

# **Laurie Whinnem Etter, A Day in the Life of a Prison Chaplain/ Un día en la vida de una capellana de prisiones**

## **1. Getting to Know Laurie/Aprendiendo a conocer a Laurie**

Name/Nombre: Laurie Whinnem Etter

A.B. Recipient/A.B. honor: 2003

Career/Carrera: Women's Prison Chaplain/Capellana de Prisiones de mujeres

Birthday/Cumpleaños: April 17, 1950/Abril 17, 1950

Place of Birth/Ciudad de Nacimiento: Hartford, Connecticut

Color of Hair/Color de Pelo: Brown/Café

Color of Eyes/Color de Ojos: Blue/Azul

Brothers or sisters /Hermanos o Hermanas: Third of three girls/Tercera de tres mujeres

Favorite Class/Clase Favorita: Best - math, favorite – science/La mejor clase-matemáticas, favorita-ciencia

Hobbies/Pasa tiempo: Swim, refinish furniture; dance, beach walk, collect sea glass/Nadar, arreglar muebles, bailar, caminar en la playa, coleccionar vidrio del mar



## **2. Today**

Another "normal" day in prison. I wave to the gatehouse officer. I know him from outside the jail. I had celebrated his son's wedding.

As I drive through the grounds, I wave to women mowing, weeding, and raking.

As I walk to the office building to get my keys, I am greeted by several women who are walking to and from visits, school, gym, work, etc.

"Hi Chap! How are you?"

"Rev. Etter, I need a Bible. Could you send me one?"

"Hey, Rev., you were going to call me for choir!"

"Rev. Etter, can we talk? My 14-year-old daughter is still missing. Can we pray?"

After we pray, I sign in and begin my "normal" day in jail. Much of prison ministry is the ministry of presence - being there at just the right time; available to listen just when someone needs to speak; sharing a simple but direct prayer.

After the mail, I begin the tedious but necessary process of sorting the 100 plus request letters the chaplains receive daily. With almost 1500 women in buildings spread over 700 acres, the only way to effectively communicate is through inmate request form. Whether asking for a Bible, a program or prayer, a woman has to write - and wait. It takes time but is crucial.

I have scheduled a meeting with chaplains in the three prisons I supervise. Muslim, Catholic, Protestant; African-American and Caucasian; male and female - we gather around the common goal of helping incarcerated persons develop a relationship with God.

Sometimes we get sidetracked by institutional issues - timesheets, monthly reports, worship attendance records, program lists. We pull each other back to our primary purpose - ministering to inmates and staff.

"Walking the parish," I feel like the pastor of a small town as I walk the expansive grounds from commissary - the store, to school and the housing units. The prison directive requiring all administrative staff to tour the grounds comes naturally to chaplains. I am greeted with talk and prayer requests, which we do on the spot:

"I'm going to court tomorrow."

"My grandmother just died."

"This roommate is driving me crazy!"

"I'm just stressed, worried, afraid, depressed, angry, ashamed . . . ."

I stop in the housing units to speak with a couple of women about issues bothering them. I think of my counseling as a spiritual M.A.S.H. unit - a woman comes to me with her spiritual wounds; we talk; I put a quick prayer fix on her wounds then send her back into the fray. I comfort myself that it is better than no attention at all.

I see a woman one-on-one in my office before the institution is locked down for "count" time. When the issue is abuse or violence, that privacy is necessary. Her 11-year-old was killed in a drive-by shooting. It is safe to

cry in my office. She can remove her stoic prison "mask." We talk. I listen a lot. She cries and we pray. As hard as prison life is, often the women and their families face worse in the streets.

Then it is time for Chrysalis or choir or Grief Guides or another program. I gather the women involved, keep a count and try to maintain order.

In Chrysalis, the multi-faith housing unit, I meet with all the women over the concerns and joys of living in community with women of different backgrounds, lifestyles and beliefs. We talk about everything from keeping your room and bathroom clean to keeping down hallway noise, to sharing different beliefs about death and dying.

During choir practice, the women sing and laugh. They cry sometimes as the words of God's songs hit their heart. I then greet outside volunteers who have come to lead a program of Bible study or personal growth or prayer or yoga. After I get the volunteers established, it is time to go home. It is not "normal," thank God, to deal with the emergencies - suicide attempts, medical crises, births, fights, but we do that as well.

"The crucible is for silver and the furnace is for gold, but the Lord tests the heart" (Proverbs 3:17). For York women, the prison can be the refiner's fire. Throughout their life they may have been chopped up, broken down like those stones.

Now they are put into the fire, impurities removed. Molded by God into new women, God's face is reflected in their lives. Perhaps you have never thought about a prison as a place for God to do some of God's most amazing work. It can be.

I started at York in 1980 when its population was fewer than 150 women compared to about 1400 in 2006.<sup>1</sup>

Let me tell you two stories: "Stephanie" came to jail for assault when she was 17. She had been in a fight with another teenager while she was drunk. The population I minister to is predominantly young, urban and addicted. Stephanie fits that category. Her mother was an alcoholic and had died so Stephanie was the care giver for her 14-year-old sister. While in jail, Stephanie joined the choir, not because she was religious, but because it

---

<sup>1</sup> Incarcerated for various offenses, fully 95 percent had a drug or alcohol addiction. Of them, 95 percent still have an addiction. The dramatic increase in the number of women is due to many things. More come in because of crack cocaine and the increased sentences legislated in an effort to control addiction. Longer prison sentences did little to diminish addiction. They were successful in filling up the prisons and causing incarceration costs to skyrocket.

was a spotlight chance. Well, coming to church and singing God's songs can change a person, even without intending that it happen.

Stephanie discovered that God loved her, that she was forgiven, and that her life and future did not have to mirror her past. When Stephanie was released, with the help of Community Partners in Action, she received a full college scholarship. I had the honor of seeing her graduate with her Bachelor's degree and start her Master of Social Work.

We call "Selena's" story living life on the installment plan.

Selena was a founding member of the choir. Being raised in the church did not stop her from acquiring a cocaine addiction. It landed her in Long Lane at 16. She began a thirty year prison career, part of every year spent in jail. When she was released in 1989, a church latched onto Selena, literally dragging her to church, Bible Study and daily prayer meetings. It worked. Today, Selena owns her home which is also home to women leaving prison without anywhere to go. Her ministry has helped to resettle hundreds of women, giving them the time and space they need to gather their lives.

### **3. In the Chat Room with Laurie**

Dee: What did you and your friends like to do?

Laurie: Usual things, dance, sleepovers, movies, pizza.

Dee: What about your friends?

Laurie: I had friends from lots of the different school cliques.

Dee: How did that good fortune happen?

Laurie: I could always spot something attractive or positive in whoever it was. They knew that. It is also my attraction to refinishing furniture. I can see the potential. The outside of a table may be ugly but inside . . . . I'm not judgmental. I am a what-you-see-is-what-you-get person, no time to play games or politics or try to please people.

Dee: Heroes?

Laurie: Martin Luther King, although I did not completely understand the issues. I admired President Kennedy. I was in eighth grade when he was killed. His "Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country" still inspires me.



Dee: How was communication with your parents?  
Laurie: Difficult. They worked hard. My father was a florist. To help support us, he worked nights at a highway toll station. He either worked or slept. My mother worked in the flower shop with him. As a latch key kid, I puzzled and worked out my life on my own.

Dee: Young people grapple with hard things.  
Laurie: Middle school years are harder than high school -- Not enough social skills yet. Immature feelings in an immature body; emerging sexuality, trying to figure out who I was as a sexual person. Same peer pressure as now. Marijuana and alcohol but not the other stuff yet. I was on the cusp of the changing social mores of the '60s.

Dee: A young teen?  
Laurie: I grew up in a Meriden, Connecticut, lower middle class home. Straight A's, president of clubs later. That pleased my father. I could not bring home my African-American boy friend. My father had a strong sense of protection. Later when I was in college near all the Kent State stuff in Ohio, he worried about me.

Dee: Your faith journey as a young woman?  
Laurie: The metaphor for my religious awakening is Van Gogh's painting, "Starry Night."<sup>2</sup> I was fifteen and at church camp. I couldn't sleep one night and walked down to the waterfront. The moon was glistening off the Connecticut River. The stars were shining. I felt connected yet insignificant. I was part of the whole created world but a little part, like a grain of sand. At that time Jesus was just a nice model. I could relate to God as creator.

Dee: What role did your church play?  
Laurie: My dad provided flowers for churches and worked Sunday morning. We went to church on Christmas and at Easter. By confirmation, I was becoming aware of racism issues. I was deeply touched by the pictures of marches in the South. The other stream in my growth was the social justice work. The two united while I was in seminary.

First Congregational in Meridan took seriously oppression and racism. I realized I was privileged. I needed to be part of

---

<sup>2</sup> <[http://www.andreaplanet.com/mosaic/starrynight\\_1gp/](http://www.andreaplanet.com/mosaic/starrynight_1gp/)> or [http://vangoghartprints.net/van\\_gogh\\_starry\\_night.html](http://vangoghartprints.net/van_gogh_starry_night.html).

helping someone else. So I brought myself to church to get involved.

Dee: Your church reached beyond itself.

Laurie: Mission-oriented, social issues-oriented since it was founded in the 1700s. The 1960s is the reason I went to seminary. The church was the only place that was doing something about what was going on.

Dee: How did your choice of lifework speak to what was happening in society or with you?

Laurie: As a young teen, I got involved in church and kind of backed into ministry. Not a deep theological calling, but okay. At 16, I decided I had to be ordained to do what I wanted to do – no particular career focus yet. I just knew I had to do something in urban ministry and social service. That much was clear.

Dee: From there?

Laurie: That led me to Hiram College in Ohio. In 1968, the anti-Vietnamese war movement had gained strength. There I was on May 4, 1970, away at college in the same county as the Kent State shootings.<sup>3</sup>

Dee: What is most enjoyable about your lifework?

Laurie: I get to be the companion for women who are on the road to enlightenment. Sometimes I see when the light bulb goes on and they realize they are likable and wonderful.

When women in the Voices of Joy gospel choir sing "Jesus Loves Me," Laurie said, they weep. They cannot speak easily of their desert of addiction. They can heal by singing about it.

Their most important work is to forgive a parent who abused them. Only then can they feel forgiven by God for the wrong things they have done, their hardest faith task. When they realize that with all the mistakes they have made, Jesus still loves them, it is a tangible change.

"My joy is to be alongside when this happens. It is to see them change, grow and become these wonderful people they were supposed to be but instead got sidetracked or pushed off the track by wrong choices. In the midst of an environment that the world sees as hostile, negative and oppressing for some women, this is a place of hope, growth and joy."

---

<sup>3</sup> <http://dept.kent.edu/sociology/lewis/LEWIHEN.htm>

## 4. Finding Voice

Majoring in religion and sociology in college, Laurie was involved in urban studies in nearby Cleveland. She did community organizing and church youth work.

While studying at Union Theological Seminary in New York City, she worked at two Lutheran churches in South Bronx. Again she did housing, community organizing and youth work. At the same time, she began her work as a prison chaplain. She was a volunteer at the world's largest penal community, Riker's Island.<sup>4</sup>

"A friend doing seminary field work at Riker's invited me to come along one day. To get there from Manhattan, I had to take two subways, change buses twice and go through all kinds of places."

After her ordination in 1974, the NYC Department of Correction hired her as a community chaplain to work in the city with families of women at Riker's. She worked with families having members on the outside and the inside.

"When I went to the prison, I felt like I had come home. There was a mystical, spiritual feeling. When you deal with women in prison, you deal with poverty, domestic violence, sexism, child abuse, mental illness and addiction -- all in one place, all the worst issues women have to deal with.

"Out in the community, these spiritual issues that underlie addiction and abuse were not being settled. Guilt and shame are spiritual issues."

She spoke of three ways to get involved in these issues: re-entry, advocacy, and changing the system in the first place. "You cannot deal with all of these at once. I am most authentic one-on-one with people."

As a Community Chaplain at Riker's Island, 1972-95, and now at York in the years since 1980, Laurie had seen enough. These women are ill-

---

<sup>4</sup> At 41.5 acres, Riker's Island is about half the size of Central Park. Eleven miles from the Statue of Liberty, it is close enough to La Guardia that walls shudder when planes take off. It houses up to 17,000 prisoners.

About the time Laurie arrived in NYC, the prison population had declined from the high numbers between 1960 and 1973. It continued to decline and remained below capacity for several years. In the 1980s with the drug crackdown, prison population surged. In 2006, it functions at between 90 and 99 percent of capacity.

See <http://nyc24.jrn.columbia.edu/2003/islands/zone2/Riker's-index.html> and <http://w.w.w.correctionhistory.org/html/chronic1/nycdoc/html/jaillist1.html>

equipped to cope with much, let alone mainstream life, she said. Many were victims of poverty, abuse and/or neglect.

Often there is a history of mental illness. "Women with mental illnesses," she said, "do not respond the same way to prison policies. Punishment makes mental illness worse. We need to treat for the illness."<sup>5</sup>

## **5. What If?**

Few opportunities at prison offered a chance for growth into a more mature understanding of themselves and their faith. What if she could develop programs uniquely designed for women's issues such as motherhood and surviving abuse, programs that would encourage a deeper level of spirituality?

What if they could see prison confinement as a protective cocoon? It seems to be dead time, but the soul of the pupa is alive. It has the possibility of undergoing a complete transformation to emerge as a work of beauty. What if they could envision this time as the chrysalis shell that protects the soul of a caterpillar as it develops into a butterfly? What if they could view imprisonment as the last stage of growth into adulthood?

Could those nearing release and re-entry into society come to lead responsible, spiritually-enriched lives that would be drug-free and crime-free? Could they be strong enough to keep from coming back to the prison again and again?

## **6. Why Not Try?**

Laurie gathered a group of women to brainstorm about programs that promote spiritual growth as well as emotional and physical wellness. These women were a rich mix of different faiths and careers. They had experience in criminal justice work.

Why not practice our hope through religious faith groups? It would make no difference what the faith was. Within three months, they had created a

---

<sup>5</sup> She said that research showed this difficult cycle of addiction and failure can be broken if individuals have a chance to draw strength from themselves and from their religious beliefs. "If a York woman could connect with communities and if she could learn how to make wise choices, she might resist the negative, destructive parts of her life".

non-profit, charitable organization, "a sanctuary of hope for incarcerated women." They named it "A Sacred Place."<sup>6</sup>

Chrysalis, the positive intervention program that resulted, is a twenty-six week daily program. It serves up to forty-two women who live together in a dorm.

They learn together. They support each other on their faith journeys. They attend group discussion and meet individually with mentors, community volunteers. In a generally negative prison environment, they move toward developing a positive, healing and productive lifestyle.

Chrysalis Community women participate in a variety of artistic projects. Part of their woman-to-woman wisdom emerged in a booklet given to newly incarcerated women. Poems such as this from "Words of Encouragement"<sup>7</sup> tell about their movement from despair to hope:

Pull me through, dear God<sup>8</sup>  
just pull me through  
once more, because I'm stuck and  
it's dark, dear God.  
just give me  
a little pull  
because there is no space  
down here  
and I can't see the sky.

Just give me  
a little pull, dear God –  
only a little pull,  
for I want to smell the morning rain

and feel the cold,  
free breeze,  
oh, give me a little pull,  
dear God,  
just a little pull.

---

<sup>6</sup> [www.asacredplace.org](http://www.asacredplace.org) . © A Sacred Place, P.O Box 422, East Lyme, CT 06333, Phone:(860) 889-0150. Used with Etter's permission.

<sup>7</sup> Funded through a United Church of Christ grant.

<sup>8</sup> In Laurie Whinnem Etter. *Chrysalis Community Program: A Multi-Faith Gender-Responsive Spiritual Development Project for Incarcerated Women*, p. 120. Final Project Report submitted in partial fulfillment of Doctor of Ministry degree requirements at Hartford Seminary. June, 2003.

Included among Laurie's programs:

- Prayer Partners with trained adult volunteers from the community;
- Houses of Healing, a 12-week course helping the women with feelings, growth and a sense of responsibility toward themselves and others;
- Healing Arts using meditation, yoga, labyrinth walks and other programs;
- Christmas Toys for children of incarcerated women; and
- Angel Memorial for children who were born and died at Niantic Prison.

Will Chrysalis work? As of summer, 2005, Chrysalis at York has had 80 graduates. Their rate of returnees to prison is four percent, down from a recidivism rate of 60 percent. They return to York, the only Connecticut prison for women. Laurie tells returning women, "I am glad you are still alive. You have another chance."

## 7. One Last Chat

Dee: Laurie, what has been hardest?

Laurie: Facing or hearing the life situations the women at the prison came from. Knowing what they are returning to when they are released. There are a number of suicides or attempted suicides. Not every woman experiences a transformation to hope.

Dee: What important contribution to our church/our society do you feel you have made?

Laurie: Have you heard the story of the child and the starfish on the beach? I have thrown a couple starfish back. Some have been done really wonderful things.

The Star Thrower by Loren Eiseley<sup>9</sup>

Once upon a time, there was a wise man who used to go to the ocean to do his writing. He had a habit of walking on the beach

---

<sup>9</sup> See <http://muttcats.com/starfish.htm> or *The Unexpected Universe* (Harcourt, Brace and World, 1969).

before he began his work. One day, as he was walking along the shore, he looked down the beach and saw a human figure moving like a dancer. He smiled to himself at the thought of someone who would dance to the day, and so, he walked faster to catch up.

As he got closer, he noticed that the figure was that of a young man, and that what he was doing was not dancing at all. The young man was reaching down to the shore, picking up small objects, and throwing them into the ocean. He came closer still and called out "Good morning! May I ask what it is that you are doing?"

The young man paused, looked up, and replied "Throwing starfish into the ocean."

"I must ask, then, why are you throwing starfish into the ocean?" asked the somewhat startled wise man. To this, the young man replied, "The sun is up and the tide is going out. If I don't throw them in, they'll die."

Upon hearing this, the wise man commented, "But, young man, do you not realize that there are miles and miles of beach and there are starfish all along every mile? You can't possibly make a difference!"

At this, the young man bent down, picked up yet another starfish, and threw it into the ocean. As it met the water, he said, "It made a difference for that one."

## **8. So What About You?**

- Laurie thought about Proverbs 3:17 as she worked with women in her spiritual care. Consider a time you were criticized yet knew the other person was right.

**What inner resources did you call upon to get through this time?**

**How did you become a new person, more like the one you felt you were meant to be?**

- Everyone has times when our life seems to be going nowhere or in a negative direction because of unwise choices.

**How have relationships with a loving and accepting God, with a listening friend, and with your own deepest self helped you turn your life around?**

- Since high school, Laurie has connected her faith with her life.

**Have any recent world events touched your deepest level of spirit?**

**How have you grown in your spiritual relationship with God?**

**How has this spoken to a possible life direction?**

- Look up Deuteronomy 15:7-11, Psalm 15:1-19, Micah 6:8, and Luke 4:18-19.

**How might they influence your life goals?**

- Laurie understands that her most genuine work is in a one-on-one situation.

**What clues do you have about your personal strengths?**

## **9. Church Family Project**

If you know persons who have been in prison, drug/alcohol center, or detention center, invite them to visit with your church gathering about getting their lives onto a positive track and healing. Ask your pastor about a local AA, Al-Anon, or Alateen contact.

## **10. Still Curious?**

Books:

Casarjian, Robin, et al. Houses of Healing: A Prisoner's Guide to Inner Power and Freedom (Boston: The Lionheart Foundation, 1995).

Etter, Laurie Whinnem. Prayer on the Walkway. Forthcoming.

Holmes, Shannon. Never Go Home Again (Simon and Shuster Adult Publishing Group, 2005). Man, 16, ends up at Riker's.

Lamb, Wally and the Women of the York Correctional Institution. Couldn't Keep It to Myself: Testimonies from our Imprisoned Sisters (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 2003).

Rierden, Andi. The Farm: Life Inside a Women's Prison (University of Massachusetts Press, June, 1977).

Kwamdela, Odimumba. Journey through Jailhouse Jeopardy: A Good New York City Teacher Ends Up in Bad Riker's Island Jail (Kibo Books, 2004).

Wynn, Jennifer. Inside Rikers: Stories from the World's Largest Penal Colony (St. Martin's Press, 2001). Each chapter tells the story of an inmate.

Movies:

**Riker High.** Showtime documentary chronicles young offender's life for a semester at prison high school. 2004 movie. TVPG. 1-1/2 hrs.