

Open letter to my adult students who are also inmates at the Boulder County jail:

You have all heard about the shootings in Minneapolis, Baton Rouge, and Dallas. Here is a quick summary, a few basic facts. Two of these situations involved police officers shooting and killing a black man. Both men who were killed had guns on their person, though there is no proven evidence in either case that the victims were pulling or attempting to use those guns. The man in Minneapolis had a license for his gun and had explained that to the officer, presumably so that the officer wouldn't be surprised and react in an aggressive or hostile manner. *(The third case in Dallas was different in many ways as it involved a sniper shooting police... though the three cases are all certainly connected by the thread of violence and death due to guns—either in the hands of police or civilians.)*

I write this short letter to you because I want us to think further about the importance and power of what we do together in this class twice a week, especially given the context of violence, suspicion, and antagonism that we see in society around us.

This class is open to inmates of different religions and races. We've had black, Hispanic, white, Native American, Asian, and mixed-race students. We've had atheists, Christians, and men with neo-Nazi backgrounds in the class. (I'm unaware of whether there have been Muslims in the class, or men and women of other faiths.)

That said, this is what you and we have done together:

- You've sat where you've wanted to in the class. I have not observed this to be based on race, religion, gang, or cliques, though I certainly don't claim to be aware of every motive or underlying reality in the classroom.
- We've read and discussed a variety of books, with content ranging from gang violence and its aftermath in Chicago (Yummy: the Story of a Southside Shorty) to growing up as a young girl, estranged from the mainstream due to disability (El Deafo) or difference (I Kill Giants). Other books have covered race relations and strife in the south (The Silence of our Friends—with scenes reminiscent of last week's shootings) as well as surviving the Holocaust (Maus).
- We've discussed these books from many angles. You've written your own creative and reflective writing pieces based on related prompts. You have discussed, shared opinions, told personal stories, and debated.
- It's been evident that we haven't always agreed. That is ok; that disagreement has not lead to violence, intimidation, or anyone even dropping out of the class (as far as I am aware).

Meanwhile, the world outside these walls is getting more complex, not less. Accepting and open relations between different peoples-- both internationally as

well as here at home-- has remained an elusive utopian ideal, or perhaps more accurately an idea to which many are NOT committed.

What is striking to me is that we have succeeded, and we succeed on a weekly basis, in doing daily what I've outlined above, as well as in the following ways:

- You participate in this class in a respectful way, and allow others to participate in a similar fashion. Different ideas and viewpoints are heard, even if they may sound racist, biased, or simply ignorant to some in the class.
- In general the atmosphere has been one of mutual tolerance, acceptance, and perhaps even respect. I have witnessed friction and resentments at times between students, and once an extra book was stolen from a class, but these incidents have not disrupted the overall functioning and progress of the class.
- We the instructors are able to team-teach this class. I believe Dion and I both value what the other brings to the classroom; we compliment each other as teachers, which benefits you the students. We are, as you know, from different races and backgrounds. I haven't team-taught a class in such a partnership before.

Why am I writing this? Because our time together is important: we are doing within the confines of jail what often is not happening outside in the larger world. Many civilians, voters, and "responsible" members of society do not engage respectfully in political discourse, do not hold themselves to norms of decency and respect if they disagree. They are not engaged in the practice of sitting and listening to another, but instead often in the practice of passing judgement and venting hostile opinions on the internet from the relative anonymity of their homes or via their phones. The reality is they/we often don't even live in communities where there are many different people, from varied races, beliefs, and backgrounds.

I am well aware that you are in fact in jail—some would argue that you have no choice but to behave peaceably. But we know that is not the case. You do not have to sign up for or take this class. Once in it, you make the choice to continue attending, and to do the work, even when you're it's challenging or you have bad or off days. Even when you disagree or someone in the class pisses you off. Violence, or ugly, base discourse, IS still an option, one that you don't choose.

So, in fact, you have something to teach or share with the world. You have developed a practice, at least during part of your time in jail, of respectful engagement in a community, in community dialogue, in showing up and listening to someone different from yourself. You have loosened your guard (in jail!) and let down barriers to creating—to being creative—in a classroom together. How many adults outside of jail can claim this—that they've prioritized showing up for a diverse group meeting of individuals from different backgrounds, then reading, discussing,

speaking, listening, writing, drawing, creating, and choosing to share these personal creations?

More power to us, I say. Thank you.

-Toby

Reed (the founder of the group that filmed the shooting of Alton Sterling in Baton Rouge) and his team have filmed killings — or their immediate aftermaths — for years.

During a phone interview with The Washington Post early Thursday, Reed said he and his group of anti-violence activists have filmed upwards of 30 killings in Louisiana since 2001. That was the year he put his violent past behind him and founded Stop the Killing in his home town of Baton Rouge. The organization seeks to prevent violent crimes, particularly among black youths, by performing outreach to local schools, prisons, churches and group homes.

“We focus on those individuals in the community to help them from going and getting killed or going back to prison,” Reed said.

One of the organization’s methods of deterring young people from crime is by filming violent crimes, often killings, and creating documentaries from the videos to show at demonstrations.

His team finds the killings, mostly around Louisiana, by keeping an ear on police scanners for calls that seem to have the potential to end violently.

“We actually create documentaries on murders, and one of the things that we do is we listen to police scanners to go out and film murders,” Reed said. Although it isn’t the group’s goal, they sometimes film police doing things like “checking cars illegally,” he said.

Early Tuesday morning, members of his team — he wouldn’t say who, nor confirm he was present, citing safety concerns — filmed the [fatal shooting of Alton Sterling outside the Triple S Food Mart](#). After police did not immediately release any footage of the shooting, Reed and his team uploaded the video to Facebook and Instagram at about 5 p.m. Tuesday.

“We see a great injustice, and we wanted it to be known,” Reed said. “We’re forcefully seeking justice. This is a civil rights movement, and this is the continuation of same struggle that black people have been going through for so many years.”

By uploading the video, Reed could ensure that people would know exactly what happened. “We don’t have faith in the system,” he said, citing the Eric Garner case. “We think the system is set up where we’re hiring licensed killers.” Reed accomplished what he set out to do — ensuring Sterling’s death wouldn’t go unnoticed by the nation.

On the phone, though, he made clear that his organization isn’t simply concerned with these sorts of incidents. Instead, it was founded to root out the gang-related crime that he thinks is tearing the black community apart.

“We’re showing what’s happening to a race of people that are in a civil war that are also in war with everyone else,” he said. “Black lives will never matter if it doesn’t matter to black people first. If it doesn’t matter to black people, why the hell would it matter to anyone else?”

Reed’s passion was born from experience. He grew up in Southside, a poor neighborhood of Baton Rouge abutting Louisiana State University’s campus, the neighborhood’s shuttered homes a contrast to the 300-year-old oak trees and roar of Tiger Stadium.

At 14 years old, he was sentenced to the Louisiana Training Institute for Boys for two counts of attempted second-degree murder. But, as Reed wrote in the [bio on his organization’s website](#), he was “taught early in life to be a soldier” and founded the Southside Wrecking Crew gang upon his release.

“Like any soldier, he had found his war,” he wrote of his younger self. For 22 years, he lived a tiring life of violent crime and prison stints. According to his bio, he tried every drug he could find, from heroin to meth, and attempted suicide three times. He was also shot multiple times during those years.

Following a car wreck which only he survived, Reed said he had a vision from God, an epiphany.

“God laid it out to me, all the way through, and I followed through the plan that was laid out in my head,” he said of founding Stop the Killing and beginning to film crime scenes. “I live that vision every day.”

On one of those days, Reed found himself face-to-face with an old ambulance left to rust in a junkyard. “I thought, ‘I never had an opportunity to take the ambulance without being shot first,’ ” he said.

He now brings that ambulance — which is outfitted with a 50-inch television monitor, speakers and seating — to schools and churches. He leaves the lights on, so children “see what goes on in the streets.” Then, he has the children sit inside, watching the documentaries he’s made over the years — “To Live and Die In Amerikka” parts one and two.

He said the outreach is difficult, particularly when trying to help those embroiled in gang culture, comparing it to trying to help a drowning man only to be told, “I know I’m drowning, now go away.”

Although releasing the Sterling video isn’t the type of thing Stop the Killing normally does, Reed felt it was necessary in this case.

“This is news, but it isn’t new,” he said. “This is our third killing here in Baton Rouge by the police department.” He added, “In my mind, it’s a national problem.”

Since releasing the video, Reed has spent most of his time at the swelling protest and makeshift memorial service outside the convenience store where Sterling was killed. He’s proud of the scene taking place there. He’s proud that in the wake of something so painful for so many, his city gathers in peace.

“It’s a peaceful demonstration. That’s why we like it,” Reed said. “We are proud of what’s going on in Baton Rouge.”