



## The New Republic

### Con Ed

by Leon Botstein

Reading 'Lolita' in the Big House.

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In early February, I watched 16 men receive degrees in an extraordinary college commencement ceremony. Although there were caps and gowns and processional music, these degrees were given deep inside a maximum-security prison, the Eastern New York Correctional Facility in Napanoch, Ulster County, in upstate New York. Fourteen men finished associate in arts (A.A.) degrees. Two earned B.A.s. Of the 16, all but two were black or Hispanic. They came originally from New York City, Puerto Rico, Panama, and New Jersey. These men had been convicted years ago for felonies that led them to be incarcerated for long sentences. Unlike other college graduates, at the end of the ceremony they did not exit into a new world of freedom and opportunity befitting the use of the word "commencement." Rather, they returned to their cells. For many of them, years will pass before there is even a consideration of parole.

This year marks the fifth anniversary of commencement exercises made possible by the Bard Prison Initiative, a degree-granting program sponsored by Bard College, the institution I have been proud to serve for more than three decades. The Bard Prison Initiative has brought to nearly 300 men and women the chance to study not a technical trade but the full range of liberal arts subjects. The students who received the A.A. studied a robust liberal arts program including philosophy, calculus, literature, and history. One of the B.A. candidates wrote his senior honors essay in the field of history on the origin of black conservatism. The thesis of the second B.A. recipient was a philosophical and literary study of the ethics of language use. As their topics show, these students, drawn to knowledge for its own sake, ironically end up receiving a version of the liberal arts education that feels very out-of-date in our modern, professionalized university system. With no hope of putting their educations to any career-oriented purpose, they turn to literature, history, and philosophy--subjects in the humanities that outside of our prisons are beleaguered, endangered, and derided as useless.



Credit: Anthony Russo, Courtesy Bard College

**Although the exercises** at Eastern New York Correctional Facility had the feel of the ritual with which we are all familiar, one with benedictions, speeches, marching across a stage, and the handing out of diplomas, this commencement followed a precedent established at the first Bard prison commencement: Not one, but four of the graduates spoke on behalf of their class and their fellow prisoner college students. Each spoke about the liberation of the mind that comes from confronting the rigorous demands of disciplined study. They described their joy in the close, intense reading of texts, the working out of problem sets in mathematics, and the struggle they encountered in learning how to write closely reasoned arguments that forced them to reconsider deeply held prejudices and facile notions based in ignorance.

We have become accustomed by conventions most eloquently expressed in literature, for example in Dostoyevsky's *House of the Dead*, to believe that it is in circumstances of complete unfreedom and deprivation, particularly in incarceration, that the character of human nature is revealed. If that is indeed the case, it was plain in this ceremony, in which the families of the graduates were gathered alongside fellow inmates, prison guards, the superintendent of the prison, and New York State's Commissioner of Correctional Services, that the capacity for good is never erased. An incredible potential for good resides in all of us, for it is the consequence of the human ability to learn and speak. In no other circumstance in my experience has the connection between ethics and learning been so dramatically validated. It should not be so much of a surprise. We know from the experience of the survivors of concentration camps that the one thing that cannot be taken from an individual is inner freedom.

The United States has the unfortunate distinction of having the largest prison population in the world. Yet we do pitifully little in our penal system to give real substance to the idea of rehabilitation and redemption. Each of our 16 college graduates had the courage to take responsibility for the crimes he committed. None questioned the legitimate right of society to punish them. While these men were exceptions, they represent a small fraction of the hundreds of inmates in that 1,000-person prison facility who took the entrance exams for the Bard program but for whom there was no place. The superintendent of the Eastern New York Correctional Facility estimates that almost three-quarters of the prison's population could benefit from a college education, but there is no practical possibility of accommodating them. There is little doubt that the opportunity for a real education, not only education in job-skills training, should be made available to prisoners, particularly those serving long sentences. The most proven defense against recidivism is education.

Still, what really moved me and my Bard colleagues to tears as we listened to the words of the four representatives of the Class of 2009 was the recognition of how weak the love of learning is among those for whom the privilege of moving seamlessly from high school into college is taken for granted. Why can we not engender the same motivation and attachment to a life of the mind when there are few real constraints on our students? In these times of economic distress, there is ever more skepticism about the utility of fields of study in the humanities, social sciences, and the sciences, which appear to have no immediate practical benefits. But, in the prisoners in Bard's program, we saw something we rarely see on our own campuses: recognition of the deep value of the pursuit of inquiry for its own sake.

It is not surprising that our faculty who teach in the prisons and spend the greater part of their lives in an atmosphere of privilege and freedom at Bard's home campus cherish their long trips to the prison. It is there that they sustain the idealism that led us to scholarship and teaching in the first place. How ironic that this should take place where ordinarily one would have little or no reason to hope that learning matters.

*Leon Botstein is president of Bard College, where he is also the Leon Levy Professor in the Arts and Humanities.*