood notice the arrest? Third, why were Dave and his brother assigned to separate foster homes? Further, following the death of his mother, was it not all the more appropriate to ensure that Dave and his brother had close contact? I ask these questions not to assign blame but to signify the fact that, as was said before, in many cases the age of children alone makes them more dependent on adults to keep their interests and vulnerabilities in mind. Many of the questions raised by Dave's testimony may be answered with statistical information, but quantitative data alone is not adequate for responding to the dehumanizing treatment of Dave and his brother. The testimony does not provide us with complete resolution. Dave recalls the events of his childhood as someone who is now enrolled in college, but he does not tell us what happened to his younger brother.

Wall says, "The narrative of one's own narrative—the temporalization of one's temporality—can contract, splinter, and divide, or it can expand, fill out, and grow more whole. No one is dealt a complete or full story. Everyone must strive to create it."⁵² In many cases, children with incarcerated parents are striving for the attention of adults in the community who can respond to their need and help them construct meaningful, productive lives. Children with incarcerated parents identify the myriad ways that their lives are different from other young

⁵² Wall, 65.

people, and they often raise what Nell Burnstein calls “warning flags.” Burnstein says, “About 20 percent of the children of the most acutely criminal parents—those who rack up the greatest numbers of arrests—exhibit serious ‘conduct problems’ as adolescents. They lie, or steal, or get into fights—problems that are often associated with adult criminality and incarceration. Another way of looking at them is as flags, warnings to the world about trouble at home.”⁵³ While this characterization is problematic because it perpetuates the myth that children with incarcerated parents only know how to emulate their parents’ criminal behavior, Burnstein is right that children often give clear indications that attentive community members would recognize immediately. Amanda, a sixteen-year-old whose mother is in prison, says:

School is hard `cause I’m thinking, “When is my mom going to get out?” It’s hard for me to concentrate. I tell my teachers and they say, “Yeah, I understand, but you still need to do your work.” My English teacher helped me just by hearing out my problems and asking me what’s wrong, how’s my day. Me and her would eat lunch and discuss my problems...

I think the school should have a daily sheet where kids can explain how they feel, or if they need someone to talk to. I don’t like how for youth to get anger management, you have to get in a fight or try to kill someone. They should attack the problem before it gets to that point.⁵⁴

It may or may not be true that children need to resort to violence in order to gain helping attention, but if this is their perception, then we as advocates know at least one action to be taken: increased availability of preventative grief and anger counseling for children with incarcerated parents. Without Amanda’s testimony, some might be tempted to talk in quantitative terms about violence among children with incarcerated parents, implying that they are capable of

⁵³ Nell Bernstein, *All Alone in the World: Children of the Incarcerated* (New York: New Press, 2005), 219.

⁵⁴ San Francisco Children of Incarcerated Parents Partnership, 15.

nothing else, rather than identifying the complexities of the emotional state and circumstances of these children.

Children of Incarcerated Parents: A Bill of Rights

Our attention to the ways that children with incarcerated parents perceive and depend on social support leads us to a discussion of the rights owed to children with incarcerated parents.

Wall says:

It is before children that humanity is most profoundly called upon to respond “here I am.” This is not because children are somehow more pure and innocent than adults, or that they are truer embodiments of God. Nor, on the contrary, because they are in special need of discipline and care. It is because children most fully embody the demand to give others one’s own new response. Children are at once the most easily ignored and the most morally disruptive other. They make the sharpest command for selves and societies to open and remake themselves.⁵⁵

As advocates, we now realize that the conversation regarding the impact of parental incarceration must be remade in order to stand in solidarity with these children. “Children are at once the most easily ignored and the most morally disruptive other” because at every level of society, people recognize undeniable accountability in the obvious potentiality that a child embodies.⁵⁶ Faced with this accountability, we choose either to ignore the child or be redirected. Let us say, then, that those of us who seek justice and humanization for children with imprisoned parents will seek their voices and hear in their testimony a word of accountability that leads to redirection. And from our own redirection, let us work for these children’s rights.

⁵⁵ Wall, 96-97.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

Wall, presenting three categories of rights—protection, provision, and participation—characterizes the rights of children (indeed, all people) as follows:

Protection, provision, and participation rights are but partial expressions of the fundamental human right to be responded to as an other creator of society. To be protected against violence fundamentally means to be protected against having one's otherness marginalized or destroyed. To be provided social resources is to be given the means for making one's own creative social contribution. And to be able to participate in society is to have the opportunity to bring one's own distinctive contribution into the creativity of the whole.⁵⁷

The "others" to which Wall refers are "irreducible human beings in and of themselves."⁵⁸

Taking Freire and Wall's entire contribution together, then, I propose that the ethical response to children with imprisoned parents is to stand in solidarity with them by holding up their voices as they give testimony to the meaning of their lives in relationship to both their immediate situation and the broader human story. In so doing, children are acknowledged as creative, contributing human members of the social whole who have every right to protection, provision, and participation on their own terms.

In 2000, the San Francisco Children of Incarcerated Parents Partnership (SFCIPP) was formed in response to the growing awareness that children's needs were not represented in the conversation about the effects of mass-imprisonment and were not considered in the criminal justice system. The Partnership says the following about their purpose: "After studying the issues affecting these children and their families, SFCIPP members agreed that a children's perspective was the logical framework from which all future work should evolve. We understand that children's rights and needs may sometimes conflict with, and must be balanced against,

⁵⁷ Ibid., 131.

⁵⁸ Ibid, 87.

institutional concerns and requirements, but believe it is essential to start from the child's perspective and work on what is possible from there."⁵⁹ In 2003, a team of people involved with the SFCIPP collaborated to author the first Bill of Rights for children with incarcerated parents. The bill includes eight rights, all of which were created in response to the words, prayers, hopes, and concerns of children and families impacted by imprisonment. Today, the bill has been recognized by California and other states as a leading response by child advocates.

In 2005, the Rights to Realities Initiative was launched in an effort to ensure that the rights outlined in the bill are carried out in the training, policies, and practices of agencies and organizations that have immediate contact with children whose parents are in prison. Supplementing the Bill of Rights, the SFCIPP outlined "An Agenda for Action" to make the practical implications of each right explicit. While an in-depth analysis of the Bill of Rights is not in the scope of this article, the rights and Agenda for Action are worth review:

1. I have the right to be kept safe and informed at the time of my parent's arrest.

- Develop arrest protocols that support and protect children.
- Offer children and/or their caregivers basic information about the post-arrest process.

2. I have the right to be heard when decisions are made about me.

- Train staff at institutions whose constituency includes children of incarcerated parents to recognize and address these children's needs and concerns.
- Tell the truth.
- Listen.

⁵⁹ San Francisco Children of Incarcerated Parents Partnership. <http://www.sfcipp.org/whoweare.html>. Accessed, October 21, 2011.

3. I have the right to be considered when decisions are made about my parent.

- Review current sentencing law in terms of its impact on children and families.
- Turn arrest into an opportunity for family preservation
- Include a family impact statement in pre-sentence investigation reports

4. I have the right to be well cared for in my parent's absence.

- Support children by supporting their caretakers.
- Offer subsidized guardianship.

5. I have the right to speak with, see and touch my parent.

- Provide access to visiting rooms that are child-centered, non-intimidating and conducive to bonding.
- Consider proximity to family when visiting prisons and assigning prisoners.
- Encourage child welfare departments to facilitate contact.

6. I have the right to support as I face my parent's incarceration.

- Train adults who work with young people to recognize the needs and concerns of children whose parents are incarcerated.
- Provide access to specially trained therapists, counselors, and/or mentors.
- Save five percent for families.

7. I have the right not to be judged, blamed or labeled because my parent is incarcerated.

- Create opportunities for children of incarcerated parents to communicate with and support each other.
- Create a truth fit to tell.
- Consider differential response when a parent is arrested.

8. I have the right to a lifelong relationship with my parent.

- Re-examine the Adoption and Safe Families Act.
- Designate a family services coordinator at prisons and jails.
- Support incarcerated parents upon reentry.
- Focus on rehabilitation and alternatives to incarceration.⁶⁰

⁶⁰ San Francisco Children of Incarcerated Parents Partnership. <http://www.sfcipp.org/rights.html>. Accessed, October 21, 2011.

In the document, the authors are steadfastly committed to keeping the voices of children present and prominent in the discussion regarding their wellbeing. The rights derive from interviews with children affected by parental incarceration, and each right is supported by facts and figures and also Agenda for Action items that guide the ongoing effort to honor children's rights and needs. Most importantly, each right is also supported by the testimonies of children whose experience with the criminal justice system through their parents' incarceration reinforces the importance of the Agenda for Action items. Testimonies are given by adolescents and young adults—many of whose parents have been involved with the criminal justice system since they were small children. The testimonies recount the confusion, fear, anguish, anger, and stigma experienced by children whose parents are in prison. But they also inspire hope because, in spite of the steep odds against them, many of these young people describe moments of resilience and fortitude that may be totally unexpected and untold if all we know of their lives is in data.

The introduction to the Bill of Rights is worth quoting at length because it expresses wonderfully the purpose of this article and the work done by many scholars and activists in an effort to be on the side of children with incarcerated parents:

Children of prisoners have a daunting array of needs. They need a safe place to live and people to care for them in their parents' absence, as well as everything else a parent might be expected to provide: food, clothing, medical care.

But beyond these material requirements, young people themselves identify less tangible, but equally compelling needs. They need to be told the truth about their parents' situation. They need someone to listen without judging, so that their parents' status need not remain a secret. They need the companionship of others who share their experience, so they can know they are not alone. They need contact with their parents—to have that relationship recognized and valued even under adverse circumstances. And—rather than being stigmatized for their

parents' actions or status—they need to be treated with respect, offered opportunity, and recognized as having potential...

A criminal justice model that took as its constituency not just individuals charged with breaking the law, but also the families and communities within which their lives are embedded—one that respected the rights and needs of children—might become one that inspired the confidence and respect of those families and communities, and so played a part in stemming, rather than perpetuating, the cycle of crime and incarceration.⁶¹

Much of what is said above about the criminal justice system might also be said about those of us advocating for the rights and dignity of children whose parents are imprisoned. In our work, we should remember that “it is essential to start from the child’s perspective and work on what is possible from there.”⁶²

Being In Solidarity with Children

I have argued that scholars and activists are wrong to talk about the impact of parental incarceration in quantitative terms alone and in the absence of children’s testimony. As the voices of children instruct us, the disruption caused by parental incarceration in children’s lives is more often qualitative in nature—mass-imprisonment disrupts marriages, education, jobs, families, and communities. When we talk about the effect of parental imprisonment on children in quantitative terms alone, the information is so stark that we force ourselves to adopt one of two reactions with regard to the impacted children: 1) overly defensive postures that presume that “the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree,” which, in extreme cases, leads us to pursue genetic

⁶¹ San Francisco Children of Incarcerated Parents Partnership, 3.

⁶² San Francisco Children of Incarcerated Parents Partnership. <http://www.sfcipp.org/whoweare.html>. Accessed, October 21, 2011.

foundations for criminality; 2) acquiescence to imprisonment as if it is inevitable in certain people and communities because of the “depenalization of prison” and the inability of whole communities to resist the lure of crime. Instead, when we hold up the voices of children with incarcerated parents, we hear their struggle to defy both of these alternatives and to live into mostly unacknowledged alternatives that, for many, include college and successful futures.

The resilient human spirit has the capacity to transform even the harshest reality into one that allows individuals to live with dignity. But children cannot be expected to transform either the criminal justice system or scholarly commentary without the unified partnership and genuine solidarity of adults. Freire says: “The oppressor is solidary [*sic*] with the oppressed only when he stops regarding the oppressed as an abstract category and sees them as persons who have been unjustly dealt with, deprived of their voice.”⁶³ Indeed, to truly measure the impact of parental incarceration, scholars and activists will have to go beyond the data in search of stories that tell the truth with alarming and buoyant clarity.

At my most recent visit to the prison in New Jersey, I had a few moments to speak with Ramos about his sons. He told me several times during past visits that the oldest of his boys was having trouble at school both behaviorally and academically. This time, he told me a different story. Ramos said that his son asked his mother a few months ago if she finished high school, to which she answered, “No.” Then, in a phone call around the same time, his oldest son asked Ramos if he finished high school. Ramos answered truthfully and said, “No.” The boy responded

⁶³ Freire, 50.

by saying that if neither of his parents finished high school than he was not going to either. This deeply troubled Ramos.

From that point on, Ramos began sending his graded papers home to his son to show him that, even though he didn't finish high school, his dad was still in school and succeeding. Ramos told me that he included encouraging notes to his son along with the graded papers as a way of cheering him on. During this visit, Ramos was beaming because his son had recently sent his report card, which included all A's and B's. The boy's behavior at school was better, and his grades were markedly improved.

Sending the graded papers was an act of solidarity between a father and son. Ramos heard his son's disappointment and frustration with his parents, and rather than pointing a finger or assuming the child to be intellectually doomed because of his parent's academic history, Ramos assumed the best of his child, envisioned a change in the challenges facing his son, and modeled a way for the child to realize his potential. Ramos could have taken the defensive posture assumed by many and threatened his child with punishment or a bleak future if he did not "shape up." Instead, Ramos told his son the truth about himself, listened to his son's honest response, and together they worked toward fulfilling their hope and potential.

Howard Thurman, a Christian minister and mentor to Martin Luther King, Jr., says: "The first step toward love is a common sharing of a sense of mutual worth and value. This cannot be discovered in a vacuum or in a series of artificial or hypothetical relationships. It has to be in a real situation, natural, free."⁶⁴ We must avoid any temptation to think or speak of children in

⁶⁴ Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1949), 98.

ways that diminish their humanity and deny their agency. The love of children—their voices, stories, and selves—is precisely what discourse about the effects of parental incarceration requires. Just as Ramos' son inspires Ramos to do his best, and Ramos inspires his son to do the same, scholars and children need to engage the PIC together. When we raise children's voices as the primary evidence of the impact of parental incarceration, they will show us where to look for hope and how we can stand together for justice.