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Celebrating Everyday Spirituality



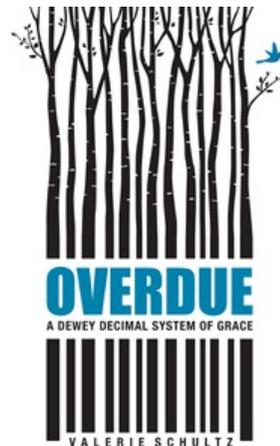
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“Overdue” by Valerie Schultz

by MELANNIE SVOBODA SND on OCTOBER 14, 2019

Valerie Schultz and her husband thought they had volunteered for their parish’s St. Vincent de Paul chapter. But through some fluke, their names were listed under the new detention ministry instead. The result of that fortunate mistake is her new book, *Overdue: A Dewey Decimal System of Grace* in which she shares some of her experiences during her fourteen years as a prison librarian. (Published by Liturgical Press)



At first Schultz was afraid to volunteer in a prison. She had seen too many movies about prison inmates. But over time she learned that inmates were “just folks—young, old, short, tall, thin, stout, bald, well-coiffed, English-speaking, Spanish-speaking, outgoing, shy, articulate, silent, funny, stern.” Some inmates were dangerous, some

About Sister Melannie Svoboda, SND

Sister of Notre Dame,
teacher, student, author,
speaker, listener, friend,
poet, farm girl.



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About Sunflower Seeds

Each Monday I'll post a short reflection, a simple musing on some aspect of spirituality— the everyday kind of spirituality that includes things like walking in the park, slicing an onion for the casserole, caring for a child, studying for an exam, reading a line from scripture, laughing at a joke, or mourning a significant loss.



Along the way I welcome your questions, comments and insights too. After all, we're all in this life—this spiritual life—together!

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were gentle; some were filled with hate, but many were kind. In short, they were similar to the non-incarcerated population.

Schultz creatively divides her book into chapters based on the Dewey Decimal system. In chapter one she gives brief descriptions of some of the inmates, concealing their identities by never using their real names and by altering some of the facts about them. Soon a picture emerges about the “normal” inmate. Normal inmates, for example, have had bad childhoods—extremely bad ones filled with horrific childhood experiences. Many grew up in poverty, had never met their fathers, never learned to read, never got a birthday present, never had a home address. It’s easy to see why membership in a gang would be so attractive to many of them.



Addiction too was a part of most inmates’ lives. Many, many crimes are the result of drugs and alcohol. Another experience inmates share is this: they often have no identity except the crime for which they are imprisoned. Schultz raises the question: How would you like your identity to be reduced to the worst thing you ever did in your life—as if nothing else matters. What’s worse, your awful deed is the only thing that is known about you.

Here are a few insights gleaned from Schultz’s book:

When she led Communion services in prison, she was surprised how often the inmates prayed for their victims and the families of their victims.

She found a “Congress of World Religions” in prison: Catholics, Protestants, Muslims, Mormons, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, Druids, Odinists, Native American Spiritualists, Wiccans, Satanists, and Atheists.

Schultz narrates sad stories of inmates paroled and returning to prison again shortly afterwards. But there are encouraging stories of former inmates doing well, the growing interest in prison reform, of dedicated staff members and volunteers, of the increase in transitional housing for parolees. As a writer, I was especially interested in the newsletter she started in which inmates could share their prose, poetry, and art.

Throughout the book, Schultz never romanticizes the prison or its

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inmates. She is always fully aware that many of the inmates committed terrible crimes. At the same time she claims she found God within the those prison walls, saying, "God was palpably everywhere." The motivating force behind her ministry is something Fr. Gregory Boyle said. He's the author of *Tattoos on the Heart* which I wrote about on this blog a few years back. Boyle said,

"Bring love where none exists." Schultz writes: "I think of those five words as a mission statement for life." I agree. No matter our age or circumstances, aren't we all just trying to bring a little more love into the world?

For reflection:

Did anything stand out for you in today's reflection?

Are any of you involved in jail or prison ministry? If so, is there something you could share with us about your ministry?

PS: I ask your prayers for the retreat I will be facilitating at the Franciscan Spiritual Center in Aston, PA this weekend, Oct. 18-20. Thank you very much!

PS #2: Special thanks to the prayer group (7 women and 3 men) in Willoughby Hills, OH who are reading and praying with my book on hope. They invited me to one of their sessions this past week and I was very inspired by their discussion and their prayer.

"I was in prison and you visited me." These words are found in Matthew 25. Here is a beautiful song called "Matthew 25 Song" by Sherri Youngward. There are no printed lyrics but the refrain is: "You were hungry...thirsty... lonely and afraid... You were crying and no one heard you. You were dying and no one cared." The final refrain is a positive one. "I was hungry, but you fed me... I was lonely, and you called my name... I was dying, and you came."



As usual, I invite a response from you below!

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Mary October 14, 2019 at 6:04 am



I'm a Eucharistic minister to prison and look forward to reading this book. When asked why I visit them, why I even bother, I tell them that I go there to see the face of God looking back at me. I truly see Him with the eyes of my heart and can only hope that I also reflect God's presence and love to them.

REPLY

Kathleen Magiera October 14, 2019 at 6:11 am



Good Morning Sr. Melanie,

I was just in prison last night preparing for an ecumenical retreat from October 17 to the 20. I also read the book you mentioned.

Valerie Schultz is right on target about the prison population. My husband and I regularly go inside to a medium security men's prison to do an occasional Catholic service (when the deacon needs us) and to share our faith in small groups with the men. We see the Holy Spirit moving among the men when we go to visit on the inside. Our witness even extends to the correction officers and staff by simply making time for these forgotten souls.

Please pray for our weekend retreat. We send a prayer chain in with names of all the people praying for the guys. It is very moving for them to see that people still care for them.

Kathleen

REPLY

Barbara Erdmann October 14, 2019 at 6:30 am



Our Parish has a thriving prison ministry, due in a large part to the efforts of Sr. Kathleen Lyons. Although she is now retired, her ministry is stronger than ever. Thank you Sister.

REPLY

John Hopkins October 14, 2019 at 7:29 am



Good morning, Sr. Melannie...
Good morning, all...

Like Mary, I, too, look forward to reading the book. And for all of you out there living the words of Matthew 25, God bless you!

REPLY

Mary M Nausadis October 14, 2019 at 7:53 am



I work with those that are not physically imprisoned, but spiritually and emotionally imprisoned. Most often the chains and the cells are not visible, but

they are held captive nonetheless.

It seems their crimes are; being of the “wrong” sexual persuasion; not the son that was expected; not the daughter who was not expected to try her wings when she became a preteen/teenager; not the woman who could manage her family on her own and hold down a well paying job; not the son who could never please his father; the girl who just had to be thinner to be loved or the man who had to work unreasonable hours in order to support his family in the style they so wished for. As I listen, really listen and help them realize how those chains can be loosed, I feel I too am a prison minister.

The video was so very moving, I'm going to post it on FB

Thank you Sr. Melannie once again for some thought-provoking questions

Have a blessed retreat,

REPLY

Nancy Burlage October 14, 2019 at 10:00 am



That's a very powerful music/video selection... very challenging! Thank you!

REPLY

Kathy October 14, 2019 at 10:02 am



While I myself am not involved in prison ministry, I have a good friend who is. Our parish bakes cookies for them to distribute to the inmates during the retreats. I have helped in this small way.

My friend just posted the following about a recent retreat:

“At age 4, Chris’s mother trafficked him for drug money. He’s very slow and probably should be in a home rather than prison. But when asked about his Kairos weekend he said in a very deliberate manner, ‘I believed in God, but I didn’t think God believed in me. But he does.’

After spending 4 days inside the maximum security prison with 30 men in blue I have come to the conclusion that this ministry is not only about showing these inmates that they are loved by God. It is also about telling folks in society that

these inmates are part of the Body of Christ, they are not monsters, their criminal acts do not define them.”

Thanks again, Sr. Melannie for a good meditation for monday morning.

REPLY

Thomas DeFreitas October 14, 2019 at 10:30 am



Sr. Melannie and friends, hello! –

Sherri Youngward’s song is very powerful, with compelling imagery in the video, and of course a timelessly urgent message.

Powerful, too, the testimony of those who have commented.

Just claiming my seat today. A lot to absorb and to reflect upon! Thank you as always.

peace and light

T

REPLY

Rosemary October 14, 2019 at 11:01 am



I had visited and written to him for twenty years and the most rewarding day of my life was the day I drove this father of my former student home from prison, him having been incarcerated for a violent crime. For the ten years he lived following that day, he was a friend to his neighbors, a help to the elderly, a voice of wisdom to the young, a daily Mass attendee, and an inspiration to all who knew him.

Through his influence my own life changed. I later became part of a prison retreat team and I began to see the goodness in those held captive. The inmates inspired me far more than I inspired them. May we work towards prison reform.

REPLY

Alfred October 14, 2019 at 5:30 pm



Hi I have been a member of the Prison Ministry for the last 8 years. I too had the same impression of prison and was scared at the beginning, but after a while I came to realize, that most are normal folks which made wrong choice. I mainly share the scriptures from an apologetical point of view. Here in Puerto Rico most were baptized catholic but have little or no knowledge of the catholic doctrine. It's a blessing for me to be able to visit with them and give hope that God is with them, they are not forgotten.

REPLY

Joni Dugan October 14, 2019 at 8:12 pm



This reflection brought back my year or two of teaching Algebra in a prison. They were the most rewarding years of teaching I ever had. It's funny, but that's been several years ago, but yet when I read the reflection, the faces of these guys came back to me as vivid as could be. I found them to be kind, very determined to learn, smart, and very truthful and honest about why they were in there and just genuine, but rough, guys. Some of my friends said they were just doing this so their classes looked good on their report when they tried to get parole But I don't think so. Getting to know them and talk to them about much more than algebra in breaks, I was convinced that was not the case for most of them. They also LOVED HOMEMADE COOKIES. We were allowed to bring in cookies on the day of the final exam. So I stayed up half the night baking trays and trays of cookies. I swear each one must have devoured 10 cookies each. So many expressed the "aha" moment when they discovered something in Algebra that made sense to them. I often wondered what happened to them when and if they got out. Some were determined to stay out and had a good support group going for them when they did get out. But I had several that just looked at me straight in the eye and answered by question: "what are you going to do when you get out?" Answer: "just all depends on the cash-flow"

So I prayed and still do for them that each are in the Lord's hands and that all is well. If I had been younger, I'd have gone back to school, obtained an advanced degree in prison reform and spread the good news about these guys and try to reform the prisons which are indeed of reform. So thanks for the post Mellanie.

REPLY

Tom October 14, 2019 at 9:31 pm



Several months ago our faith-sharing group unanimously welcomed a confrère who had recently returned home after thirty years of confinement in prison. For him this invitation was a much appreciated 'welcome home' which he had feared he might not receive. More significantly, however, is the blessing his inclusion has been for our group. The trust he has placed in us in telling his story has inspired the rest of us to share our stories on a much deeper level. I can certainly sense the image of Christ in this experience of one person's shame and pain bringing saving grace to his brothers.

REPLY

Jean Canatsey October 15, 2019 at 1:10 pm



When I listened to the "Matthew 25" song, I cried. Although my husband and I have been involved off and on in prison ministry since the 1970's, it wasn't until one of our sons was incarcerated in 2001 that we became the "lonely and afraid....and the crying who no one heard."

Having an incarcerated family member is not exactly a warm and fuzzy thing so in order to meet our own need to be heard and comforted, in 2004 we started a group for those with incarcerated loved ones called "Families Ministering to Families". As an extension of that ministry, we write to many inmates including several on death row. Even though society refuses to hear, we listen and comfort each other.

As to the "we are dying and no one cares", please pray for James Dailey who is scheduled to be executed in Florida on November 7th. He has been on death row for 30 years and has always professed his innocence. Another man has even confessed to the crime but "no one hears." We plan to be present and praying outside of Raiford's walls.

REPLY

Annette October 16, 2019 at 5:54 pm



Dear Sister,

Thank you for this gentle yet powerful reminder about our incarcerated brethren . Years ago a former student with whom I had bonded , was reportedly in prison. My heart ached to be able to visit him. My limited efforts failed as he was transferred out and then later released. By the time I had a lead as to his mother's new last name, he had died!

I had helped him to escape a "bad" reputation in grade school and a kindly neighbor taught him woodworking so that he won a Soapbox Derby the following year. The interim is a mystery but certainly sad.

Please pray for the fatherless boys, the single mothers struggling along. and those whose path encounter youngsters who need affirmation. All these need blessings for courage to build up fragile egos so these vulnerable never see the inside of a cell.

REPLY

Martin J Louis October 15, 2019 at 1:57 pm



I knew you would get around to this. Thank you. I am so happy for the positive result of living out Matt 25. As having lived in prison for 25 years I can give the truth as to what those who overcome the fear trusting in God's love for those considered lost. It was hard being treated as a crime and not a human who yes by his bad choice got there. Paul was a serial killer and through finding Jesus became a true apostle. I pray others who read this blog will find a program in their parish even if it is just prayer groups or sending encouraging cards. Thx to all who shared.

REPLY

Linda October 16, 2019 at 2:11 pm



I really don't know what to say except that I am very moved by this reflection and song. Our parish has a prison ministry but I never hear much about it. I'm going to seek out those involved and see how I might help I'm so thankful that I found this Blog

REPLY

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