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Hobbits in the Hoosegow: Teaching Tolkienian Morality Behind the Walls

William Mongelli

Abstract

Correctional educators have discovered common thinking and behavioral errors which impede pro-social adjustment. In order for the inmate student to hope to experience societal reintegration, these errors must be detected and corrected. The program described herein—a consequential thinking seminar called ABLE MINDS—has as its goals: 1) The shifting of offenders' self-identification from pro-criminal to pro-social and 2) The teaching of concrete problem-solving skills. Drawing on decades of instruction in cognitive thinking and pre-release preparation to prisoners, the author—a Librarian at the Massachusetts Correctional Institution, Norfolk—discusses the use of Tolkien's Lord of the Rings and The Hobbit in the context of ABLE MINDS to teach prisoners a method of self-restraint predicated on good human character.

Introduction

For the past 10 years at the Massachusetts (MA) Correctional Institution, Norfolk, prisoners have participated in ABLE MINDS, a consequential thinking seminar created by Cynthia Blinn, a researcher hired by the department to develop the program. Blinn's pilot project in 1994, introduced at the North Central Correctional Center (Gardner, Massachusetts), was called "Writing for Our Lives" (Blinn, 1995). From this foundation, Blinn developed a comprehensive literature-based consequential thinking program for the Massachusetts Department of Correction called ABLE MINDS, an acronym for *Altering Behavior through Literary Exploration and Moderated Inquiry-based Discussion Sessions*. The 120-page curriculum contains a syllabus, course overview, teacher's guide, lesson plans, course handouts, and course evaluation.

Blinn's premise is that most people end up in jail due to impulsive behavior. The seminar uses literature to encourage forethought over impulsivity. Prisoners are required to isolate plot points in a work of literature whose protagonist makes decisions that trigger tragic-but-avoidable consequences. Prisoners learn that consequences can be imagined and considered before a decision to act is made, thus making it possible to choose the best solution (Blinn, 1996). Since 2004, four 8-week seminars of the program have been offered annually to MCI-Norfolk prisoners, each cycle meeting once weekly. After 10 years of offering both introductory and advanced ABLE MINDS courses, over 300 MCI-Norfolk prisoners have successfully completed the program.

A perennial attraction to taking the course is the awarding of earned good conduct credits, which are statutorily determined hours deducted from the sentence that each participant is serving (Massachusetts General Court, 2012). But the earned good conduct credit only gets inmates into the seats. What compels participation, attention, curiosity, application, and successful completion? One possible reason for the relative success of both introductory and advanced versions of this program might best be illustrated using a set of nine program elements that, according to the research of Dr. Thom Gehring, should be present in any well-run prison educative effort. These elements are:

- The pedagogy/andragogy continuum
- Vocational education
- Social education
- Cultural education
- Shared responsibility
- Inclusion
- Technology
- Library
- Administrative configuration

While Dr. Gehring recommends that these elements usually are combined in a *comprehensive curriculum* of studies that a correctional school would offer, it may be possible to identify many of these elements within one course. Excepting the vocational experience, ABLE MINDS contains at least superficial levels of the remaining criteria. The one element, however, that ABLE MINDS seems to satisfy most readily is that of the so-called "pedagogy/andragogy continuum":

Some adults are incarcerated because they behave emotionally like children: the literature on the criminal personality is replete with discussions about problems normally associated with youth—impulsivity, ego-centered behavior, inability to plan or set goals, and so forth. For a host of reasons, therefore, successful prison educators respond to each student's needs individually; chronological age is not always the best indicator of maturity....[W]e use the term "pedagogy/andragogy continuum" to describe how the one program under discussion is anchored for teaching and learning among juveniles, adults, juveniles who sometimes act like adults, and adults who sometimes act like children (Gehring, 2008).

In the Blinn curriculum, prisoners are encouraged and expected to do the right thing by the course's midway point: "Inmate participants should be modeling pro-social behaviors and thought-processes for their peers and on behalf of the characters they're discussing" (Blinn, 1996). Blinn's method for encouraging participants on the right road is a technique by which each participant is expected to peaceably handle interpersonal conflict. To teach this skill, Blinn invented a consequential thinking mechanism called THINK FIRST (Blinn, 1996), an acronym whose first letters represent 10 discrete steps of considering the consequences of one's actions: **T**ake stock of my situation; **H**ow do I feel?; **I**s more information needed?; **N**ame facts and opinions; **K**now where I stand; **F**igure out my goals; **I**dentify possible solutions; **R**eflect on their consequences; **S**elect my best plan; and **T**ake action.

Early in the course, prisoners are required to memorize the 10 steps of the THINK FIRST mechanism. To help them succeed, the librarian moderator begins each class by prompting each student to recite the THINK FIRST steps. When an inmate makes a successful recitation, the effort is greeted by applause from the group. Prisoners also receive their own copy of the THINK FIRST handout during the opening night of the course. At course end, the librarian moderator distributes to each participant a "Pocket Savior," a small laminated cardboard card of the THINK FIRST steps that prisoners can carry post-program and refer to in times of interpersonal conflict.

Convicts and Consequences: Tolkien Teaches Toughs to THINK FIRST

One American subculture where fantasy fanatics certainly may be found is—curiously enough—the jail (Goodman, 2011). Prisoners participate in fantasy role-play, read *Twilight* and *Harry Potter* novels, and request astounding works from the mind of Professor John Ronald Reuel Tolkien. Such is their Middle-earth mania that some of these men even know what the "J.R.R." stands for. In the

correctional classroom, fantasy allows the incarcerated a socially acceptable way to pretend that they are people that society says they can never be: someone noble, admirable, powerful (Schwartz, 2010). Even likable. And many of Middle-earth's creatures—at least the ones with which Tolkien's readers most readily identify—are likable.

If you do not find a way, no one will

In 2004, after a three-month collaboration with an inmate course assistant, a 46-page curriculum based on J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* was developed, a veritable exegesis on the nature of human evil (Mongelli & Laird, 2004). The curriculum is replete with 81 discussion questions, 30 class exercises, and a useful definition of "character." Why "advanced"? Because the new premise proves radically different, being more positive and less accusatory. Prisoners are immersed in the Tolkienian universe by being asked to study the character of creatures that make consistently good decisions based on right reasoning. The supposition is that every human being has good character components, components that not only can be identified but, with some good old-fashioned elbow grease, can be developed and strengthened (Berkowitz, Marvin, & Bier, 2004).

Although Blinn's curriculum aptly conveys the THINK FIRST mechanism, little practical application of the mechanism is encouraged. For the advanced presentation, students need not wait until their release to apply the lessons learned; instead, each student must vigorously test the mechanism during the course through a series of homework assignments. The concept of redemption is their theory, the THINK FIRST steps their formula, the prison their crucible, and positive change their goal. Correctional instructors know that inmate students take no one's word for anything; they must see a thing to believe it. By weekly application and moderator evaluations of their success and failure with THINK FIRST, inmates prove to themselves the usefulness of the mechanism in the course, during their incarceration, and before societal reintegration.

Since 2007, *Lord of the Rings* has been offered as an advanced presentation of Blinn's curriculum. Beginning in 2009, the *Lord of the Rings* (LOTR) films directed by Peter Jackson have been included in the curriculum, albeit not viewed until the program's end.

Folk...had lots of chances, like us, of turning back, only they didn't

As one would expect, conflict abounds in an adult male medium-security prison because, on any given day, what prisoners hope to accomplish in the limited time they are given is often thwarted by simple prison logistics: security drills, unexpected delays in movement periods, prisoner-on-prisoner violence, absent staff, canceled university classes, etc. When presented with this assignment, some prisoners tell you sincerely and with a straight face: "I don't have conflict." At this point, time must be spent not only defining the concept of interpersonal conflict, but also enumerating the myriad situations where conflict is inevitable. The simplest way of illustrating the concept is by using the instant conversation as an object lesson. "You say you don't have conflict; we say you do, and you have to write about it. There's your conflict."

The first literature-based assignment, "Frodo's Dilemma," presents students with a conflict scenario—an excerpt taken from *The Fellowship of the Ring* (Book II, Chapter 2, "The Council of Elrond"). Using the THINK FIRST mechanism, students examine the thought process that Frodo might have used to reach the decision to become the Ring-bearer. The results are recorded and submitted for credit. A sample inmate response follows.

Take stock of my situation—The One Ring needs to be brought to Mordor to be destroyed. **How do I feel?**—Scared, but with a sense of duty. **Is more information needed?**—No. The One Ring needs to be destroyed. There are no other options. **Name facts and opinions**—**FACT:** The One Ring can only be used for evil. **OPINION:** Maybe the Ring can help us defeat Sauron. **Know where I stand**—I am on the side of good. I want to protect the Shire. I want to help destroy the Ring. **Figure out my goals**—Save the Shire (my home). **Identify possible solutions**—I can take the Ring to Mordor....Maybe one of the others in the Company will be Ring-bearer, if they can stop bickering....Maybe Gandalf knows something about this that we don't. **Reflect on their consequences**—If I bear the Ring, I could die....One of the others in the Fellowship could take it and make a bigger mess....We do not have time to wait for Gandalf. **Select my best plan**—As dangerous as it is, I and I alone must bear the One Ring to Mordor. **Take action**—"I will take the Ring, though I do not know the way." (Evan, 2012)

"Because it's my birthday, and I wants it!" —The Achilles' Heel Assignment

After several cycles of the course and listening to student feedback to the conflict resolution assignment, it became apparent that a significant flaw existed in the Blinn mechanism: in the heat of confrontation, no one has time to evoke 10 problem-solving steps. This is because tempers flare, with the

resultant overthrow of reason by anger. Compounding this problematic criterion are the students themselves for, in general, inmate participants are people who never received adequate guidance in peaceful conflict resolution. Whenever interpersonal conflict arises, discourtesy is met with discourtesy, arrogance with arrogance, and violence with violence. As such, a different approach to emotional problem solving had to be devised.

Although students are still required to memorize the 10 THINK FIRST steps, students subsequently are asked to isolate the step that has and continues to be their Achilles' heel, the one facet of conflict resolution that has given them the most trouble (Mongelli & Laird, 2004). From here until course end, the 10-step method is set aside, and replaced by the 'Achilles' heel' concept.

Creatures and Character: Teaching Inmates to Apply Tolkienian Morality

When analyzing components of good human character in the advanced course, the word "creatures" is substituted for "characters" when referring to denizens of Middle-earth. The first course assignment—one that students are expected to complete and submit on opening night—is called "Character Profiles" (Mongelli & Laird, 2004). Students are given a handout containing six creatures possessing very different character makeups. While reading the novel (which is also expected to be completed before the first class), students examine the character of these six creatures by considering whether each does or fails to do the following five character traits: **Seeks Goodness for Themselves; Seeks Goodness in the Other; Does a Good Deed for the Other; Chooses Companions of Good Character; and Helps the Other to Do the Right Thing.** Students are required to record one example for each of these traits, and include the name of the section and page where it can be found. At the next class meeting, students must read their assignments to the class. The assignments are then submitted for credit.

Each Creature Plays a Critical Role.

The importance that Tolkien places on the duty of each individual in the overthrow of Sauron remains, arguably, the paramount philosophical lesson in the text; indeed, this was the primary reason *LOTR* was selected as an ABLE MINDS presentation for incarcerated men. Tolkien inculcates the notion that each creature in the tale—and, by extension, each inmate in the classroom—has vital responsibilities to carry out, grounded in self-sacrifice. This message must be emphasized, as many prisoners dwell in a world of self-absorption.

Because inmates seek hope through fantasy literature, there may be no better way to instruct them than by emphasizing Tolkien's recurring theme that *every creature matters*. Each creature in the Fellowship plays a pivotal role in Sauron's downfall, selected examples of which are discussed during each course cycle:

- If Elrond doesn't warn Frodo that he alone must bear the Ring and find a way to Mount Doom, the Quest fails;
- If Merry and Pippin do not accompany Frodo and Sam, they will not have what is required to recover the ruined Shire from Sharkey;
- If Aragorn fails to make the decision to take the Three Hunters in pursuit of Merry and Pippin, then they wouldn't have met Éomer;
- If Boromir is not there to do battle with the Uruk-hai, Frodo and Sam miss the opportunity to slip away;
- If Gollum, in his lust for his "precious," isn't there to overpower Frodo at the Crack of Doom, then the Ring would not have been unmade;
- If Gandalf does not move throughout Middle-earth for thousands of years, putting things in motion that culminate in the end of the Third Age, Sauron will succeed in dominating all Kindreds in Middle-earth; and
- If Sam doesn't briefly bear the Ring, then it would have been discovered by the Orcs at the Tower of Cirith Ungol.

Teamwork for a Common Purpose

Although LOTR contains numerous examples of creatures working toward a common goal (e.g., Éowyn and Merry, Legolas and Gimli, and Frodo and Sméagol), inmates are directed to focus on the more dramatic instances of cooperation. Tolkien's excellent examples reveal the merits of common purpose, an experience that remains largely foreign to inmate students. The *Fellowship of the Nine* is examined in detail, therefore, as many inmates require a further understanding of why these specific creatures were chosen as the bodyguard, counsel, and encouragement of the Ring-bearer. Students discuss the acceptance of responsibility, honor, duty, self-sacrifice, honesty, and trustworthiness.

Creatures united against a common enemy define the *Council of Elrond*. Cooperation is critical to the Council's success, as are active listening and discerning fact from opinion. Further, Frodo's dilemma regarding the bearing of the Ring brings out the concept of stretching oneself beyond the normal limits or, as one inmate expressed it: "The United States Army would have liked Frodo, 'cause he was bein' all he could be!"

Aragorn, Gimli, and Legolas form yet another nexus of trust and common labor as the *Three Hunters*. Aragorn finds it difficult choosing between following the Ring-bearer or pursuing the captors of Merry and Pippin. Students use the THINK FIRST method to examine his thought process in making this seemingly impossible decision.

Finally, in the *Last Debate*, the sons of Elrond, Gondorian lords, Éomer of Rohan, and what remains of the Fellowship examine the choices before them: whether to fortify strongholds and attempt a victory of arms, or to confront Sauron's armies at the Black Gate, distracting the Great Eye for the Ring-bearer to "unmake" the One Ring. Students focus on the third step "Is more information needed?" to consider the soundness of Gandalf's advice of self-sacrifice.

Friendship Gives Meaning to Life

"But it does not seem that I can trust anyone," said Frodo. Sam looked at him unhappily. "It all depends on what you want," put in Merry. "You can trust us to stick with you through thick and thin—to the bitter end. And you can trust us to keep any secret of yours—closer than you keep it yourself. But you cannot trust us to let you face trouble alone, and go off without a word. We are your friends, Frodo." (Tolkien J. R., Book VI, "The Land of Shadow")

Two exemplary examples of agape love and compassion in the story can be found in the behavior of both the revolutionary friendship between Gimli and Legolas, and in the devotion of Samwise Gamgee for Frodo, of whom he refers as "my master." These relationships embody the five character traits above, and help students apprehend that delicate balance between selfish desire and the good of the Other. Gimli develops respect for Legolas, which opens the door for their Kindreds to enjoy future peace. At first palpable, their enmity gives way to understanding, admiration and, ultimately, forgiveness and compassion. And Samwise, the humble gardener/fertility god, encourages and emboldens Frodo at each step of the Quest, proving his steadfast friendship and love in ways both mundane and profound. Without Sam's support, it is quite possible that Frodo could not have made it beyond Bree.

"Where there's life, there's hope," as my Gaffer used to say

Apart from Gollum, the best example of reestablishing one's good name and character in the world is in the sad-yet-noble case of Boromir, son of

Denethor, Steward of Gondor. Overthrown by his lust for the One Ring as a weapon to protect his people, Boromir attempts by force to take the Ring from Frodo. Then, at Parth Galen, Boromir is mortally wounded in a valorous fight against the Uruk-hai, allowing Frodo and Sam to escape and continue the Quest. In despair and dying, Boromir confesses his attempted theft, adding, "I have failed." Aragorn consoles his friend: "No! You have conquered. Few have gained such a victory. Be at peace!" (Book VI, "The Land of Shadow") We understand from this assurance that Boromir has regained his honor. Prisoners discuss Boromir's redemption, a plot point that is seldom lost on those who also feel, in light of the actions that brought them to prison, that there may be nothing that they can do to reestablish a good reputation for themselves. Boromir's fall and redemption at the end, however, is encouraging to those inmates who are desirous to start a new, useful life for themselves.

Inmates also find succor in this passage, as Sam fights to stay awake to guard Frodo as he sleeps in the Black Land:

Far above the Ephel Dúath in the West the night-sky was still dim and pale. There, peeping among the cloud-wrack above a dark tor high up in the mountains, Sam saw a white star twinkle for a while. The beauty of it smote his heart, as he looked up out of the forsaken land, and hope returned to him. For like a shaft, clear and cold, the thought pierced him that in the end the Shadow was only a small and passing thing: there was light and high beauty for ever beyond its reach." (Book VI, "The Land of Shadow")

Miscreants and Middle-Earth: Inquiry-based Discussion Sessions and the Redemption of the Incarcerated

The curriculum contains discussion questions designed to encourage self-reflection, character analysis, and (hopefully) lively conversation. Eighty-one questions comprise section three, "Discussion Questions" (Mongelli & Laird, 2004). Questions are categorized as follows: Studies in Free Will; Gollum: A Study in Lust and Corruption; and Self-Deception and Redemption.

Studies in Free Will

Tolkien believes wholeheartedly in the vanquishment of force by free will (Tolkien J. R., "Fate and Free Will," 2009). Indeed, the unrestrained exercise of conscience over coercion emerges as a major theme of the novel. Questions in this section of the curriculum emphasize the words and actions of the noble

and admirable creatures who are, essentially, those who were chosen to comprise the Fellowship. Through these questions students examine: Valor in the face of overwhelming odds ("Why does Samwise insist on accompanying his Master?"); Duty over selfishness ("Why do Meriadoc and Peregrin willingly put themselves in harm's way?"); Conscience when coercion is expedient (Frodo asks: "Why did you let me keep [the Ring]? Why didn't you make me throw it away or destroy it?" To which Gandalf replies "I could not 'make' you, except by force—which would break your mind"); Strength of purpose in the face of uncertainty ("Gandalf feared that the Ring was dangerous, and yet exposed Frodo to its influence. What thought process permits Gandalf to endanger the life of a friend?"); Honor when dealing with the dishonorable ("Why did Frodo and Sam decide to have Gollum lead them?"); Mercy to those who deserve punishment ("Why does Frodo prevent Sam from killing Gollum? How does Frodo's conscience help him? When confronted by a treacherous person, how do you choose to respond?")

Gollum: A Study in Lust and Corruption

Many prisoners identify with the identity crisis of Gollum and his struggle to remain good and true to Frodo, his master. Prisoners also identify with the addict-like behavior between Gollum and his "precious." Through Gollum, Tolkien illustrates a crucial point about human nature by emphasizing the necessity for those who have the misfortune of coming into possession of the One Ring to do so without violence and without coercion (Book I, "The Shadow of the Past"). That Sméagol obtains this Ring through force and murder must bode ill for him because, although Sauron's malice through the Ring is strong, it also seems to require a spoiled nature of its possessor in which to foment its most fearsome work. In the character of Sméagol, the One Ring has found fertile ground.

After the fall of Isengard, when Saruman refuses to allow himself to trust the goodwill of an exasperated Gandalf the White, the good wizard says wearily, "The treacherous are ever distrustful" (Tolkien, 1954). At this class discussion point, prisoners are invited to assume the truth of this statement in order to examine whether they too suspect and distrust their world and the people in it. Many prisoners nurture manipulative personalities, and have difficulty trusting others because they know they themselves should not be trusted (Cornelius, 2010).

Upon examining this scene, some prisoners rush to pronounce the world a terrible place, and launch into a social-Darwinian diatribe about human

depravity and the survival of the fittest. It is here in the presentation that the librarian moderator must tread carefully, reminding students of the THINK FIRST course focus and the story's fundamental themes of friendship, teamwork, duty, etc. Some prisoners will complete the course and never be able to accept Tolkien's valuable and practical observations on human behavior. Naturally and sadly, this failure to relate to Tolkien's redemptive lessons is not endemic to prisoners, for the same failure occurs in readers of the free world who, unlike the incarcerated, are not necessarily struggling against their own critically low self-worth.

After Gollum is shown mercy by Faramir at the Forbidden Pool, he says to Frodo, "Always forgives, Sméagol does, yes, yes, even nice Master's little trickses" (Book IV, "Journey to the Crossroads"). Gollum too quickly suspects the motives of others, even of those he cares for, long ago having been led through the influence of the One Ring (and his own sordid nature) to be cynical about the world and those with which he shares it. One aspect of Sauron's nature that has become inextricably mingled with his own is impudent selfishness, Gollum's one consistent character trait. He does nothing before weighing the gain of it for himself, even if this deliberation results in the loss of friendship and trust (Davison, 2003).

Prisoners tend toward this type of thought life and, during this presentation, are led away from this anti-social blindness through the use of assignments designed to take the focus off of the Self and onto the needs of the Other.

Self-Deception and Redemption

Several creatures permit themselves to be corrupted by the One Ring. Prisoners are required to identify the elements of their character that make them fail their tests. Just as important, they must determine if they redeem themselves. Questions used to examine these elements are listed below.

Gollum/Sméagol. "Why does Sméagol allow the One Ring to transform him into Gollum? Does he seek freedom from the One Ring? Does his heart still desire goodness? Why does he call Frodo "master"? Why does he guide Sam and Frodo through the Dead Marshes? Does Gollum redeem himself at the end?"

Saruman. "What reason does he give Gandalf for choosing to join with Sauron? What 'choice' does he offer to Gandalf at Isengard? Why does Saruman choose to betray Gandalf, his colleague and friend? Why does Saruman become Sharkey and attempt the ruination of the Shire? Does Saruman redeem himself at the end?"

Boromir. "What does Boromir desire to do with the One Ring? Why does he reject the advice at the Council of Elrond? Is his patriotism justified? Why does Boromir fail his test? What is the price he pays? Is that price just? Does Boromir redeem himself in the end?"

Denethor. "Why does Boromir's father, the Steward of Gondor, refuse to make way for Isildur's heir? Why does Denethor allow himself to despair over Boromir's death? Why does Denethor choose to use the *palantir*? What doesn't he understand about their use? What is the price he pays? Does Denethor redeem himself?"

Théoden King, Rohan. "What part does Grima play in his fall? What part does Saruman play? After he is set free of Saruman, why is the King clement toward Grima? And toward Hama? Why does Théoden seek the sanctuary of the Hornburg? How does Théoden comport himself at the Battle of the Pelennor Fields? Does Théoden redeem himself in the end?"

The Wonders of Digital Projection: Prison Pedagogy in the iPod Generation

After several cycles of the course in which these questions were used to generate group discussion, this information was adapted in a PowerPoint presentation. The 81 questions were condensed into manageable categories that could be used as general slide concepts for jumping-off points of further discussion. Ultimately, 63 slides were created, a lengthy presentation that requires the full eight weeks of the course to complete (Mongelli, 2005).

Major sections of the presentation include: "Consequential Thinking," "Human Evil," "Defeating Evil," "Morality in *The Lord of the Rings*," and "Thoughts on Character."

Under each section, discussion topics are generated, including:

- Nature (human action governed by DNA) vs. Nurture (emulation through experience)
- Inherent morality (Tolkien, 1966): duty, honor, friendship, trust, and agape love
- Selfish desires of the One pitted against self-sacrifice
- How conscience compels right action for the Self and for the Other
- Shared belief in the triumphant Good required for the successful completion of the Quest
- How the One Ring compels character tests of the major actors (Isildur, Bilbo, Sméagol/Gollum, Gandalf, Galadriel, Boromir, Sam, and Frodo)

Nested within these broad topics of discussion are subcategories designed to further elucidate the main points. These subtopics are used to help inmates make that necessary bridge between plot point and personal experience. For above all, ABLE MINDS is not a Tolkien seminar, or even a book discussion group. ABLE MINDS is a consequential thinking course, using literature as a springboard to examine the problem-solving skills of inmate participants, and to teach a method of thinking ahead before the necessity of concrete action. Subtopics include: "Characteristics of Human Evil," "Examples of Human Evil," "Why We Choose Evil," "Maturity (Civilization/Culture/Community/Clansmen)," "Components of Good Character," "Human Values," "The Common Good vs. the Common Enemy," "Lovers of Peace Over Chaos," "Free Will Over Coercion," "Tolkien's Enemies of Good Character," and "Tolkien's Call to Hope."

Those were the stories that really mattered

In the *Special Features* section of the DVD, actress Miranda Otto, who portrays Éowyn of Rohan, shares her opinion of what the story means to her.¹ Otto's fearless words help inmates to keep the story and its creatures in proper perspective. In general, inmates pay attention when celebrities speak, immersed as they are in a prison culture where television is a vocation and gossip magazines their bible.

One expectation of inmate participants that must be corrected is the misguided notion that ABLE MINDS is a "book discussion" or "entertainment." Inmates must know from the start that they are part of a consequential thinking seminar, and any medium used to that end (book, handout, film) is by definition a therapeutic tool. Students are admonished that ABLE MINDS was not designed to entertain participants, but to aid in their socialization.

During the first class, students are informed that the three *LOTR* films will be offered at the end of the course. Students are cautioned not to refer to Jackson's masterpiece as "movies." The euphemistic phrase they are encouraged to substitute for the word "movie" is "educational films for therapeutic purposes," which is embraced and enjoyed by most participants.

When the time comes to show the films, the transformation from "movie" to video therapy occurs simply by pausing the story at predetermined points (e.g., Frodo at the Council, Saruman advising Gandalf to join with Sauron, Frodo

¹ "I think we're living in a very cynical age. And I think this is not a cynical story. This is a story that loyalty and honesty and dignity and courage are things that are more important than money, ambition, greed" (Otto, 2003).

deciding to travel to Mordor by himself, etc.) to examine admirable character components and sound decision-making skills. Although some inmates are troubled by these interruptions, most are willing to brave the story's discontinuity in order to discuss how these creatures successfully reach their goals.

Samwise in the Slammer: Course Assistants and the Redemptive Power of Middle-earth

Some correctional administrators frown on prison employees cultivating and using course assistants. They fear (correctly) that inmates and employees may become too close emotionally, a dynamic devoutly to be avoided. Regarding the correctional classroom, it is perhaps wise to recognize the usefulness and even necessity for a course assistant. The librarian-as-moderator witnesses the astonishing array of academic talent possessed by some of the men in jail. Assistants also understand how to present a concept in jailhouse terms when certain concepts appear difficult for students to comprehend. And even in a small class of 16 students, one cannot be everywhere at once. The teaching dynamic is liberated with the luxury of being able to turn to an assistant and say, "Make a note to make that change." One behavioral theory has it that if you want a prisoner to become trustworthy, you have to place him in positions of trust (Laughlin, 2012).

I will take the Ring...though I do not know the way

An inmate course assistant, "Victor," has participated as a student in four ABLE MINDS courses, and has co-facilitated five LOTR seminars. Below are some thoughts he shares on what LOTR means to him, and what ABLE MINDS has done for him personally. Victor was chosen because, of the six course assistants who have worked since 2004, he unhesitatingly shared opinions about Tolkien and his personal demons with each class in which he participated.

Teaching Tolkien Teaches Me

Prior to being invited to assist in the teaching of LOTR, I was and still am a student. I first read Tolkien's book for entertainment. I did not give the book any thought as being helpful to assist in life-changing decisions. However, once I was invited to participate in the ABLE MINDS course, and had to analyze LOTR, my respect for Tolkien soared. I was able to relate to several characters in the book (especially Gollum and Frodo) and the decisions they made which altered their lives in either a good or bad way. It was surprising to me that my personal life experiences, behavior, and choices could be dissected inside of a classroom. I soon

became emotionally involved, as more of my underlying personal issues came to the surface. Eventually, I was asked to help as the Instructor's Assistant. It was a privilege for me, and helping in the class allowed me to continue to relate to others, as they related to the characters in the story. To me, what is important is not teaching Tolkien; but allowing Tolkien to teach me. ("Victor," 2012)

That last astonishing sentence demonstrates why Tolkien works so well for so long in the ABLE MINDS context. Teachers understand that students make or break their presentation. Another classroom truism is that assistants make course information understandable and meaningful to inmate participants. Often, the inmate assistant gives insights into the text that otherwise would have been missed by both the moderator and inmate participant.

I will help you bear this burden, as long as it is yours to bear

Prior to "Victor," an inmate named "Al" was the classroom assistant for three years, and his most important contribution was the creation of the Conflict Resolution assignment. The following is his description of what it has meant for him to help prisoners in their reformation.

Helping Inmates See Themselves

From the beginning, I didn't like Tolkien's Lord of the Rings, because I believed that applying fantasy to the actual lives of human beings was impossible! I couldn't see how a novel had any practical application to the real world. But as a course assistant, I was obliged to read the book and think of questions related to these creatures and the make-up of their character. Here is where I began to learn that this book and its creatures had something to teach its readers, to the betterment of the human condition. At this point, I used analytical skills developed from my years working in information technology to examine each component of good human character through our "Character Profiles" assignment. This helped me to understand the transformative potential of fantasy literature. From here on out, I went from a person in denial to a Tolkien fanatic! It became a joy for me to prepare for each class, and to give feedback to the Moderator at the end of each class night. We found that I contributed a different perspective on the material beyond what the opinions of the Moderator might be. This "conflict" between us made the class exciting, interesting, and worthwhile. During class time, I helped inject some food-for-thought into the discussion, which the participants could consider and use for further debate. Watching the students' understanding of THINK FIRST grow from these discussions was the high point of my assistant role,

because I knew I was helping them see themselves beyond the so-called "inmate perspective." ("AI," 2012)

Houses of Healing: A Prison-Tolkien Alchemy for Change

The following exchange in *Fellowship of the Ring* between Gandalf and Frodo neatly elucidates Tolkien's overarching theme of purpose and responsibility:

Frodo: I wish it need not have happened in my time.

Gandalf: So do I, and so do all who live to see such times, but that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us. (Tolkien, 1994)

This dialogue, which occurs early in *Fellowship*, is one of the more inspirational in the Tolkien canon and, perhaps, one of the most spiritual exchanges in world literature. Prisoners must learn that, despite the current circumstance of incarceration, their time need not be wasted because, in the participation of their reclamation, they still have something worthwhile and good to contribute to life's grand Pageant. Tolkien's stories confirm that Hope (and need of vittles) does not cease until the exhalation of one's dying breath. Like Boromir, prisoners have reputations and honor that can be reclaimed. Even Gollum, mired in his spirit-sickness to possess something beyond his power to possess, ultimately (albeit unwillingly) sacrifices Self for the salvation of many. Inmates discuss turning prison to their advantage, while resisting the temptation to use imprisonment as an excuse to deny the responsibility of the individual to turn misfortune into good. Tolkien teaches inmates that choice between good and evil impulses is a power that they can use to avoid consequences of destructive behavior. THINK FIRST and 'Achilles' heel' concepts aid their efforts. In the alchemic transition from plot points to personal anecdotes, inmates acquire a deeper understanding of their own character, the essential self-examination to which Socrates—no stranger to prison—refers.²

² Plato, *Apologia*, 37e–38a. "Someone will say: 'Yes, Socrates, but cannot you hold your tongue, and then you may go into a foreign city, and no one will interfere with you?' Now I have great difficulty in making you understand my answer to this. For if I tell you that this would be a disobedience to a divine command, and therefore that I cannot hold my tongue, you will not believe that I am serious; and if I say that the greatest good of a man is daily to converse about virtue, and all that concerning which you hear me examining myself and others, and that the life which is unexamined is not worth living—that you are still less likely to believe."

As ABLE MINDS continues to reach both the imagination and heart of inmate participants, the developing penitent attitude of the inmate "Victor" embodies all that the program has to offer. He looks forward with hope to what he calls "that day when I get to apply these mythology lessons to my free life of friends and dear ones." Ultimately, *The Lord of the Rings's* value is found not in *palantirs* or wizards or rings, but in the revelation of worthwhile human character components displayed by Tolkien's creatures, creatures invented as much to instruct as to entertain. The mindful application of Tolkienian insight combined with the THINK FIRST mechanism—not sorcery or swords—are the weapons "Victor" wields as his own reformation Quest continues.

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Biographical Sketch

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