

Holding On

originally published in *Fellowship* magazine, July/August 2003

It's the look in his eyes that stays with me. Held aloft in the hard cradle of another man's arms, he faces the audience with an expression that has all the terror and amazement of sudden flight. This is the performance of a theatre group at the county jail, and for the prisoners and two directors, it's the culmination of six months of meeting, talking, improvising, and rehearsing. Six months of learning about trust and what it takes to surrender to it.

"Don't think it happened right away," Danny says when a woman in the audience asks afterwards how the men were able to trust each other so physically and intimately in jail. "I mean, we had to get to know each other first. It takes time. We didn't just jump into people's hands without knowing whose hands we were jumping into."

Knowing whose hands. I want to say that this, more than any conventional wisdom about programs or methods or outcomes, is what people who want to help other people need to consider. With prisoners, kids, anyone, trust has to be built. It resists formula and design.

People come in wary, and why shouldn't they, given what life has shown them or refused to show them most of the time. They come in like people who wouldn't jump into anyone else's hands, wouldn't exchange their own desperate self-protectiveness for the risk that comes with leaping and expecting to be caught. *Jump*, we say, we who believe that jumping is worth the risk. Jump, look to another person to catch you, leap in and talk about things you've never talked about before, jump and believe that this time it won't end badly, this time the arms will be there.

It's the look in the eyes that stays with me. The wary look at the beginning; the veiled hope you can sometimes see lurking underneath it; the shift that comes when that hope turns into belief.

"We were so crazy when they first got here," Danny is saying, recalling the early days with the two women, Amie and Julie, who founded this theatre group and came into the jail each week to help create this show. "I'm sure we were hard on them sometimes, because we were all over the place. But these two women, they just got in there with us and they *held on*."

Tears come to my eyes when Danny makes this comment, which surprises me because I would have thought by now that the fact of my own holding on was old news. But Danny's simple observation, his ability to recognize a certain kind of tenacity in the two directors, strikes something deep.

I too have collaborated with someone who has spent time in prison, working together to tell his story. I worked with one person, not a whole group; we worked with words, not theatre improvisation or movement. But still, listening to Danny and Amie and Julie makes me see that parts of the journey were similar.

Sitting and waiting for the week's work session to begin, I used to scribble notes to myself. One of the lines I wrote and rewrote was T. S. Eliot's "Teach me to care and not to care." *Find the right balance*, I took the line to mean. Care enough to hold on no matter how rocky the ride gets, but not so much that the caring destroys or numbs you. Care enough to believe that what you do matters, but not so much that you overestimate either your own power or your own impotence.

There are so many ways to do harm. I could map it, create a blueprint: ways to hurt a child and how that hurt will show up later on. Why go there? some people ask. Why travel to places you don't otherwise have to be: a makeshift rehearsal space, a prison visiting room, a detox facility? Not to mention all the rooms full of hard memories, solid as furniture. Why go?

It's that look in the eyes again. That's the best way I can explain it. The thing in people that makes them scabble to try again. That vulnerable place they can't quite bring themselves to destroy – this is what moves me every time. It's what keeps a man dropping coins into the pay phone to maintain the connection, even as he's telling you he's no good to anyone and there's no point in sticking around. It's what makes him return again and again to those dark rooms of memory, and sometimes when he gets in there with the flashlight you're helping to hold, he realizes something new and you can just about *see* the furniture rearranging itself. The look in his eyes says *OK, I'm still learning*.

When you're working with people on these hard things, when you get *in* there with them in that place that I believe Danny was referring to when he described what Amie and Julie did, you can reach something, see something, that makes you want to keep returning. It makes you sit back, surrounded by

the detritus of misery and frailty and pain, suddenly overcome by what the writer Torey Hayden calls “the brutal privilege of being human.”

Caring does matter. Going on this kind of journey, whether it’s to create a theatre piece or a written piece or something else, does do something important. If I thought about it, I could come up with a hundred moments when I knew I’d made some kind of difference – when the hard wariness loosened into trust; when the molten pain cooled into something that light could shine through. Times when the imprint that people leave on one another, simply by telling and listening, was as evident as a tattoo inked on a prisoner’s arm.

But even so, when I think about holding on, it’s not those obvious moments that come immediately to my mind. No, what I think about are the times when I was least sure about any of this. When the idea of trying to make meaning, or make a difference, seemed little more than my personal idiosyncrasy. When it seemed that I was no match for the old demons of distrust and despair.

The fact is, sometimes the hold is strongest when doubt is greatest. Make a difference? Make things better? Take that conviction away, and what’s left? Some reason to keep holding on anyway. Some sense of doing it because of who you want to be, not because of any belief about anybody else. Julie tells me that one of the things that kept her going, even during the hardest parts of the work on the performance piece, was that she knew so many people had failed to come through for these guys, and she wanted to be one of the ones who did. *She* wanted to be – for them, yes, but also for herself.

Holding on when you see growth or progress or art is easier, because the rewards are so clear. But when you’re not seeing any of those things, you have to reach inside to a deeper place in order to hold on. And when you reach for it, you find something solid and still, like stones at the bottom of the sea. *This is what you do.* You follow the story. You stay open to the pain of it and the moments of grace too. You show up for whatever happens. Just, somehow, for the brutal privilege of being there.