Relationships Behind Bars: Faith, Family, and Other Coping Mechanisms for Women in the Prison System

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ABSTRACT

I study the experience of imprisonment and reentry into society through the perspectives of formerly incarcerated women. My central focus is on how women's relationships help them cope with the hardships of imprisonment and reentry. Whether it is a spiritual relationship with God, a life-saving bond with a fellow inmate, or a deep tie to a family member outside of the walls of prison, relationships for incarcerated women and women reentering society are an important part of their narratives. I conducted formal interviews with eleven women who have spent time in jails and prisons and now live in New York City. I went to Rikers Island, the city's main jail complex, and interviewed five women in jail and observed a holiday event in the women's unit. I also did fieldwork with three nonprofit groups that work with women leaving prison. In the body of this thesis, I examine the negative relationships women face prior to their incarceration often tied to drug addictions and domestic violence. I study power dynamics behind bars and women's relationships with prison guards. I look at how women cope by leaning on each other and forming families behind bars. Separation from children and parents on the other side is a significant strain that I also scrutinize. In addition, I examine the ways in which some women use relationships with God and other modes of spirituality to overcome adversities of incarceration. Finally, I study the difficult process of reentry and the barriers women face as they work to turn their lives around and form positive relationships after prison. Through these studies, I question whether the prison system really helps rehabilitate these women and whether the Department of Corrections does enough to prepare women for life after imprisonment.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter One: Introduction........1

Chapter Two: Life Before Prison........29

Addicted........33

Abused and Stuck........40

Broken Faith........45

Chapter Three: Power Behind Bars........50

The Strip-Search........54

The Streets of Rikers........58

Creating Families........63

Chapter Four: Passing the Time........70

Separation Anxiety........75

Relying on Faith, Day by Day........83

Epiphanies and Transformation........89

Chapter Five: Coming Home........98

Hour One, Day One, Week One........101

In Search of Stability........110

Keeping the Faith........118

Conclusion: Does the Prison System Build Healthy Relationships?........129

References Cited........140

Appendix........146

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I would like to thank the *New York Daily News* and my editor Paul Shin, who gave me space to write about these issues and who helped me develop my interest in the topic. I would also like to thank the New York City Department of Correction for letting me visit Rikers Island. Finally, I would like to thank my thesis advisor Meredith Linn, whose advice and support has been incredibly important at every step of this process.

CHAPTER ONE—INTRODUCTION

It was supposed to be Sharon's final Parole Board meeting. She had spent 20 years in prison for conspiracy to commit murder. She was months away from finishing her sentence, she took courses behind bars, she earned academic degrees, and she even helped lead group therapy sessions. She had done everything right and was ready to go home.

The meeting, in January of 2010, did not go as planned.

The Parole Board told her that "due to the nature of her crime"—a serious one, that is—she needed to spend 24 more months in prison. To Sharon, age 50 at the time, from Brooklyn, New York, that meant two more years away from her children. But because hers was a homicide case, she was told that she would still be a "threat to society." At the time, she was locked up in Bayview Correctional Facility in lower Manhattan, along the Hudson River. Here is a selection from her recounting of this moment:[1]

> I went into this massive, massive unconscious state of depression. As much as I believe in God, as much as I have faith, I began to give in. ... I was so close, and they shut the door in my face. ... I immediately gave in to the dark side. I cried and I cried and I cried. I was angry with God. I even began to beg Him and say, 'What do you want from me?' Ask me, whatever sacrifice that I could possibly lay before you, I was willing to do it. ... [I told] God, 'I needed to be free.'

She cried and prayed for weeks after she received the news. Her fellow inmates, who had become her family over the last two decades, tried to comfort her, but at times, she felt inconsolable. Two months later, in a story I tell in greater detail in the fifth chapter, officials from the Department of Corrections changed their minds. She was told in March that she would be going home after all. , now 52

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[1] Sharon, Personal Interview, September 30, 2011.

years old, might still be locked up today if the Parole Board had not reversed its decision, she told me in an interview at her job in East Harlem in September of 2011. But by May of 2010, she was released. God was on her side, she said. He helped her obtain the freedom she had dreamed of for so long.

These kinds of reflections on incarceration from women who have spent time in prisons and jails[2] are at the heart of my project. I study the experience of imprisonment and reentry through the direct perspectives of formerly incarcerated women. This is a large topic that touches upon issues of mental health, faith and spirituality, domestic violence, trauma, and the effectiveness of the prison system. Here I explore these matters through a focused question: How do women's relationships help them cope with the hardships of imprisonment and reentry to society? Whether it is a spiritual connection to God, a life-saving bond with a fellow inmate or group of inmates, or a persistent love for a family member outside of prison, relationships for incarcerated women and women reentering society are a very meaningful part of their personal narratives.

Within these diverse connections, common threads emerge in how they overcome obstacles through these relationships—a term I use broadly to refer to both human and spiritual bonds. In response to the challenges of incarceration, women develop new relationships and rely on, or rediscover, old ones. Facing isolation, a lack of freedom, intense power dynamics, and separation from the outside world, women are pushed to find sources of comfort and avenues for coping. Some relationships help them pass the time while others inspire them to

[2] Jail is typically a temporary holding place for those awaiting trials and decisions. Prison is where inmates carry out long-term sentences, and in New York, the prisons are primarily located upstate.

fundamentally rethink their outlook on life. When incarcerated women return to society, having positive relationships is an important part of the difficult process of rebuilding their lives after prison.

Several women I interviewed said they developed new understandings of God in prison through spiritual transformations that helped them make it to the other side. Others told me they could not have survived the agonizing monotony of imprisonment without their friendships behind bars. One woman said that the only factor that motivated her to "stay sane" while she was locked up was the thought of her motherless children waiting for her to come home. Embedded in this research topic are questions concerning women's perspectives on what the challenges of incarceration and reentry are in practice. What are the perceived problems that personal and spiritual relationships can mitigate? What are psychological strains that can be confronted through these relationships? These questions are linked closely to discussions of mental health and trauma. Let me briefly present the comments of a few women here to illustrate this idea. Doris, now 51 and also incarcerated for a violent crime, said she prayed everyday as she prepared for her release:[3]

> Lord, I can do it if you don't let my mind go. In the middle of the night, I would hear Him. He would say, 'Do this, do that, go back to school.' He would tell me what to do. ... God has always been my strength, even when I got my sentence. ... My higher power always gives me the strength to move on. I can't really explain it.

In this short excerpt, we see that Doris, who spent 27 years in prison, is drawing a direct parallel between her mental health and her relationship with God. This is common in the 16 women I interviewed for this study. Some women like Doris

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[3] Doris, Personal Interview, October 25, 2011.

overtly draw this connection—her ties to God, she said, played a major role in helping her maintain mental stability. In other cases, the links between relationships and women's ability to endure imprisonment are subtler.

Mercedes, who went to prison at age 27 and left two decades later, said that a strong coping mechanism she developed was nurturing younger inmates. Unable to be a present mother for her children growing up without her, Mercedes provided support for other incarcerated women; it is these relationships that helped her stay emotionally-stable behind bars, she told me.[4] Linda, 50, who has been in and out of prison more than ten times over several decades for drug charges and other offenses, said that she stays out of trouble when she chooses "God's way." She said that she is not returning to jail again: "I always knew there was a God. … I let it be His will and I just stood still. It's either God's way or my way. And I chose God's way—I don't want to go back."[5] Linda said she makes positive choices when she is able to follow God's plan, suggesting that her relationship with God influences her decision-making and her overall emotional stability. She is more powerful than her crack addiction, she said, when she follows His will.

In this work, I thus present and analyze the perspectives of women—and the language they use—on the significance of these kinds of relationships throughout the prison experience. In turn, I explore a fundamental question of why it is in fact so difficult for imprisoned women to "survive," as many of them described it, and how these relationships helped them overcome these barriers.

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[4] Mercedes, Personal Interview, October 25, 2011.
[5] Linda, Personal Interview, October 25, 2011.

The formation and character of these relationships function as a broader lens to examine potential failings of the prison system, which some women say is deeply flawed and does little to rehabilitate its prisoners.

Female Prisoners: On the Rise in a Struggling System

The population of women behind bars is an important one to study today. Federal, state, and local statistics partially explain why, and I will offer here a quick snapshot. The number of women in United States prisons is rapidly increasing, jumping by more than 200 percent from 1995 to 2008—a much faster growth than decades prior.[6] The prison experiences of women also demand academic attention due to some defining characteristics. A majority of women in jails and prisons have experienced sexual assault in their lives. Many have faced domestic abuse from multiple individuals. Most have been through some kind of trauma in their lives.[7] [8] [9] Female inmates have higher rates of mental health problems than male inmates—in state prisons, 73 percent of women suffer from such problems versus roughly 50 percent of the male population.[10] The system also disproportionately incarcerates women of color, with African-American women imprisoned at a rate three times greater than that of white women.[11]

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[6] Darrell K. Gilliard and Allen J. Beck, "Prison and Jail Inmates," *Bureau of Justice Statistics, U.S. Department of Justice*, 2006.
[7] Bonnie L. Green, Jeanne Miranda, et al., "Trauma exposure, mental health functioning, and program needs of women in jail," *Crime & Delinquency* 51 (2005): 133-151.
[8] Dana D. DeHart, "Pathways to Prison: Impact of Victimization in the Lives of Incarcerated Women," *National Institute of Justice*, 2004.
[9] An estimated eight in 10 women in New York State have experienced severe abuse as children and an estimated nine in 10 have endured physical or sexual violence in their lifetimes. "Women in Prison Fact Sheet," *Women in Prison Project*, 2009.
[10] Doris J. James and Lauren E. Glaze, "Mental Health Problems of Prison and Jail Inmates, Bureau of Justice Statistics," *U.S. Department of Justice*, 2006.
[11] Latina women are incarcerated nationwide at a rate almost 1.6 times the rate of white women. "Women in Prison Fact Sheet," 2009.

In New York State, data shows similar trends, and, in some cases, more severe trends. From 1973 to 2009, the number of women in New York's prisons increased by more than 580 percent as the state's total prison population increased by 388 percent.[12] More than 42 percent of women in New York's prisons, as of January, 2007, have been diagnosed with a serious mental illness, compared to nearly 12 percent of male inmates—a much more drastic disparity than national trends.[13] The larger picture these figures synthesize is key: Women are being sent to prisons and jails at a faster rate than men, and as a population, they face unique challenges, notably greater instances of mental health problems and a higher rate of experiencing sexual violence and domestic abuse. Female imprisonment is a topic that is drawing increasing interest from scholars across disciplines, with a particular focus on mental health, domestic violence, and the challenges of reentry.[14] [15] In this project, I study women's relationships as coping mechanisms to contribute to this discussion.

It is worth briefly noting here a few reasons why the study of incarceration at large is also so important politically today. Movements and organizations critical of the prison system are gaining more attention across the country. In New York State, Governor Andrew Cuomo has been advocating the closure of state prisons and the reallocation of funds to community-based organizations. He

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[12] Ibid.

[13] "CNYPC Patient Demographic and Diagnostic Profile, Year 2007," *Central New York Psychiatric Center*, 2007.

[14] Candace Kruttschnitt and Rosemary Gartner, "Women's Imprisonment," *Crime and Justice* 30 (2003).

[15] Giovanna Shay. "Locked Up, Overlooked, Review of Talvi, Women Behind Bars: The Crisis of Women in the U.S. Prison System," *Pace Law Review* (2009).

argues that the prison system is inefficient and ineffective.[16] In a time when government agencies are forced to cut back due to budget demands, analyzing the impacts of the prison system is paramount. At an event associated with the African Day Parade in Harlem that I attended in fall of 2011, Governor Cuomo framed it like this, earning him loud applause:

> This year, for the first time in decades, we closed 3,800 prison cells in upstate New York. ... We're going to take that money and provide it in community-based services so the problem doesn't happen in the first place. ... We need to do more. We have to fight this fight on every level.

To some advocates, the failed prison system is at the center of larger social problems plaguing society. I understood this argument most clearly after attending an all-day symposium in Morningside Heights in September of 2011, called *Think Outside the Cell: A New Day, A New Way*. Speakers there framed the discussion of prison reform as *the most* important challenge the nation faces today. Many characterized it as an issue that has lacked serious attention in a very disturbing way. Randall Robinson, a Penn State professor, said: “Today, we are talking about the most important issue with which we will be faced in our time. We have been a great people before. We will be a great people again.”[17] It is also worth mentioning here that the U.S. has the highest incarceration rate of any country in the world.[18] While these arguments are tied to prison reform agendas, the sentiment resonates for scholars: The prison system is at the center of many challenges in our society, including urban poverty, street violence, depression,

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[16] Sam Levin and Erin Durkin. “Gov. Andrew Cuomo calls for shutting state prisons, investing in community in light of gun violence,” *New York Daily News*. September 18, 2011.

[17] *Think Outside the Cell: A New Day, A New Way*, Symposium at Riverside Church in Morningside Heights, September 24, 2011.

[18] International Centre for Prison Studies. “Prison Brief – Highest to Lowest Rates,” World Prison Brief. London: King's College London School of Law. March, 2010.

and racial inequity.[19] [20] It thus deserves great scrutiny. Through these kinds of investigations, we can begin to explore opportunities for meaningful reform.

Studying Women in Prison: Trauma and Power Struggles

Scholars that study female incarceration have increasingly grown interested in how women interact with the prison system. In my analysis, I am interested in exploring the relationship between women's past traumas and the offenses that brought them to prison. I examine the ways in which women's histories—often associated with negative relationships—influence their experiences within the walls of jails and prisons and upon reentry to society. My analysis adds to pre-existing research on some of the patterns that are unique to women behind bars. "Women's Imprisonment," by Candace Kruttschnitt and Rosemary Gartner, published in *Crime and Society* in 2003, does a good job summarizing relevant debates and theories. Firstly, the authors present some of the distinguishing characteristics of the female inmate population. Women in jail typically come from economically and politically disadvantaged populations with low rates of education and high rates of unemployment and public assistance, the authors explain.[21] Some scholars have presented women in prison, in this vein, as a "community of victims rather than a collection of victimizers."[22] It is this dichotomy of victim vs. victimizer that I aim to examine more closely through the reflections of women who have been imprisoned.

[19] Linda Evans and Eve Goldberg. *The Prison-Industrial Complex and the Global Economy*, (Oakland: PM Press, 2009).
[20] Suzanne M. Kirchhoff, "Economic Impacts of Prison Growth," *Congressional Research Service*, April 13, 2010.
[21] Candace Kruttschnitt and Rosemary Gartner, "Women's Imprisonment," *Crime and Justice* 30 (2003): 18-21.
[22] Mary Bosworth. *Engendering Resistance: Agency and Power in Women's Prisons*, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999): 56.

Research in the 1960s on incarcerated women focused primarily on women's intimate and primary group relationships and on processes of prison adjustment, such as resistance to staff and inmate solidarity. Prevailing theories in more recent years have examined the complex ways in which women's identities and backgrounds shape how they negotiate power while imprisoned. Earlier scholarly work around World War II focused mainly on male prisoners so that studies of female prison experiences were interested primarily in how they deviated from male patterns.[23] There remains a lack of scholarly investigation on depression and self-harm in prisons; this is part of a larger academic inattention to coping mechanisms for women in prison, Kruttschnitt and Gartner wrote in 2003. In terms of this gap in the literature, I contribute here by offering firsthand accounts of mental health struggles behind bars and after incarceration. My goal is to present and analyze the language women use to discuss their struggles and explore common threads in the way they perceive connections between depression, incarceration, and often, the relationships they develop to cope.

Barbara Owen argues that incarcerated women often have a history of a "multiplicity of abuse," which impacts their crime and influences their experiences and perceptions of being locked up.[24] This is another theoretical assumption that my work draws upon. The basic principle is that a woman's experiences with abuse plays an important role in how she navigates the prison and reentry process, which is important for the population I am studying. Recent literature has also focused on the ways women negotiate power in prison—a

[23] "Women's Imprisonment," 23-5.
[24] Barbara Owen and Barbara Bloom. "Profiling Women Prisoners: Findings from National Surveys and a California Sample," *The Prison Journal* 75 (1995): 165.

useful framework for discussing women's memories of imprisonment.[25] I add to this discussion by collecting women's reflections on their own abuse and analyzing the ways in which they relate their histories of violence to their struggles behind bars. In terms of the definition of "power" that I use, I am specifically interested in control and autonomy. I look at what women can and cannot do behind bars, what aspects of their lives are determined by the prison guards and the system at large, and the ways in which others in their lives may have—or the women may perceive them to have—some kind of physical, emotional, or social dominance over them.

There is also an overarching trend across disciplines of increasing interest in female incarceration that is worth noting here. As Giovanna Shay argues in her 2009 essay, "Locked Up, Overlooked," in the last decade, women prisoners have received increased attention from lawyers, courts, academics, human rights organizations, journalists, and even legislators.[26] To some, this growing interest is tied to a growing crisis. The reason scholars are studying female prisoners with greater energy today—and why we must continue—is that they are at a crossroads of societal problems, Shay says. Paralleling the argument of prison reform advocates I mentioned earlier—who presented incarceration as deeply rooted in larger social issues—Shay says that understanding women's imprisonment could unlock the door to understanding much larger sociopolitical problems. Women prisoners are the collision of the forces of race, gender, and class, she says.

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[25] Alexandria Mageehon "Caught Up in the System: How Women Who Have Been Incarcerated Negotiate Power," *The Prison Journal* 88 (2008): 473.
[26] Giovanna Shay. "Locked Up, Overlooked, Review of Talvi, Women Behind Bars: The Crisis of Women in the U.S. Prison System," *Pace Law Review* (2009): 379.

Beth Richie, writing in 1995, presents a related concept, arguing that physical abuse, economic disadvantage, and racial and gender identities can coalesce to "entrap" poor women of color into crime.[27] This idea—that incarcerated females are windows into a much larger discussion of society—is a useful framework for my project. The women I interviewed so often referenced larger frustrations with society when discussing incarceration, whether mentioning their struggles with poverty, systematic racism, or gang violence. Thus, it is important that I examine their reflections not in isolation, but rather in connection with greater sociopolitical problems. The direct perspectives of women are useful here, because they offer firsthand insight into how the structures in their lives relate to their experiences with incarceration.

One relevant area of study that is worth briefly mentioning here is identity politics, which looks at how social structures interact with constructs of identity, such as race, class, gender, and sexuality. Previous literature has drawn specific connections between the politics of identity and incarceration, and I analyze some of my fieldwork in this context. In "Transitions from Prison to Community," authors Christy A. Visher and Jeremy Travis present a concept of "identity transformation" for prisoners returning to society. This is a useful term when I discuss some of the dramatic changes women went through behind bars.[28] Important to my research is the idea that challenging circumstances like imprisonment can push people to change the way they view themselves, or in

[27] Beth E. Richie. *Compelled to Crime: The Gender Entrapment of Battered Black Women*, (New York, Routledge, 1995).
[28] Christy A. Visher and Jeremy Travis, "Transitions from Prison to Community: Understanding Individual Pathways," *Annual Review of Sociology* 29 (2003): 89-113.

some cases lead them to drastically rethink their identities. It's also important to recognize that race dynamics play an important role for women of color. Prevailing theories in sociology recognize that race is a construct linked to social interactions, relationships, and power dynamics.[29] [30] Though race is not a focus of my work, nine out of eleven formerly incarcerated women I interviewed were women of color, and it's important to acknowledge that their racial identities have shaped their experiences and their perceptions of the prison system.

Finally, it is worth referencing here an argument from journalist Silja Talvi, who says it is necessary to study female prisoners, even if they only make up around ten percent of the country's prison population.[31] In her work *Women Behind Bars*, in a chapter called "Here's Your One-Way Ticket to Prison," Talvi says that the realities of female imprisonment are far more complex and underreported "than most Americans seem to realize," noting perpetuated stereotypes of the female criminal. She says that women in the criminal justice system are rarely portrayed in three-dimensional ways with complex social and emotional identities. The needs of women once they are incarcerated are completely off the radar of state and federal correctional departments, she says, arguing that the government and its policies are based in a system focused on males.[32] I hope to address this gap by analyzing the direct reflections of women,

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[29] Michael Omi and Howard Winant. *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s*. (London: Routledge, 1994): 53-57.
[30] Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham. "African-American Women's History and the Metalanguage of Race," *Signs* 17 (1992): 251-274.
[31] Heather West and William Sabol, *Prison Inmates at Midyear 2008–Statistical Tables*, Bureau of Justice Statistics, U.S. Department of Justice (March 2009).
[32] Silja Talvi. *Women Behind Bars: The Crisis of Women in the U.S. Prison System*. Berkeley: Seal Press, 2007.

with the overarching goal of confronting stereotypes and presenting a more nuanced picture of their experiences.

Psychological Impacts of Spirituality and Relationships

While there is a less substantive body of literature specifically focused on spiritual relationships for women behind bars, (a gap that I see as another driving force for my project), it is worth briefly summarizing here some prior discussions on the role of faith in prison. Much that is written on the topic of faith and incarceration is first-person narrative. In "Learning by Going Inside," for example, author Stephen Chinlund, an Episcopal priest, writes about his experiences visiting prisons and seeing what helps motivate prisoners on the "inside." He discusses the transformative experiences he observes when inmates turn prison cells into "monastic" cells.[33] In *Interrupted Life*, women write about their spirituality behind bars. One said she found spirituality in jail for the first time while another calls it the "golden anchor and sustenance" for women in prison, for example.[34]

In *The Spirituality of Incarceration*, written in 2006, Katja Farnden and Jeffrey Stevens write about the importance of finding spirituality in prison, though the work takes a very active stance against the prison system and functions as more of an agenda-driven guide than a critical study of the linkages between incarceration and spirituality.[35] As I will describe in more detail later,

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[33] Stephen Chinlund, "Learning by Going inside," *Journal of Religion and Health* 45 (2006): 4-18

[34] Rickie Solinger, Paula C. Johnson, et al. *Interrupted life: Experiences of incarcerated women in the United States* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010): 164, 219.

[35] Katja Farnden and Jeffrey Stevens, *The spirituality of incarceration* (Frederick: PublishAmerica, 2006).

religious activities—ranging from weekly church services to faith-based workshops—do exist in prisons and jails. But these activities make up a small part of a large and complex mosaic of faith and spirituality that can exist behind bars. In general, I mirror here the approach of firsthand documentation as a way of studying religion and faith as it relates to incarceration. With something as nuanced and personal as spiritual relationships, I believe it is fruitful to hear directly from the women about what their faith has meant to them behind bars and after their incarceration.

As prior literature shows—and as I will demonstrate with the stories from the women I interviewed—spiritual transformation can be a very important part of faith in prison. Research has shown that spiritual or religious epiphanies, in general, are in fact an important part of American culture. Tom Smith, a University of Chicago scholar with the National Opinion Research Center, argues that faith-based transformations are common in around 50 percent of Americans. His 2005 study demonstrated that often those who have had religious transformations typically perceive them as "life-changing" events. Faith can be strengthened from these experiences, which can lead to major changes in habits and lifestyle. found in his survey that transformations are also typically tied to significant life obstacles, such as illnesses or accidents.[36] The idea of religious

[36] Tom Smith. "Spiritual and Religious Transformations in America: The National Spiritual Transformation Study," *National Opinion Research Center/University of Chicago*, (December, 2005): 4-10

transformation is also of course grounded in American history with movements like the Second Great Awakening, focused on spiritual revival.[37]

This understanding of spiritual transformation—as an experience widespread among Americans and often associated with negative events—is relevant to my study. Imprisonment and reentry both force individuals to make major life changes. When a woman enters prison, her whole life is altered. And when a woman has been incarcerated for more than two decades and then must face life outside of the walls of prison, her life again changes dramatically. In this study, I look at ways in which women cope with these obstacles and drastic shifts, and in some cases, how spiritual relationships can play a major role. Take, for example, one of my interviewees Johanna, now 31, from Tijuana, Mexico. The strip-searches in prison—where women must take off all their clothes to prove they aren't carrying contraband—forced her into a mental state she never knew before. "I wanted the world to eat me," she told me. "I felt like this," she added, signaling "tiny" with her thumb and index finger. She had to transform her way of thinking to get through that trauma. She had never been through something so emotionally hurtful, and it required a complete shift in her mentality.[38] In her stories—she also described her major personal changes upon release—we see that the prison experience can motivate transformation.

In reviewing the relevant theory on faith, I must also briefly explain the connections that have been drawn between religious belief and mental health. Faith can be a direct coping strategy for those experiencing significant distress or

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[37] Barry Hankins, *The Second Great Awakening and the Transcendentalists*, (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2004).
[38] Johanna, Personal Interview, November 15, 2011.

illness. Nicole Taylor, in her 2001 essay, "Utilizing Religious Schemas to Cope with Mental Illness," argues that religion, in some cases, is a clinically proven mechanism to cope with mental illness.[39] In my project, I pick apart this alleged power of faith through the viewpoints of women who have used spiritual relationships, and sometimes new belief systems they adopted while in prison, to confront mental health challenges associated with incarceration.

One final theoretical foundation that is important to my work relates to the role of relationships in general when coping with emotionally challenging situations. One of the simplest ideas dates back to 1897, when sociologist Emile Durkheim published a book called *Suicide*. He argued that suicide rates are higher among Protestants than among Catholics, because Catholic society has higher levels of integration. Simply put, he argued that social relationships and society at large influence mental health. He presented society as an entity greater than the sum of its parts, such that a phenomenon that appears deeply personal like suicide can be explained through social structures.[40] This relates to my project because it establishes the idea that personal mental health battles are influenced by social relationships, whether, in the case of my work, women forming uplifting bonds in prison or women breaking down due to negative relationships that are difficult to escape.

There is also an abundance of literature in the field of psychology on how relationships can be important coping mechanisms for those facing emotional

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[39] *Nicole Taylor,* "Utilizing Religious Schemas to Cope with Mental Illness," *Journal of Religion and Health* 40, 2001, 383-8.
[40] Emile Durkheim, *Suicide*. Taylor & Francis e-Library edition 2005. (London: Routledge Classics, 2005): x-xi.

stress or trauma. These connections are fairly logical but worth mentioning here since this concept is a basic theoretical assumption of my work. Ronald Kessler and his co-authors, in "Social Factors in Psychopathology: Stress, Social Support, and Coping Processes," written in 1985, provide a good summary of the meaning of "social support," which refers to mechanisms by which interpersonal relationships protect people from the negative impacts of stress. The authors argue that the absence of adequate social ties or supports—or the disruption of social networks—is often closely linked to emotional stress. This is relevant to my discussion of the difficult life circumstances these women faced before they were incarcerated. Simply put, this line of psychology makes direct connections between social support and emotional health.[41] More recent studies have argued that this kind of support can be especially important as it relates to trauma and posttraumatic stress disorders.[42] Through this literature, we see not only that productive relationships can provide important support systems but also that an absence of healthy relationships can be very damaging.

Methodology: Conducting In-Depth Interviews With Formerly Incarcerated Women Living in New York City

Before diving into these women's stories and reflections, let me now say a bit about how I conducted this study and the population I worked with. I conducted semi-formal interviews with eleven formerly incarcerated women who now live in New York City (see Appendix Figure 1 for photos). I also did shorter

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[41] Ronald C. Kessler, et al. "Social Factors in Psychopathology: Stress, Social Support, and Coping Processes," *Annual Review of Psychology* 36, 1985: 541-4.
[42] Anthony Charuvastra and Marylene Cloitre. "Social Bonds and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder," *Annual Review of Psychology* 59, 2008: 301.

interviews with five women in jail at Rikers Island in the Bronx (see Appendix Figure 2 for map). I interviewed four advocates (who have not been incarcerated) from nonprofit groups that work with female prisoners.

I worked primarily with three New York City nonprofit organizations that provide services for formerly incarcerated women. One group, Hour Children, based in Long Island City, Queens, provides a wide spectrum of services for women leaving prison, including housing, food, employment training, and mentoring. Hour Children, founded in 1986, now runs five residencies that house approximately 60 families each year, and it is in the process of expanding its housing in Queens.[43] [44] A second organization, STEPS to End Family Violence, run by the Edwin Gould Services for Children and Families, has an array of initiatives focused on strengthening family health. STEPS, which is based in East Harlem, has programs dedicated to abuse prevention, clinical services, teen accountability, alternatives to incarceration, and reentry. The reentry program, which is now led by Sharon —whose story I began earlier—offers women counseling and refers them to housing and employment opportunities. Organizers from STEPS also lead workshops inside some of the New York jails and prisons.[45] It was through this organization I got the idea for my project. The third organization I worked with is called Women on the Rise Telling HerStory, or WORTH. This group, also based in East Harlem, is an association of currently and formerly incarcerated women who work together in support and mentoring

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[43] Sam Levin, "Queens group builds housing and new lives for former inmates," *New York Daily News*, November 8, 2011.
[44] "History," *Hour Children*, hourchildren.net/wordpress/?page_id=37, accessed November, 2011.
[45] "STEPS to End Family Violence," *Edwin Gould Services for Children and Families*, http://www.egscf.org/services/steps/, accessed November, 2011.

groups. In addition to its social service work—helping women find housing and jobs and running group workshops—WORTH also does advocacy work related to prison policy initiatives.[46]

These three organizations connected me to formerly incarcerated women involved in their programs either as fulltime staff, as regular members, or as occasional participants. I interviewed five women from Hour Children, four women from WORTH, and two women from STEPS. Let me say a bit about the demographics of these women and some shared characteristics. Seven of these women are black, two are Hispanic and two, who are sisters, are white. All eleven women now live in New York City, either in Brooklyn, Queens, or upper Manhattan. Eight of these women were born or spent parts of their childhood in the city, one spent most of her life in Minneapolis, one grew up in Florida, and one is a Mexican immigrant. Their interactions with the criminal justice system cover a wide range of experiences. Doris spent the most time behind bars—27 consecutive years for second-degree murder. The shortest prison stay of the eleven women was around one year for an assault charge. Most were sentenced for drug-related charges. Except for one woman who served most of her time in Florida and later ended up in New York City, all of these women were incarcerated in the women's units of local correctional facilities in the city and state, including Rikers Island, Taconic, Bayview, and Bedford. In terms of their backgrounds, nine of these women have been victims of some kind of violence or domestic abuse, typically from family members or romantic partners. All have

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[46] "Who We Are," *Women on the Rise Telling HerStory*, http://www.womenontherise-worth.org/, accessed November, 2011.

some kind of experience with drug abuse and addiction. The women have been out of prison from a range of just a few months to nearly two decades. The women I interviewed in Rikers—during a Thanksgiving event run by STEPS—were all in jail for no more than a year for assault, theft, or drug charges.

Let me briefly overview how I chose these women and discuss a few of the limitations of this group in terms of my research. Generally, I interviewed women who were willing to tell their stories and let me record our conversations. In most cases, the women I spoke to were ones that organizers recommended to me. I also met several of these women at a WORTH fundraiser in Harlem in October of 2011.[47] I was in contact with around 20 women total and ultimately interviewed the ones who were available to talk during the timeframe of my research.

It is important to note that these women, because they are all interacting in some capacity with these nonprofit groups, are not necessarily representative of the average experiences of formerly incarcerated New York City women. Because they are receiving support from these agencies, they generally are not struggling with drug addiction relapses and are not reoffending. Six of them, though, have been in and out of prison at least twice. (Three years after release from New York's prisons in 2003, the recidivism rate for women is about 30 percent compared to 40 percent in men).[48] Now, most have found some kind of temporary housing and job or are in school. They are relatively stable. For women who have histories of domestic violence, it can be particularly crucial to find a

[47] Women on the Rise Telling HerStory Annual Sisterhood Celebration, at the Dwyer Cultural Center in Harlem, October 20, 2011.
[48] "Women in Prison Fact Sheet," *Women in Prison Project of Correctional Association of New York*, 2009.

new safe environment in which they can move their lives forward in a positive direction when returning from prison.[49] The women I interviewed thus have overcome, or are in the process of overcoming, these most difficult obstacles of reentry. All of them have been or are currently enrolled in some kind of educational program, and at least three of them said they hope to write books about their experiences. This is not necessarily a drawback to my research; because these women are more stable, perhaps they could talk more articulately and could reflect with greater nuance. It is, however, important to mention, since women leaving prison can be in far worse situations than the ones I interviewed.

For the formal interviews, I sat down with each woman one-on-one and recorded the conversations, which lasted anywhere from half an hour to two hours. They were not rigidly structured. In most cases, I let women tell me stories of their lives and the situations that led them to jail. I heard about women's impressions of being incarcerated—the most challenging moments, how they overcame them. We discussed the process of reentry and the obstacles they faced upon release. I asked them for their impressions on the prison system and how they would reform it. The topic of their spiritual and personal relationships came up organically in most conversations.

Most often, I spoke with women on site at their respective organizations. At Hour Children, I met with women at the organization's Hour Working Women Program site. It is a homey one-room site on the ground floor of a Long Island City building with windows looking out to the sidewalk. There are large photos of women posing with their children on white backgrounds lining the wall. There

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[49] Sister Mary Nerney, founder of STEPS, Personal Interview, November 1, 2011.

are about a dozen computers at desks in the room. It is a welcoming environment where I noticed, on several occasions, women sometimes pop in unannounced to say hello. At Women on the Rise Telling HerStory, members walk up one flight of stairs to a large room with a kitchen that feels more like a private residence than an official headquarters. Women come in and use the kitchen or sit at a large table at the center of the main room. There are motivational quotes and goals written on construction paper posted on the walls. There is even a crib in a back room where one staffer brings her child. STEPS has more of a traditional office setup with cubicles.

This work is the product of analyzing dozens of hours of recording and sifting through pages of notes produced while visiting these field sites. There are a few theoretical ideas I would like to briefly outline here that played an important role in synthesizing this work from my field research. This work is composed as an ethnography, in which I function as a "participant observer," meaning one who watches and observes, but also, unavoidably perhaps, participates. As Herbert Gans wrote in 1982, a "participant observer" is someone who gains entry to a place and is simultaneously researching, observing, and participating—to varying degrees along a spectrum.[50] In this case, I observed and interacted simultaneously. I took notes on the behaviors and mannerisms of those I spoke with, and though I did not *actively* participate in the way some ethnographers do, I certainly chatted casually with the women, had in-depth conversations, told them about myself, sometimes helped with a quick task if they

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[50] Herbert Gans. "The Participant Observer as a Human Being: Observations on the Personal Aspects of Fieldwork," *Field research: a source book and field manual*, 1982, 80-93.

needed it, etc. In synthesizing this work, I have paid close attention to this and try to openly discuss my involvement in the situations and people I studied.

The Ethnographer: Journalist and Native New Yorker

"You don't look like someone who was in prison for 20 years. You look totally sane!" This is perhaps one of the more offensive remarks Sharon , the former inmate who served 20 years, said she hears on a frequent basis now that she is out of prison. She discussed this with me in our interview in her East Harlem office where she now works as a reentry specialist for STEPS.[51] As we discussed the issues of stigma surrounding incarcerated women, I began to think much more seriously about my own biases in approaching interviews and the topic of female incarceration in general. Here I want to briefly outline my background and relevant perspectives and biases.

The rude statement Sharon described is not something I would have initially considered offensive, I must admit. My background is in journalism. I reported for the *New York Daily News* from the summer of 2010 to December of 2011. I met Sharon when I was working on an article for the *Daily News* about one of her colleagues at STEPS organizing a book drive for women at Rikers Island.[52] It was a lighter feature compared to my typical assignments; I usually reported on breaking news and crime, often in the outer boroughs. In my time at the *Daily News*, my editors have sent me dozens of times to primarily black and Hispanic public housing projects in neighborhoods like East New York and South

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[51] Sharon, Personal Interview, September 30, 2011.

[52] Sam Levin, "Donations of books and letters to Rikers Island helping female inmates cope with jail time," *New York Daily News*, July 14, 2011.

Jamaica with high crime rates. My unconscious, or somewhat conscious, assumption when I study crime and prison is that the participants have come from these kinds of inner-city environments plagued by violence in predominantly poor, minority communities. With these kinds of assumptions, I might expect a woman raised in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn, who had been incarcerated for 20 years for conspiring to murder her partner, to perhaps look "less sane" than Sharon appeared in our first in-person encounter.

My experiences in so-called "bad neighborhoods," like where Sharon grew up, have certainly informed my perceptions of these areas. At one housing project on a Sunday morning in Brooklyn, for example, a *Daily News* photographer and I were taunted by neighborhood residents and forced to leave a crime scene after one man began throwing rocks at us. Because of these kinds of experiences, albeit rarely that stressful, I did instinctively assume in the beginning that the women I interviewed who have served time for serious crimes, came from similar kinds of hostile environments. This ties into a larger initial bias of mine—assuming I even have a broad understanding of the demographics of New York City women who end up in jail for serious crimes. The fact is I don't. I have not, prior to this, done research on what leads women in New York City to incarceration or the difficulties of escaping drug addictions or abusive relationships. I have worked hard in the process of researching and writing this project to throw these kinds of assumptions out the window and let the women speak for themselves.

As a native New Yorker raised by liberal parents, my perspective on the punitive system and American practices of incarceration are important to consider as well. As a student at Columbia University, a clear majority of the

classmates and academics I encounter have liberal leanings. What this means for my project is I have frequently interacted with individuals who strongly criticize the criminal justice system as one that fails to rehabilitate criminals and also wastes shocking amounts of public dollars. These biases are at the heart of local events I have covered for the *Daily News*—the speech by New York Governor Andrew Cuomo on shutting down prisons or a rally pushing a bill that would limit federal authorities' access to Rikers Island inmates.[53] I have been exposed to a way of thinking that presents our jail system as a dehumanizing force failing on nearly all fronts. A central objective of this project is of course to try to understand the experience of incarceration and reentry through the voices of these women directly. This means that a critical stance that accuses the prison system of taking away individuals' voices is certainly relevant. Still, there are opposing views that support our system, and some of the women I spoke to even said that jail-time was productive for them. In this study, I have tried to be cognizant of these influences on my perspectives.

When I first came into Sharon's office, I had with me a few jotted notes of topics I was hoping to touch upon, including: "trauma," the "biggest challenges," "problems unique to women," etc. I was there to have a longer conversation with her for my thesis, but I was also there to finish up a profile feature I was writing for the *Daily News*. I am an aspiring journalist, and throughout this project, I have reminded myself that a reporter's objectives are different than that of a sociologist completing an ethnography. When I entered Sharon's office, one of

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[53] Sam Levin, "City Council crafts bill to protect immigrants from deportation at Rikers Island," *New York Daily News*, October 2, 2011.

my main objectives as a *Daily News* reporter, was to get snappy quotes about a few different broad topics that I assumed would be relevant for my short feature. These goals do not always align with the objectives of really listening to someone, hearing her story and following up with thoughtful questions. My bias as a journalist, then, is that I am frequently in search of the printable story and not necessarily the nuanced, complex perspectives at the heart of fieldwork. Additionally, my role as a *Daily News* reporter sometimes complicated my relationship with sources since I had met many of them as a reporter first. In some cases, interviewees hoped that their conversations with me could lead to publicity for their organizations. I addressed this by clearly stating my goals as a Columbia student conducting thesis research at the start of interviews.

Roadmap

What follows are the stories of the primary eleven women I interviewed interwoven into a larger analysis of female prisoners and their most important relationships behind bars and after incarceration. This project is broken up into five chapters examining key sub-issues, loosely organized in parallel to a woman's path from arrest to conviction to prison time to release. In the second chapter, "Life Before Prison," I explore the circumstances these women faced before they were convicted and sentenced. I look at some common patterns in their experiences and family backgrounds, and how they struggled through negative, harmful relationships shaped by drug addictions and domestic violence. In Chapter 3, "Power Behind Bars," I discuss the issue of retraumatization in prison, referring to the ways in which the prison experience can trigger memories of past violence. Strip-searches or abusive guards, for example, often remind women of

abusive partners and can lead to mental breakdowns. I also explore community dynamics behind bars and bonds that form in response to these power struggles. In Chapter 4, "Passing the Time," I examine women's perspectives on day-to-day life behind bars and the roles of spirituality in helping women get through their sentences. In that chapter, I also dissect the impact of women's separation from family members while incarcerated; many in my study left multiple young children behind when they went to prison. In the final chapter, "Coming Home," I study the reentry process by examining how relationships they developed behind bars evolved on the other side. I also look at the barriers women faced in the important step of establishing positive relationships when they were released from prison.

I would like to here give proper thanks to Sharon, who gave me the idea for the focus of my research. She was the first formerly incarcerated woman I interviewed and at the end of our lengthy chat, I asked her what *she* would write about for this kind of project. She said spirituality and incarceration are closely linked and thought it would make for a great paper. It stuck. Since that first interview, my topic has expanded into one that examines not only spiritual relationships but also the human connections that are so important to incarcerated women—another area that she helped illustrate for me in great detail by sharing stories about her relationships behind bars.

I think it is appropriate then that I end this introduction with Sharon's words on the topic. Again, I will describe her reentry story in greater detail later, but the Parole Board's reversed decision in 2010 to release her on time was nothing short of an act of God to Sharon. She said to me in our interview, in tears

at this point in the story: “A miracle happened—because that’s what that was.” It was a miracle that today reminds Sharon of the great power of faith for women behind bars and maintaining a relationship with a higher power. As she put it, “I tell people all the time, if you don’t believe in miracles, if you don’t believe in God, listen to some of the stories of people that have been incarcerated.”

CHAPTER TWO—LIFE BEFORE PRISON

Sigrid ran away from home at age 17. She had been dating a guy at her job at a nursing home where she was working part-time. “He said he wanted to marry me, and he actually bought me a ring,” she recalled in an interview. But he was old-fashioned and wanted her parents’ permission first. Sigrid’s parents, though, were very strict and had forbidden her from even dating. Their relationship had been a secret. “My mother made me feel smaller than an ant,” Sigrid told me, recalling her mom’s reaction to their plan to marry. “It got to the point where I just, I dunno, I was thinking crazy thoughts.”

Given her family situation, it seems she had good reasons to think “crazy” thoughts. Her father was very abusive. When she was 7 years old—living in Minneapolis, Minnesota at the time—she watched in horror as her father beat her mother to the ground when Sigrid was getting ready to go to school one day. (It was one of the first memories she brought up when I asked her an open-ended question about her childhood). He threatened to kill Sigrid’s mother, and the threat seemed real—he had a gun. When she was 14 or 15 years old, she witnessed her older brother, once a role model to her, beating up her mother at a house party. She tried to defend her mother at the time, but couldn’t. After her mother physically recovered from the incident, both her mother and her brother pretended it never happened. She lived in fear of her parents, who she said were both abusive and struggled with alcoholism.

So when Sigrid’s mother told her she could not get married, things unraveled quickly. She ran away from home and began living with a friend. It didn’t last. Her brother and a cousin somehow tracked her down and armed with

weapons, forced her to come home to her mother. "She just turned her back to me and she said, 'This is how you're living? You go live with your brother.' I wasn't allowed to take anything with me, nothing," she said. Her stay with her brother didn't last for more than a week. She recalled:

> This is the brother that I so-called admired. Drinking, smoking, shooting [drugs], popping pills—you name it. Anything that got you outside of yourself, my brother was doing. So I didn't stay there. I left. I was running the streets. I was, I dunno, I thought that was the life. But then I was like, God, I want to go back home and I knew my mother wasn't having it. I was living on the streets, living from there to there...I was selling my butt at an early age. I was prostituting at a very early age.[54]

At age 17, she was pregnant. She didn't talk to her mother for most of her pregnancy, but after a grueling 17 hours of labor, her mother, who happened to be working as a nurse at the hospital at the time of her delivery, came to her estranged daughter and took her baby son away—without Sigrid's permission. On her 21st birthday, she tried snorting cocaine with her sister. Soon, she became addicted to crack. She entered into a 13-year relationship with an abusive man. "He beat me. He beat me for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. And I didn't know why," she said. "I was with that man for 13 years and my children saw that."

In her 20s, she began forging checks as a way to make quick cash. It landed her in jail for the first time when she was around 26, which led her to a nine-month sentence in Minneapolis. She spiraled out of control with forgery and, in an effort to avoid a harsh sentence, managed to escape to New York City in 1997—which she quickly found to be a "drug paradise." From 1997 to 2010, Sigrid estimates that she was in and out of jail a dozen times, with the longest stay being nearly two consecutive years.

[54] Sigrid. Personal Interview, November 8, 2011.

This obviously provides a very cursory look into the life of Sigrid, now 50 and out of jail, living in Astoria, Queens. When we sat down for an interview in a conference room at Hour Children in Long Island City, Queens, she was eager to tell her story. I started by asking her to tell me a bit about the circumstances that she thought led her on the path to drug abuse and incarceration, and she volunteered many of these snapshots of rough memories from her childhood and young adulthood. Drug abuse and physical violence were constant in her life for decades. Interestingly, though, her very first response to my question was a story from her elementary school about a strict teacher who wouldn't let her use the bathroom when she was six years old. She remembers the embarrassment of soiling her pants, segueing into a discussion of her parents, whose punishment she feared greatly. It was a roundabout way to begin discussing her difficult childhood and family life, but I found it particularly revealing. In an article called, "Caught Up in the System: How Women Who Have Been Incarcerated Negotiate Power," author Alexandria Mageehon discusses how women's histories of abuse and addiction tie to larger feelings of a lack of control of others and themselves. Their experiences with power brokers within the prison institutions and outside of the system impact them psychologically and emotionally.[55] I saw this immediately in Sigrid's story. Every anecdote from her dark youth linked back to some kind of power struggle, whether it was fighting off abusive men or losing control and succumbing to the addictive power of drugs.

In this chapter, I explore this tension—women struggling to overcome negative relationships—that lies in the unique circumstances that can put them

[55] Alexandria Mageehon, 2008, 476.

on a path to imprisonment. I examine how women attempted to navigate difficult life circumstances, but ended up on a road to jail. The collection of stories from the 16 women I interviewed in and out of prisons by no means provides a complete picture of the situations and environments that can lead to incarceration. They do, however, provide a meaningful sample that illuminates several important trends for incarcerated women. Here, I first look at the issue of drug addiction, which was common in a majority of the women I interviewed. In the second section, I explore the issue of physical violence and abusive relationships for women behind bars, which was also common in most women featured in this study. Finally, I examine the ways in which women's spiritual systems were questioned and challenged by these difficult life situations.

In the context of my study, I look at these life circumstances as a network of negative relationships that put these women on the path to incarceration. Because the central focus of my research is on relationships as coping mechanisms, it's important to understand how these women's lives prior to incarceration *lacked* positive relationships and were largely influenced by detrimental ones. In the stories of the women I spoke to, these negative relationships primarily centered on drug addiction and abusive partners. In these scenarios, common ideas emerged, mainly that these women felt out of control or some form of powerlessness within these relationships. They felt lost in these relationships. Their self-esteem reached unprecedentedly low levels. Many told me they lost any sense of self through these relationships and became directionless. These kinds of characteristics of their relationships are important to highlight here because they emphasize the ways in which positive bonds they

ultimately developed—behind bars and on the others side—helped them turn their lives around.

Additionally, to better understand female imprisonment, it is crucial to hear women's recollections of their time before prison, whether fond memories of childhood or dark secrets from their past. In their stories, we get a glimpse of circumstances that pushed these women toward imprisonment—situations that in some cases become so rough they could not escape.

Addicted

In the 1980s, "the streets of New York City were paved with cocaine." This is how Violet, now 58, remembers the city during that time. Violet, who lives in East Harlem and grew up on the Lower East Side, now works as an advocate counselor for the domestic violence program of STEPS to End Family Violence. Decades ago, however, she was not doing so well. But unlike Sigrid and many of the other women I interviewed, Violet did not spend many years in jail and did not find herself caught in the revolving door of the prison system. She served time from 1987 to 1990 and never went back. Violet and I did not discuss her rough childhood. Instead, when I asked Violet how her life took a turn toward the path of incarceration, she started by talking about Latin music:

> My involvement happened during a time when people used to love to go to Studio 54, and the streets of New York City were paved with cocaine. Every police officer and their mother was sniffing coke in the back of the club. It wasn't like I was doing anything that wasn't extremely trendy at the time…I was fortunate enough to meet the beautiful people within the Latin music community. My introduction to the drug was actually hanging out with these beautiful people…I was a groupie! (laughs)…I was shaking my ass on the dance floor.[56]

[56] Violet, Personal Interview, November 8, 2011.

This conversation was a bit of an anomaly in my interviews. The ill influences in her life were perhaps less severe than most others in this study; she was interested in a sub-culture in the city and drugs were her ticket into that community. (It's also worth noting that, out of all the women I interviewed, she has been out of jail for the longest). Her story, then, perhaps provides useful insight into the downward spiral of drug use and addiction, in particular, since she attributes this factor as the main driving force of her incarceration.

Violet has three children, and in the mid-80s, she ended a violent relationship with an abusive partner. By the time she started exploring drugs, her youngest one was only 10 years old. It was easy to fall into the trap of drugs, she said, and it quickly impacted her family. "I'm telling you [cocaine] was everywhere. Recording studio, it was there, the club, it was there, people's houses for dinner, and it was there. It was everywhere. Becoming addicted—it was just part of that scene."

The excitement for Violet did not last. She wanted to avoid prostitution, which she saw all around her. She thought the only other option she had was to get involved with a drug dealer. So she developed a relationship with a Dominican dealer, which gave her easier access to drugs. "I was so caught up in that world that I just did not belong in," she recalled. "I tried to protect my children from that, but of course I did a poor job. ... I knew that what I was doing was wrong, but I didn't know how to get out." The struggle that Violet recounted seems to be a common one in the women I talked to: a simultaneous awareness of a negative choice with an inability to stop the bad habit. As it worsened, it developed into more and more of a feeling of powerlessness in her relationship to

drugs and her partner. This challenge she described lines up well with some research on the psychology of drug abuse. Addiction is often tied to a general lack of assertiveness and overall inability to make positive choices. This in turn makes it difficult for individuals to prioritize positive relationships that might help them fight their drug addiction, Steve Sussman and Susan L. Ames write.[57] Important to my study is the idea that women who find themselves struggling with addictions often channel their energies toward the drug and the situations that support that habit. They do not actively seek—and in some cases they push away—opportunities that might help them move past addiction. Additionally, Sussman and Ames argue, perhaps somewhat obviously, that addicts often do not view it as a serious problem, and when they do, they are more likely to try and break the addiction. For the women I talked to like Violet, it sometimes took a big wake-up call to help them understand the magnitude of the problem.

And for many, that wake-up call was jail.

The New York State Rockefeller Drug Laws—harsher punitive policies for individuals convicted of drug-related crimes—were enacted in 1973 in the heat of a crime wave closely tied to the nation's heroin epidemic. Elected officials at the time presented the laws as a way to catch big dealers and keep them off the streets for good. But the laws imposed long, mandatory minimum jail times for the possession of small amounts of drugs, they removed judges' authority to take into consideration mitigating factors, and as a result, they ended up impacting thousands of small-time offenders and drug addicts. One of the great examples of

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[57] Steve Sussman and Susan L. Ames, *The social psychology of drug abuse* (Philadelphia: Open University Press, 2001): 16.

the extreme punitive nature of these laws was the famous case of Elaine Bartlett who won clemency from former Governor George Pataki in 1999. She had spent 16 years in jail for an indirect role in a single cocaine sale.[58]

The laws in New York inspired other states across the country to enact similar draconian policies meant to present elected officials as "tough on crime." In an article in *Salon*, writer Abigail Kramer presents the great racial disparities in these laws, arguing that the vast majority affected were low-income, urban, and black, even though the U.S. Department of Health reports that, on average, drug usage is consistent across race and class. The impact on women was extreme. In the early 70s, there were fewer than 400 women in New York state prisons; 30 years later, there were several thousand and only 15 percent of them were incarcerated for violent offenses. Further, more than half the women convicted of drug crimes had committed the lowest-level offenses, such as simple possession. Many women entered prisons with substance abuse problems. In April of 2009, after 36 years, the law finally changed.[59] "The Rockefeller laws are still running the courts, ruining lives that could be saved, handing out life sentences at $45,000 a year," wrote Emily Jane Goodman, a New York State Supreme Court Justice in an op-ed for the *Huffington Post* just before the policies ended. Her piece provides a descriptive account of just how unnecessarily punitive these laws were in some instances. She recalls cases of judges crying because they were forced to impose mandatory sentences that defy all logic and appropriateness—three years to life for a mother with no prior record, or an AIDS

[58] Abigail Kramer. "Rockefeller Drug Laws: The end of an error," *Salon*, April 6th, 2009.
[59] Emily Jane Goodman. "The End of the Rockefeller Era," *Gotham Gazette*, April 27, 2009.

patient too weak for prison, or a battered woman trapped in a drug-infested house.[60]

Perhaps the best way to understand the impact of these laws is to examine the case of one woman caught up in this system. Linda, now 50 years old, was born in Bedford-Stuyvesant in Brooklyn. She was one of 27 children. Her father died from a heart attack when she was 12 years old, and it was tough on her. She quickly began to rebel, and by age 15 she ran away. At that time, she started to sell—and occasionally use—marijuana, crack, cocaine, and heroin. At age 17, she was shot in the head in a drug-related brawl.

Linda was soft-spoken during our conversation but got louder when recounting some of her darker memories. She is HIV positive, gay, and now lives in East New York, Brooklyn. She is a member and an intern at Women on the Rise Telling HerStory, and we chatted in the middle of the main room in East Harlem on a quiet afternoon. Not a lot of clients passed through as we sat at a big central table in a large room with a kitchen. Women walked in and out, microwaving lunch, chatting with each other, or working at computers in the main room and in a back room. On the walls around us were post-it notes with motivational sayings or jarring facts about the prison system. Diagrams and posters from past group activities also lined the walls.

Recalling the shooting that landed her in jail for the first time, Linda said she woke up from a coma after six months and remembers thinking to herself that she wished she had died. "I'd've liked to die. But I didn't," she told me, rather

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[60] Emily Jane Goodman. Rockefeller Drug Laws and Judicial/Prosecutorial Power Struggle, *Huffington Post*, March 26, 2009.

matter-of-factly. She said she still has a metal plate in her head today. When she came out of the coma, she was handcuffed to her bed. “My family was asking me what did I get myself into. I let them know that I did own a gun.” She pleaded guilty to charges related to drugs and illegal gun possession, and did her first sentence in a state prison for five years. She was 21 when she got out of jail. It was the first of five state bids she did over the course of several decades, until she was finally released in 2008. In Linda’s story, we see the system’s obvious ineffectiveness at addressing the core problem—her drug addiction. Linda said she was in fact high and remained high for most of the time in her first four prison stays. Inside prison, she had easy access to crack, cocaine, marijuana, and more. She completed sentences largely under the influence.

We talked for about an hour and she went through the circumstances of each of her arrests. Each time—and she repeated the same phrases—she talked about her goals to get better once she left prison. Three or four times during our conversation, she talked about being “sick and tired” of being high, being an addict, and being a criminal. But then something always went wrong. One time, a girlfriend’s brother sexually assaulted her. Another time, her godson was dealing drugs and she was forced to take the fall, she said. But at the end of the day, she was an addict. In jails and prisons, she would get in fights and did not participate in any drug rehab programs that had a meaningful impact on her. When she went to prison the last time, it was due to a parole violation. But this time, she had been clean prior to the arrest, and for whatever reason, it ended up being a completely different experience:

> I was clean and sober. My past arrests didn't really count for me, because I was intoxicated while in state prison those last four times. The last time, I was clean, and I wasn't getting high. ...This was the first time I was sober. The experience was different. There was a lot of things I was seeing with my eyes open. I was like, damn, there's a lot of issues going on in these prisons. ...It really woke me up. There were women in there not knowing they were being arrested under the Rockefeller Drug Law. A lot of women in there who really couldn't read. A lot of them there who didn't know what they were being charged for. A lot of women there who didn't know what it means to be clean and come home and stay out of jail.

The last time, she participated in a drug rehab program that actually helped her. I'll go more in-depth into the experiences behind bars and during reentry in the next two chapters, but it is worth noting here the struggle Linda faced fighting her addiction and the ways in which the criminal justice system, in her eyes, only further pushed her down the wrong path. Until it finally worked on the fifth try—when she became more powerful than the drugs.

The women I spoke to got involved in drugs for a variety of reasons. For some, it was simply a part of their local culture—whether in their community or in their families directly. Others were curious teenagers who made a wrong choice that spiraled out of control quickly. Several, however, found drugs as a way to cope with difficult life situations. The sexual assault Linda faced—and she said she had her fair share of rough female partners, too—certainly did not help her efforts to fight addiction. A majority of the women I spoke to dealt with some kind of repeated domestic violence—and many of those women struggled with drug abuse. The two are obviously intertwined, and before I discuss some of the larger issues of violence and abuse here, it is worth briefly mentioning some research on these linkages.

In an article called "Substance Abuse in Women: Relationship Between Chemical Dependency of Women and Past Reports of Physical and/or Sexual Abuse," published in the *International Journal of the Addictions* in 1989, the authors describe the basic connection that can exist between women's experiences of abuse and their drug habits. The study is largely statistical, but the results are telling. Nearly 30 percent of females in the Michigan Department of Corrections at the time of the study who struggled with addiction also reported histories of sexual violence.[61] The study highlights the ways in which drug addiction and sexual violence can feed into one another. Women with histories of assault or childhood abuse are a high-risk group for chemical dependencies. Additionally, women with drug problems, the study says, are more likely to be in situations where they are at higher risks of facing physical violence. It is clear that among the women I interviewed, these problems can be precariously intertwined, pushing them down a dangerous downward spiral with a final destination behind bars, or worse.

Abused and Stuck

Looking at an abusive relationship from the outside, it can sometimes be difficult to understand why a victim of domestic violence might stay in a specific situation. This is what Sharon told me when we first met in her office. (Sharon was the 52-year-old Queens resident who spent 20 years in jail and now heads the reentry program of STEPS in East Harlem). People observing this kind of relationship often don't get it, she told me—why stay with him? Why not seek

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[61] Gail B. Ladwig and Marcia D. Anderson. *The International Journal of the Addictions*, 24(8), 739-754,1989.

help? Why let your children be around someone who is treating you this way? These are questions that she says vastly overlook the complexities of these kinds of circumstances. "When you talk to a battered woman … a lot of what people believe is the easiest thing to do is get out. Call somebody. They say, 'You are smart. Why didn't you reach out for help?'" Sharon said. Research dating back to the 1970s has studied the "battered-women syndrome," that partially explains the psychology behind why women may stay in destructive relationships.[62] Sharon's comments come from her personal experience and her job now working with women who are sometimes involved in violent relationships.

For Sharon, there were a variety of reasons why she didn't end her relationship when she should have, she recalled, saying that these kinds of situations can quickly spiral out of control and into a place of delusion:

> There's that capture with inside the relationship. The love that you think you're feeling for this person—the whole honeymoon stage. You're going to make it right, or maybe it's just this time, and it won't happen anymore. And before you know it, time is just moving, and you're getting deeper and deeper, and you begin to lie. Some people get out and some people don't. Some people die. Some people go to prison. Other people's lives get taken.

Sharon, age 30 when she met her partner, was working as a corrections officer at the time. He was an inmate. She fell in love, so much so that she actually bailed him out of jail. It did not bother her that he was an inmate—making it an unprofessional and, on the books, forbidden relationship. Nor did it bother her that he was in jail for shooting a woman. They formed a relationship and she bailed him out so that she could be with him. But let me back up briefly. During our interview, at this point in the story, she pointed out that it's important to take

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[62] Walker, Lenore. *The Battered Woman*. New York: Harper and Row, 1979.

a step back. And she was right. For many of the women I spoke to whose abusive histories influenced their experiences with incarceration, the broader contexts of their lives at the time of the relationship are crucial to consider. Sharon's parents worked full-time in good jobs, she said. Her mother was a buyer at Sears and Roebuck and her father worked for Eastman Kodak. She says she had a good life, but her social circles brought her to the streets. She and her friends were quickly interested in older men and various drug scenes; meanwhile, her family was very Christian, and those worlds clashed. At age 30, she found herself very interested in this inmate, 28 at the time, and she didn't care about much else.

Their love affair was short. She bailed him out of jail, and he lived with her for four months. During that time, he beat her frequently. When we talked, Sharon preferred not to go into great detail about the incident that put her in jail—ultimately a charge and conviction for conspiracy to commit murder—but, in short, it involved a 17-year-old who learned of Sharon's rough relationship. This adolescent, Sharon said, took it upon himself to murder Sharon's partner. He and several other guys came over one night and stabbed him to death. "As far as I'm concerned, I'm guilty. You know why? I was a C.O [Correction Officer] and I should've known not to get involved with someone in prison. I should've never let the relationship get to the point where it did. And I lied. I tried covering it up," she said. She did not kill him herself and she had no idea that confiding in this youth would lead to her boyfriend's death. But that doesn't change the fact that someone's life was taken, and she played a part in it, she said. At the time, she lost sight of the harsh realities of her situation—this dangerous delusion that seems characteristic of these negative relationships that brought these women to

jail. Today, she said that she has come to terms with it. “I take responsibility for my actions. It’s been too long to say that I’m innocent.”

Out of the 11 formerly incarcerated women I interviewed, nine of them dealt with some kind of physical abuse. (At least, it did not come up with the other two whom I talked with). Every single woman had some sort of struggle with drugs—ranging from one woman who never used but got caught trafficking on her first time to a woman addicted to numerous drugs for decades. These are patterns that of course line up with the larger statistics I reviewed earlier (that most women who end up incarcerated struggle with domestic violence and drug addiction). In the stories and the language that women use to discuss their abusers and their violent relationships, some important patterns emerge. In my interviews, I saw that these relationships were often tied to a larger social scene, most often centered on drugs. In most cases, the women I spoke to described these relationships as their only options—or at least that is how they felt at the time, whether they were disempowered financially or emotionally. Reflecting back, often with a distance of many years, a majority of these women laughed at themselves or ridiculed themselves. They use words like “idiot” or “lunatic” or “complete mess,” when they remembered what they were like at that time in their lives. Others said they were completely trapped. In nearly every case, though, women told me that, at the time, they felt they had no alternative and no way out.

As I pointed out earlier, there was Violet, who got involved with a shady drug dealer for no other reason than to support her habit and lifestyle. Doris, 51, who spent 27 years in prison—the longest out of anyone I interviewed—talked about her abuser as active and herself as passive. She was simply not in control of

her circumstances. “He *made* me be with him. I didn’t mean to be with him,” she told me. “It’s not like I wanted to be with this guy, I wanted to get out. But even the police were afraid of him. I’m telling you, the cops were afraid of him.” It did not help her situation that she had faced repeated sexual abuse from a half-brother. Mentally, she felt broken down from a very early age, and the tormenting of her sibling continues to haunt her today. “It damaged me and it still hurts me. I get counseling for it. It affects me having relationships. ... He hates me, even still to this day,” she told me.

Similarly to Sharon—who, by the way was a good friend of Doris in prison—Doris’ abusive relationship was part of a larger circumstances. It was not a life that she had planned to lead, but one where she found herself. He would “stick up” people, or rob them at gunpoint. And she supported him in the effort. This is how she made money. She had her first child at age 14 and was living on her own at age 15. As I heard from many women, part of the reason they ended up in these negative relationships was economic disempowerment. Financial necessities limited her choices. She just needed cash, and in her partner she found some semblance of support—or at least that is what is seemed to be at the time. It was this kind of robbery that ultimately led her to jail for convictions of first-degree robbery and second-degree murder. (A friend of her brother got in a fight with a robbery victim and ended up stabbing him to death).

In these women’s stories, we see that physical violence was often a regular part of their lives, whether they were frequently surrounded by crime or whether they were in a relationship that made them the victim of abuse on a daily basis. These factors become crucial when I explore the power dynamics and physical

struggles of incarceration. The traumas of these women's lives before incarceration informed their experiences behind bars and on the other side.

Broken Faith

Before I close this chapter, it is important to take a moment and examine what these situations meant for these women in terms of their faith, spirituality, and mental health. I will go into greater detail in Chapters 4 and 5 about the spiritual backgrounds of the women I interviewed, but in these stories of abuse, suffering, and drug addiction, patterns certainly emerged around faith. Because so many women ended up coping with hardship through spiritual relationships—whether long-time ones or new ones developed during incarceration—it is important here to recognize the ways in which their faith was challenged by these difficult circumstances prior to their arrests. When I talk about faith and spirituality, I'm interested in the women's conceptions of God or a higher power as well as their larger sense of purpose in life, or world philosophies. In our discussions of spiritual beliefs, women often talked about the way they view the world and their place in it.

Some of the women I interviewed had little or no faith prior to incarceration. Sisters Justine and Joedy, born in Staten Island, in a joint interview told me about a breakdown of their faith as they faced problems of drug abuse and violence. Neither grew up very religious, and they were particularly adverse to religion when their father became a Jehovah's Witness. Still their struggles prior to imprisonment significantly impacted their sense of self and overall spirituality. Justine, the older sister, now 40 years old, remembered everything crashing down when her boyfriend died of a drug overdose:

> I had lost my mind. I was a zombie. I was not eating. I was not sleeping. I was a zombie, walking around with his picture in my hand. … I went to my mother's house and that's when I started getting high, smoking dust, shooting dope. I didn't want to deal with nothing. … I was running around the street acting like a lunatic.[63]

Joedy, three years younger than Justine, remembered feeling lost and hopeless—essentially, faithless. "No one knew what to do with us. We were really just a mess," she said. They both described to me how difficult it was to have faith in anything or to care, when they were surrounded by such bad influences. Their mother was an addict most of their lives, and still is today, they said. Justine was born addicted to drugs since her mother had used during her pregnancy, and as an infant, Justine had to go through a detoxification process. Surrounded by this kind of negativity, they grew up in an environment where they just didn't care about their futures or the consequences of their actions.

Carolyn, now 22 and the youngest woman I interviewed, said that she too had very little faith or spirituality. For her, it was just about making money and getting by day-to-day, she recalled of her not-too-distant teenage years. "I was doing everything for money. I wanted to live the materialistic life." She liked selling drugs, because she liked having money to go shopping. In her reflections, there is a similar lack of faith—contrasted with her beliefs about the existence and importance of God that she developed during her prison stay (more on that in Chapter 4). Before she went to prison, she didn't even feel that she needed to justify her lack of faith or care. Her mother was an addict. Drugs were all over her neighborhood. "I just wanted to fit in, in the moment. … I wasn't thinking about

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[63] Justine and Joedy. Personal Interview. November 8, 2011.

consequences."[64] This disregard seemed to be a common thread in the women's memories of their time before prison. Whether through atheism or a general disinterest in the world around them, some women said they did not think twice about the larger significance of their actions or choices. In some cases, they were numb from physical abuse. Or in other cases, they had zero spiritual role models, or positive role models, for that matter. Without a larger motivation, these women struggled to care about their own lives. This quote from Joedy illustrates this idea:

> I didn't care about myself. And when you don't care about yourself, you don't care about anyone else. If you don't love yourself, you can never love another human being. Even though I did love other people, I really didn't act like I did—I can tell you that. And I cared more about other people than I did myself.

In the following chapter, I discuss in great detail the ways in which self-care and care for fellow inmates during incarceration can be key to mental stability and become an important part of developing positive healing relationships.

Others, however, said they were unwavering in their beliefs and spirituality during even the worst of times. For example, Doris, who faced abuse at a young age from her brother and a partner, said she always had a relationship with God; He was always by her side. "I have a Christian background. God has always been my strength," she said. For Doris, though, it certainly wasn't a blind faith, and she admits that she struggled with her beliefs in her darkest times before she was locked up. "Spirituality has always been a big part of my life. That's where I get my strength. I was always praying to God, saying, God give me strength," she recalled. She prayed a lot when she was young and she still prays a

[64] Carolyn. Personal Interview. November 8, 2011.

lot today, perhaps in a different way than she used to, she said, discussing with me how her religious beliefs have evolved over time. Before she went to jail—and while police were looking for her in connection to the case that ultimately led to her conviction—she was frightened and fearful. During those rough times, she continued to pray and believe in God. In those difficult moments—such as a "stick up" or when she was being abused, she always prayed for God to give her strength and help her get her life back on track.

At least two other women expressed similar ideas that their relationship with God was always an important part of their lives, but one that did not reliably save them from negativity. Their connections to God ere not enough to keep them away from negative relationships in the world around them. They had to believe on their own that they wanted to and were able to change their situations. In some cases, God helped them realize that or they finally started listening to God more clearly, or they held God closer to them. But these women still always maintained some kind of relationship with a higher power—it just carried different meanings as they moved through the prison system. Doris never stopped believing in God, but in reality, at age 30, it would be more than two decades and a half before those prayers would finally be answered.

In summary, women I spoke with reported facing very trying situations that they said can sometimes be difficult to comprehend from the outside. A breakdown of stability—tied to drugs, crime, poverty, and violence—so often paved the way for situations of emotional and mental unraveling that forced women to lose faith in whatever they had once believed in. The ironic part, and something that several women pointed out to me, is that when women are sent to

jails and prisons, they are often in the worst possible place—physically, mentally, spiritually, and emotionally—to experience incarceration. Broken down and angry at the criminal justice system, they have often lost their sense of self. Battling harmful relationships, most of the women I interviewed became addicted, abused, faithless, and powerless to such a degree that they were at the lowest state of mental health that they had ever experienced. Still, many said that—despite all the hardship they faced before incarceration—when they were convicted and sent to prison, they never could have anticipated the intense struggles they would face in their new lives behind bars.

CHAPTER THREE—POWER BEHIND BARS

Johanna never dreamed she would end up in prison. But she did dream of coming to New York City. Johanna, now 31, was raised in Tijuana, Mexico, but she always had her eyes on the Big Apple. "It was my dream to come to New York. Famous people come from New York. The style, everything!" she said. But growing up poor in Mexico made it difficult for her to find a way to get to the city—until her best friend's husband gave her an offer she could not resist: Smuggle some diamonds into the United States and get a free trip to New York City, plus $3,000. "All I have to do is transport the diamonds," she recalled in an interview at the nonprofit headquarters of Hour Children in Long Island City, Queens. In Tijuana, she grew up around the mafia. Smuggling diamonds wasn't out of the ordinary, and she was 19 years old. She said she didn't know better and the offer seemed too good to pass up. "Diamonds from Mexico are cheap and in New York, you can resell them. I really thought I was in the mafia. I was young and naïve and not thinking about the consequences of my actions. I thought it was too good to be true, and I went for it."

Turns out they were not diamonds, but actually five kilos of cocaine—a fact she only learned when airport police stopped her in New York City. She had been given $1,000 upfront with the promise of $2,000 upon return to Mexico. (She later learned that they were taking advantage of her in a serious way: The amount of cocaine she was smuggling was worth at least $25,000, which is more than eight times the amount her friend had offered her). She did not make it back to Mexico. Instead, her first experience in New York City, after she was caught at JFK airport, was in Rikers Island. Unlike some of the women I talked to, Johanna

did not tell me she was a tough girl from the street. Times were difficult when she grew up, but she didn't know the "streets" the way most of the women involved in drugs and crime that I interviewed said they did. She was perhaps less prepared than others for the world of prison—or at least that's how she sees it. And she would know. Johanna now works as the employment coordinator for Hour Working Women Program, a branch of Hour Children that helps women find jobs after incarceration. Her life now is devoted to helping women who ended up on a similar path as she did, though she recognizes that her route to jail was somewhat unique.

I start this chapter here with her story, because I found her recollections of her first moments in jail particularly insightful. Not only had she lacked exposure to the world of crime, but she also barely spoke a word of English. These factors combined with the fact that she was still a teenager and in a completely foreign environment made her feel powerless and set her up for a particularly traumatic experience. Decades later, Johanna is composed and goofy. In our interview, she laughed a lot, speaking candidly in very slightly broken English about the trials of her times in prison and her struggles to rebuild her life after incarceration. She munched on chips as we talked, frequently offering me some. We sat in the middle of the organization's homey ground floor space, which has big windows and large, high-resolution photos of women and their children plastered on the walls. It's a very welcoming environment where women come in and out, sometimes just to say hello.

All this is to say, her life has changed drastically. The confidence and comfort with which she carries herself today in her position at Hour Children

were not a part of her when she found herself behind bars. Her demeanor shifted when she told me this story about her first night in jail:

> My first night in Rikers Island - the word 'search.' I didn't even know the word 'search.' I spoke "yes? No? Ok?" that's it. When I was in Rikers Island, my first night, they threw me in a cell where I had sink and a toilet. And the first word was 'search.' Search means all these officers come with masks and sticks, male, female it really doesn't matter, and they're looking for drugs in prison. Search means that you have to get naked—completely naked. Then you have to bend and show your butt and open your butt and cough at the same time. I felt like this. [indicates feeling 'small' with index finger and thumb] I wanted to die. I wanted the world to eat me. Say goodbye and flush myself. I couldn't believe, just looking around that there were male officers looking at my body. My self-esteem dropped. I wanted to die. I used to cry. I didn't eat. I wanted to die. It was horrible.

It was painful. It was scary. It was the most serious trauma she had ever experienced in her life, and still to this day, she counts it as one of her worst memories. This kind of reflection on the trauma of imprisonment is what I explore in this chapter. For imprisoned women, feeling powerless and out of control is a significant part of their reflections on their time spent incarcerated.

The purpose of this section of my research is to examine the ways in which power struggles in prison contributed to larger mental and emotional challenges women faced behind bars. As women struggled to move past the negative relationships outlined in the previous chapter and develop positive ones, they faced additional obstacles associated with the difficult power dynamics inherent in the prison system. The larger goal of this project is to offer some insight into women's relationships as coping mechanisms, and here I explore this question in relation to power struggles in jail. In every interview I conducted, I asked women what the worst part of incarceration was, and reliably, they all mentioned some form of feeling powerless. As I outlined in the introduction, I discuss power in

this work as it relates to control and autonomy, such that powerlessness is when one lacks control of her situation and sometimes herself. I have already presented these kinds of personal struggles as they related to drug abuse and violence for these women before incarceration. Here, I examine how women dealt with the powerlessness built into the experience of incarceration—something they had to confront from day one behind bars. Something to keep in mind in this section is how this question relates to the actual goal of the criminal justice system (an idea I explore more in the conclusion). Is the prison system designed to make prisoners feel powerless as a form of punishment that is supposed to discourage them from committing crimes in the future? Or is it meant to rehabilitate them and empower them to take control of their lives and develop positive relationships on the other side?

It is worth noting here that this focus—power dynamics in prison—has been widely written about by scholars in this field.[65] [66] Still, it is a topic that is especially significant as it pertains to the women I studied who often discussed their struggles with male guards. And I hope to add to this specific discussion by arguing here that these power struggles largely contributed to greater challenges of mental health and a breakdown of faith in prison for these incarcerated women. This chapter is broken down into three sections. First, I look more in-depth at the experience of the strip-search. Second, I examine struggles with

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[65] Mary Bosworth. *Engendering Resistance: Agency and Power in Women's Prisons*, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999): 56.

[66] Candace Kruttschnitt and Rosemary Gartner, “Women’s Imprisonment,” *Crime and Justice* 30 (2003): 18-21.

authority and bureaucracy in jails and prisons. In the final section here, I discuss the role of community and camaraderie of women in jail.

The Strip-Search

When planning this chapter, I debated whether or not to devote an entire section to the topic. Was it important enough? After combing through my notes, though, I noticed a trend: Nearly every woman I interviewed—inside and outside of prison—voluntarily brought up the strip-search. Frequently, it was the immediate response to my question along the lines of, “When you reflect back on your time in prison, what are some of the worst memories? When did you feel at your lowest?” The strip-search. This practice ties to larger questions of how women are treated in prison, what kinds of relationships they develop with guards, how the power dynamics of physically being imprisoned impact women, and how they mitigate the challenges of a loss of independence that is an integral part of the prison experience. It is also an important topic to address in its own section, because for so many women, this practice triggered past traumas. As I wrote in the previous chapter, physical abuse and violence were uniformly a regular part of these women’s lives before they were incarcerated. For many, the practice of being strip-searched brought back those memories, reminding women of the powerlessness they felt in abusive relationships outside of prison.

From my interviews with women, I learned that strip-searches take place at a variety of points during incarceration, depending on the institution and the charge. Most women I talked to who were involved in a drug-related crime, or something more serious, recalled being strip-searched upon entry to jail. In many cases, the recollections were similar to Johanna’s story: memories of humiliation

and degradation in a process that forced them to get partially or fully naked upon arrival. Generally, strip-searches require people arrested to take off their clothes, open their mouths, reveal their genitals for inspection, and squat and cough so any contraband falls out of their body cavities. These practices are constitutionally allowed if there is "reasonable suspicion" that the person might be hiding something that could hinder security. These searches are permitted for individuals arrested for a major offense involving violence or drugs—because those charges themselves are considered "grounds for suspicion."[67] So that means nearly every woman I interviewed could legally be strip-searched. And they were. Strip-searches have recently been the subject of litigation in New York City; the city was ordered to pay $33 million to nonviolent inmates who were illegally strip-searched when they were taken to Rikers Island on misdemeanor charges.[68] Male guards are not supposed to strip-search women, but most I interviewed told me that it happened or that men were often present in the room.

Studies have also shown, in some cases, that strip-searches are ineffective. A comprehensive study of strip-searches in Orange County, New York, found that from 1999 to 2003, not strip-searching those arrested for minor crimes would have let in "only one item of contraband" for every 23,000 detainees. In other words, in that county at least, the searches didn't actually do much to preserve jail security.[69] [70] I mention these policy debates and broader news stories only to

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[67] *New York Times* Editorial Board. "Unreasonable Strip-Searches." *New York Times* October 16, 2011.
[68] Michael Schmidt. "City to Pay $33 Million to Inmates Who Were Illegally Strip-searched," *New York Times*. March 22, 2010.
[69] *New York Times* Editorial Board.
[70] Dodge V. County of Orange. 282 F.Supp.2d 41 (2003). *United States District Court, S.D. New York*. September 9, 2003.

point out that these strip-searches are in fact controversial and are occurring in a wider context where some advocates are questioning their legitimacy. Technically, strip-searches are meant to keep prisons safe and keep out contraband, but for all women I interviewed, the process consistently felt like it was designed to humiliate them and remind inmates of their inferior position.

Whether they are legal or not, effective or ineffective, the strip-searches happened. And most women I interviewed agreed that they were traumatizing. I met Loretta, a 23-year-old inmate at Rikers, inside the women's unit during a Thanksgiving celebration last year[71] (more on this event in the following chapter). There reporting for the *New York Daily News*, I asked her what she appreciated most about the annual event where the city's Department of Correction, in partnership with nonprofit groups, allows the women to celebrate Thanksgiving with a feast. Loretta, from Harlem and in jail for around five months for an assault charge, responded:

> It's my daughter's birthday on Thanksgiving. This is taking my mind away from it. This is something to let us know that they are supporting us. The people behind the walls are supporting us. From being strip-searched to waking us up at 5 a.m. in the morning to going through all our stuff, making it messy…this shows us that somewhere in their hearts, they do still care about us.

I include this quick excerpt from our chat here because it is particularly revealing the way she throws in the reference of the strip-search. It is both symbolic and meaningful—the go-to representation of her perception of guards' mistreatment, and also a real frustration she has with the system. Many women I talked to in jail

[71] Sam Levin. "Inmates at Rikers Island get a taste of Thanksgiving." *New York Daily News*.

that day said similar things—that the Thanksgiving celebration was one of the few times that they felt respected and even a little bit in control. Guards were being (relatively) nice to them. There were no strip-searches to get into the main cafeteria where they got to sing and dance and eat good food. Loretta told me that these kinds of practices—having to take off all her clothes, or losing all privacy when a guard searches through her limited personal belongings in her cell—had taken a toll on her. To her, the practice of strip-searching women means they—the correction officers, the Department of Correction, the guards—just don't care about these women as people, as individuals. In these relationships with jail officials, women said they felt fundamentally subordinate and that there was nothing they could do to change the situation. They were stuck.

For someone like Sharon, the perception that the system just does not care about these women—compounded by a practice like strip-searching—is especially painful given her history of physical abuse. Her boyfriend had abused her for four months and he wound up dead, which winded up bringing her to prison. (That's how she often framed the series of events to me). It was clearly a very difficult time in her life, and she was not stable emotionally or physically. The great challenge, then, in her first years in prison—the first of two decades—was facing prison guards and correction officers who treated her in ways that reminded her of the difficult trials that brought her to prison in the first place. Those same feelings of powerlessness were a regular part of her daily routine in prison as she tried to adjust to her new life behind bars:

> One of the biggest challenges is being under authority by the correction officers. It was hard for me. Remember, I was a CO [Correction Officer]. I knew who they were and I had to now submit myself to them telling me

> when I could go, how I could go and how fast, how high and how low. I was being strip-searched. What a challenge—every time after a visit, I was searched.

Facing tasks like the strip-search, Sharon felt like her life had been turned upside down. Once a correction officer with a stable job, she was now on the other side. Her partner had abused her and now she felt abused by the system and the officers running the prison. It was especially humiliating for Sharon who had even returned to an institution where she had worked. Under surveillance by officers who were once her colleagues, she felt embarrassed and ashamed in a way that she never had before. And in prison, there was really nothing she could do about it to change her physical situation. This is a common thread of suffering I heard from a lot of women—practices like the strip-search reminded them that they were stuck. They couldn't fight back. They couldn't say no. This was only made worse by the street-like, brutal environment that surrounded them in so many of these institutions.

The Streets of Rikers

"Rikers was a playground," said Carolyn, the 22-year-old South Bronx resident who recently spent two years in jail for an assault charge. "Rikers was a joke, a playground—it was basically the streets." I heard this sentiment often. Rikers was a "zoo." Everything that happened in the neighborhoods where these women came from was happening inside the walls of the jail. People were selling drugs. There were fights. People were committing crimes, and clashing with officers. There was prostitution, rape, and sexual abuse—involving guards and other inmates. It was all happening in a contained environment. One nonprofit

organizer I spoke to described Rikers as an "orgy." Sigrid, a longtime victim of domestic violence, described it this way:

> When I was in jail…it was a whole 'nother world. I was in the streets, but I wasn't in the streets. I was hustling in jail. When I got locked up…I smuggled crack into the jailhouse. I smuggled 27 dimes, 27 ten-dollar rocks into Rikers…Rikers Island is like the streets, almost. It's almost like the streets. You're smuggling. You're living. If you know how to work the halls, if you know how to know the officers, if you know how to talk the street lingo, if you know how to hold your own, that's what I was doing. It wasn't helping me any. If I wasn't selling crack, it was sugar. If I wasn't selling sugar, I was smuggling different things. Getting people things. I was making money in the jail. It really wasn't hard. It was like the streets, except you had to be locked down at a certain period.

This may sound surprising—it certainly was to me—but I heard this from every woman I interviewed. I bring this up in the context of power dynamics as a way to explore how these women navigated the world of jail and their relationships with the bureaucrats and rules of the system. For people like Sigrid, it was easy. It certainly wasn't doing much to help her move her life in the right direction, she recalled, but she knew how to work the streets of New York City, and she knew how to work the streets of Rikers Island, she told me. "It wasn't rough for me. … I wasn't doing hard time," she said. She didn't always like the way she was being treated, but she was very tough, she told me.

For others, though, it was not so simple. Along with access to the same drugs they were using in the streets, women found themselves exposed to the same trials and traumas of their lives before incarceration. It wasn't just the strip-searches for some of these women, but rather a larger system that they felt was doing little to rehabilitate them and was doing a lot to retraumatize them. Dinah, from Florida, told me that she couldn't believe how poorly she was being treated in jails and prisons and how difficult it was for her to escape the problems she

had faced on the street outside of jail. “It retraumatizes you. I struggled with drug abuse. I was an addict,” she told me, adding that she knows that her environment and the poverty she faced in her life prior to incarceration played a big part in her path toward her heroin addiction. But in jail, when she first arrived, it just got worse. “When I went in [to jail], I wanted to use even more. It wasn’t helping. There was no type of treatment.” In many ways, she felt like she had lost herself, lost her identity, to drugs. To find herself in an institution where she felt like no one was treating her like a human just exacerbated her mental struggle. When she first arrived, she quickly felt like she was losing her faith and a chance for recovery:

> It was crazy. There were maybe 80 women in a dorm. When you’re going in, they’re strip-searching you off the bat. It just demeans you as a person. You have three minutes to take a shower. You have to be on your bunk for the count. They treat you like robots. There’s nobody that treats you like a human being. You’re just a number to them. ... When I first got there, I was traumatized by the whole experience.[72]

For women like Dinah, figuring out how to survive in jail meant figuring out how to cope with the intense power dynamics between guards and inmates that they saw as embedded in the system. It meant navigating tough relationships and sometimes verbal or physical abuse.

When I asked Mercedes what she would change about the prison system if she had the power to do so, she started off saying this: “One of the things I would want to change is correction officers’ training. I think they need to be trained to the fact that we’re not dogs in prison. We’re humans. You’d get a lot more respect if you gave respect,” she said. And it was a personal problem for her: She never

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[72] Dinah, Personal Interview, October 25, 2011.

liked authority and has a bit of a loud mouth, she told me. This is just who she was as a person. So to be put in a position where there were no meaningful ways that she could speak up for herself when she felt violated was a great struggle. If a guard made a snide remark, or pushed her around for no reason, she had to learn to be quiet. One solution? Prayers. "I prayed that if something happened that God would allow me to keep my mouth close," she said. Many, it is worth noting, told me that they had friends that were guards and that some of them treated the women well. (Carolyn said, "I feel for them—they are locked up in prison, too). They were a part of the community and also had to spend their days behind bars. But, most agreed, all it takes is one power-hungry, abusive guard to make the experience of incarceration a living hell.

Carolyn said she too had to learn how to keep her mouth shut. She recalled one officer telling her that he could see right through her, predicting that she would be back in jail in three years. "It felt like they were praying for my downfall. ... Some officers have fun doing that." Sometimes, she got in trouble for speaking up—especially in the early part of her two-year stint in jail. "My sanity, my dignity, my pride—it always got in the way." She remembers getting "tickets" that she had to pay for. She would lose free time or recreational time. She wouldn't be allowed to go outside. It began to feel claustrophobic. "I couldn't come out of the cell all day, none of that. It was the only freedom I had, the little bit I do have in there, and they're going to take that away from me?" she said, recalling her frustrations. She had to learn to stop fighting back, which, reflective of some of the recollections I heard from other women, felt like she was losing a part of herself. "I started to be mute. I learned to no longer feed it. They could

take what they want. I bite my tongue basically. It upset me every single day." This aspect of the guard-prisoner relationship was particularly challenging for some of the women I talked to, because they felt like they had no choice but let the prison officials shape them into what they wanted them to be: docile subjects. I noticed that Carolyn looked back on these interactions with perhaps the most bitterness out of the women I interviewed. She got visibly angry remembering it, and made this comment: "Still, to this day, I wish I would see [the correction officers] in the street. Cause I'd give it to them."

At least one of the women I interviewed did speak out—in a serious way. And when she spoke out, she got what she wanted. But it wasn't easy. Doris, who spent 27 years in jail and was shuffled around numerous times between different prisons, said her worst experience, by far, was in Albion in upstate New York. "I have seen guards send women to the box [the prison within prison] if the guard was attracted to a woman [to sexually abuse them] ... They call you 'nigga' and 'spic.' They talk about your mother. I have never seen anything like that in my life," she said. Her friends from another prison had warned her that Albion was tough. They knew Doris was outspoken and they told her to keep quiet. "So I sat back and I watched. I couldn't be a rebel with a cause. They would've beat me up." As soon as she arrived, she knew she had to get out of there. First, she tried to run for a position in the grievance office—which the inmates vote on. She said she practically got the whole prison to vote for her. But the officers rigged the vote, because they didn't want her in that position. She wrote a complaint letter to a state Department of Corrections commissioner in Albany. She thought if she made a big enough of a fuss, the higher-ups in Albion would want her out of their

hair. But they brought her and derided her for sending that letter. "They were screaming and screaming. He sat me down in a chair, then he told me to get up, get up, get up."

She thought she was going to be beaten to death. After a lieutenant ended his raging speech, he said, "You see that bus out there? That bus is going to take your ass back to Bedford," she recalled. "Inside, I was like, 'Yes, yes!'" It was one of the scariest moments of her 27 years behind bars, but it was also one of the greatest triumphs. She had navigated the system and successfully found a way to get what she wanted and return to the friends she had made in Bedford, another correctional facility in upstate New York. She still had years to spend behind bars, and with her constant reassignment, her sister couldn't find her for weeks. But in the world of Doris' incarceration, it was a major feat.

Creating Families

Doris' way of handling the power struggles did not work for everyone. In fact, a majority of the women I talked to recounted numerous instances when they regretted speaking up, because it only made the situation worse for them. I will go in greater detail in the following chapter into some of women's personal battles and triumphs overcoming the power struggles that they said made prison so difficult. These are the internal, mental shifts that women cultivated while living behind bars, sometimes intertwined closely with spiritual and religious transitions and transformations. But when I discussed the issue of power and control with these women, they often related it to one important avenue for coping: each other. Much like the struggle that these women faced with male guards, the idea of forming a community with fellow inmates is something that

these women said is particularly unique to them. The women formed bonds in prison that they said are unlike anything that goes on in the male prisons. Whether that's true or not is outside the scope of my project, but it is important to recognize that this is how some of the women presented their relationships to me. The connections and support they felt with each other, they said, were vital tools in coping with the difficulties of imprisonment. In the previous chapter, I described the ways in which women felt like they didn't care about anything. Through each other's support behind bars, women told me they learned to care about others in a meaningful way, and maybe more importantly, care about themselves.

Sharon perhaps described it best when I asked her how important the other women were to her in prison. She said it meant everything to her:

> We create families while we're there. Some women are dads in there. Women are moms in there. Women are sisters in there, and women are brothers in there. They're aunties, you know? We create this family because for many of us, we've come from that—that whole culture of connecting. People would say, 'That ain't your mother,' or, 'That ain't your uncle, that's a woman!' But that's what we did. ... We learned to just be family, whether we liked it or not.

What is interesting to me about this idea is that the women actually fulfilled very specific roles in relation to each other. (This, unsurprisingly, seems more common in the women who had longer prison stays and found themselves in a single upstate prison for many consecutive years, like Sharon who was incarcerated for two decades). I often heard these women refer to each other as their "sisters," but when Sharon and I talked more in-depth about this issue of her "prison family," she took it much further. And it makes sense—they're not just friends who support each other. It's more. Of course, they bond through

shared experiences and challenges, but behind bars, these women sometimes try to, in any way they can, replicate the world they are missing outside of the prison walls. I spoke to women who said they enjoyed having fellow inmates act like their moms or aunts, their role models, or simply their loved ones from an older generation. Likewise, many I spoke to—missing their children grow up or unable to be by an ill parent's side—said it was meaningful to nurture young inmates. I explore the role of these women's family outside of prison in great detail in the next chapter, but it is important here to recognize the ways in which the women responded to power struggles by leaning on each other.

I had the good fortune of being able to interview women who actually knew each other in prison. For Mercedes, a close friend of Sharon who was released a month after her, the bonds in prison were about looking out for each other and passing along wisdom. After years in a prison, you learn how the system works, she told me. When she first got to jail, she met women who told her what to do and what not to do. Years later, as she grew older—she spent 20 years in prison—she took on that role with other women. "I was a lot of women's aunt. And I was a lot of women's godmother," she said. "I was really nurturing. I wasn't able to nurture my children the way I wanted to…so I nurtured everything around me. … It helped me get through." It was enjoyable for her, and she really cared about the other women, she said. On a basic level, many women told me, it's humanizing to have these kinds of relationships in a place that can be so dehumanizing. "I made sure everybody was alright," Mercedes said. Certainly women told me they didn't get along with everyone, that there were constant troublemakers, and that some had downright enemies. But it was the positive

relationships that often had a more lasting influence on their experiences of imprisonment, women told me. It is interesting to me that Mercedes and Sharon, who I interviewed months apart from each other, had such similar feelings. It affirms the significance of having multiple identities in jail—and when many women participate in these relationships, the impact is greater than any single bond. It is out of these relationships that larger networks form, which make up the diverse community of inmates in women's jails and prisons.

When discussing power relations with these women, another area where they felt particularly powerless was the Parole Board checkpoint leading up to release. At these moments, as I presented in the first story of Sharon's attempts to be released, these women's lives are in the hands of two or three individuals who they may have never met before. They have a short time to convince them that they are rehabilitated and ready to be a productive member of society. Sometimes that means admitting guilt even if they believe they are innocent, women told me. At the very least, it's certainly a time to bite your tongue. With these specific struggles, I found that the solace women found in their relationships with each other was particularly useful. I heard numerous stories of women cheering for each other when the Parole Board approved their release or crying in each other's arms when their sentence was extended. Doris, who also lived alongside Sharon in prison, shared this anecdote with me when I asked her about community:

> When Sharon was [preparing for the Parole Board] … all her friends said, 'Sharon, you're going to make it. You're going to make it!' I was the only one that was real with her. I was being honest. I said, 'You're not. You're not gonna make it.' The day when she came [back] from the [Parole] Board, she came out hysterical crying. I hugged her—I was real stiff, but I

> was genuine. I told her that I knew [eventually] she was going home. I knew she would go home.

After years in prison, Doris had developed a certain level of cynicism and also a keen awareness of how women respond to the trials of imprisonment. She knew that the odds were not always in a woman's favor when she goes before the Parole Board—especially with someone like Sharon who was incarcerated for a violent crime. She had seen the personal struggle in women exacerbated by a broken sense of hope when they thought they might be facing their last meeting with the board. "I can see the pain and the loneliness. ... I sit back and I observe." She took pride in the supportive role she developed with women, and with someone like Sharon, she became a trusted and wise companion. It was important for Sharon to have that sincere support, and it was important for Doris to take on that role.

In Dinah's analysis of her relationship with fellow inmates, I saw a bit more skepticism than the explanations of Sharon and Mercedes. Having some kind of community was an important part of her life in prison, but she didn't actively plan on forming one, she said. It was inevitable:

> When you have nothing else—even though you may have people supporting you on the outside—you're living with these women 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Whether you want to or not, you're gonna create a bond with them, because this is who you see in and out. You are seeing them without clothes. You're seeing them at their most vulnerable. You create this bond that's like a sisterhood. Knowing you're all there and you're all vulnerable—it's a sisterhood. You are there for each other. There's nothing like that.

Remember, Dinah was the woman from Florida who said she felt like officers treated her like an animal or a robot. So perhaps it makes sense that she would perceive this kind of bond as an important one in the context of her deep resentment toward the system. She wasn't necessarily trying to recreate some

kind of world of friends and family that she had outside of prison, but she rather found herself uniquely connected to women facing similar struggles. She repeatedly used the word "vulnerable," and I think this is key. To Dinah, these women in jail were facing, in many cases, the most challenging, upsetting experiences of their lives up to that point. She had struggled in the streets, but in jail, she had lost her children and she had lost her freedom. On top of that, she was powerless against those who ran the system—whether she had to strip naked for them or wake up before the sun rose. Once she and her fellow inmates shared in that deep vulnerability, the bonds became something deeply intimate.

When listening to women's memories of their time in prison, it's sometimes easy to get lost in the relentlessly negative and shockingly depressing realities of living every waking hour for many consecutive years locked up behind bars. So often in my interviews I spoke with women about their worst times, their deepest frustrations, and their darkest hours. As I started packing my bag to leave my interview with Violet—the 58-year-old Harlem native who served three years for drug charges—she stopped me and said, "I actually have fond memories." I'm glad she stopped me, because her quick anecdote reminded me that while the bonding of female inmates is complex and emotional, it's also just solid friendship. When discussing challenges of prison, it can be difficult to imagine smiles and laughter behind bars. But those are a part of the experience, too. For Violet, who albeit had a shorter sentence than most referenced in this chapter, those moments made incarceration livable. And sometimes even fun:

> We got busted for giggling in the bathroom in the shower. We actually got busted for giggling. We were joking, throwing cold water, yelling, laughing. … Oh my God, this correctional officer got angry. He was writing up

> tickets. I'll never forget this incident—it was five women. ... I said, 'Look, we were laughing I'm sorry if you feel it's that serious we can't have a laugh.' He says I'll give you an assignment. The assignment was to sweep the staircase. This girl and I were sweeping the staircase, but we forgot the dust pan. So we swept it all under this rug. [laughing] ... But we got busted by the captain. He reminded me of a little Captain America. I was dying. I laughed so hard that I peed on myself.

Violet laughed loudly as she recalled the incident, telling me, "It's one of those memories I'll never forget." Out of all the stories about surviving in prison and pushing past incarceration, it's definitely a simple story—but one I probably won't forget, too. It was a rare human moment that I heard in stories of power struggles.

Laughter and friendship provided one useful way to cope. But ultimately, for many, the power struggles were persistently demoralizing and even paralyzing as I have shown in some of these stories. I often heard women say that the worst times were during the first months and years of prison sentences—when they were trying to adjust to a life in which they had such little control. Leaning on each other was one way to cope, but people come and go. And as I study in great detail in the next chapter, time trudges forward, sometimes, in the eyes of these women, at a snail's pace. As power relations became more manageable, time often became the next greatest obstacle. Some told me that there was only so much that others could do for them to help them cope. For some women, the burden of time was a slower trauma they weren't expecting. It was a challenge that forced them to pass through each day recognizing, in many cases, that there was no foreseeable end in sight.

CHAPTER FOUR—PASSING THE TIME

I rode up in a van to a small public parking lot on the northern tip of Elmhurst, Queens. We parked at the edge of the only bridge that leads to Rikers Island, a New York City jail. It's the only way to access the correctional facility, which is just north of Queens and is technically a part of the Bronx, but has a Queens zip code. It was a chilly, but sunny Tuesday in November of 2011. I was in the car with three others—STEPS to End Family Violence Director Lucia Rivieccio, a young woman who is planning a mural project with Rikers inmates, and STEP's driver in the front. When we got out of the car, I met with Sharman Stein, the Deputy Commissioner for Public Information with the city's Department of Correction. After a lot of back and forth for several weeks prior, she had given me and a *Daily News* photographer clearance to enter Rikers Island for a few hours. We would be joining a handful of organizers from STEPS for the group's annual Thanksgiving celebration for the women in the Rose M. Singer Center at Rikers. The organization solicits donations from restaurants throughout the city and mobilizes a team of volunteers to enter Rikers and serve the women a feast—a rare and delicious break from the monotony of jail.

I thought the long journey to Rikers (I had gone from Manhattan to Brooklyn up to Queens) was nearly complete at that point, but there were still many more checkpoints and obstacles. Initially, the officer manning the trailer at the entrance to the bridge wouldn't give my colleague Enid, a *Daily News* photographer, the access card she needed to cross because her name wasn't on a list. After Sharman—a fairly high-ranking official within the DOC—negotiated with him, we all had our passes. We piled into one car and began crossing the

bridge toward Rikers Island. Enid, who has shot stories on Rikers before, and I both pulled out our camera phones and snapped some shots as we crossed, while I made small talk with Sharman about her job handling press for the DOC. This was certainly an easier, positive story for her to oversee—a rarity in her job fielding inquiries on topics ranging from rape accusations to deaths behind bars. When we got to the other side of the bridge, we had to trade our first passes for a second round of passes that gave us access to enter the facilities. We showed our IDs again and spelled our names for a correction officer behind a glass wall.

Finally, we walked through a dark hallway and began to hear sounds that I didn't typically associate with jail—laughter, singing, and joyful cheers. (It was my first time setting foot in Rikers, or any jail or prison, for that matter). We smelled turkey, ham, chicken, and other holiday foods. Then we finally entered the cafeteria in the women's unit, where about 60 female inmates—dressed in green and grey jumpsuits and small top hats they had decorated—were crowded around tables, listening to music and anxiously waiting for their turn to get their hands on the fresh food. Dozens of guards were on scene as well as 20 or so volunteers and organizers with STEPS. Sharman and her colleagues had divided the room in half—on the left, the women didn't mind being photographed for the *Daily News*, and on the right the women did not want to be in the newspaper.

Additionally, Sharman and her associate informed me that she had identified three women who I could interview for the feature, and they were sitting at the front of the table on the left. It was immediately awkward and frustrating. As a reporter, I don't generally like to be restricted in that way from the get-go, and as soon as we arrived, a lot of the women were excited and eager

to talk to us—not just the three hand-picked for the article. Sharman and I had chatted in advance about the angle of the story—she wanted to ensure that the piece would truly be good press and not a tabloid story along the lines of city-wastes-taxpayers'-money-by-feeding-murderers. (Apparently the event had gotten some negative press in the past, STEPS representatives told me). So she had identified three articulate young women with minor crimes who she trusted to offer me some good, simple quotes on the event.

After I turned my phone off—I was told I wasn't allowed to use it to record—I immediately went up to a young woman with a shaved head on the opposite end of the table who was singing and dancing as her fellow inmates cheered her on. She wasn't one of the three Sharman had identified, but I had a gut feeling that she wanted to talk. Keyoka, 23, from Brownsville, Brooklyn, told me she has been in jail for 13 months and was awaiting trial for a grand larceny charge. She had a boyish look, a tattoo that read "RIP Mom" on her neck, she was smiley and charismatic, and people around her gravitated toward her. So did I. I asked her how she was feeling. She said:

> This is happiness for me. It gives me a chance to experience people with other people. It's like a get together with family. When you're arrested, you get depressed and sad. You want to be around family. It's stressful. I appreciate this...It's hard, especially around the holidays, being locked up. Not being able to spend the holidays with family. It's a struggle. This is the first time since I've been here that I feel a sense of relief. I feel human.[73]

I couldn't chat with her long since she wasn't one of the designated interviewees. So I moved on to the three women in the front of the room and one at a time held more extensive interviews. All three gave me good *Daily News*-worthy quotes

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[73] Keyoka. Personal Interview at Rikers Island, November 21, 2011.

about the joys of this event, but they also talked about the hardships of missing family, especially during a time like Thanksgiving. Their appreciation of the event sometimes transitioned into discussions about their frustrations with the system, their feelings that they have been disrespected and mistreated by guards, and mainly their desires to go home and see their children growing up without them or a loved one who was elderly or ill.

Shanise, 23, of Sheepshead Bay, Brooklyn, had been in jail for almost a full year due to a charge related to a domestic dispute and arson. She was also awaiting trial. As I interviewed a different woman, Shanise sat smiling, singing, and crying. Tears lightly streamed down her face as she sat at the cafeteria table. She described the event as a bittersweet moment for her:

> I feel this is the closest I get to being at home. This is the second Thanksgiving I've missed. It feels homey to me to be here. We all wish we could be home with our families. I really miss my family. ... Outside of this, we're still institutionalized. We can't even play. This is the closest to fun we have. We really enjoy ourselves in this moment. We really get to cherish it. ...I'm really thankful we get to have this day. Being here is very depressing. I miss my family. My oldest daughter wants me to be there with her on Thanksgiving. It...hurts me.[74]

For many of these women, the event was a momentary release or break from the personal struggle of spending time behind bars. I was reminded of how truly fleeting the event was when I was preparing to leave. As I was saying my goodbyes to some of the women, guards and volunteers circled around the room, one-by-one collecting each inmate's party hat. The smiles on the women lingered, but the food was gone, and the music had stopped. A few were still asking Enid, the photographer, to take more photos of them, and one inmate, who said she

[74] Shanise. Personal Interview at Rikers Island, November 21, 2011.

was working on a book, tried to give me her email address—but an officer wouldn't let her. As I watched the rapid transformation of the scene from a celebration to a jail cell, it was a bit heartbreaking. Ten minutes earlier, the women were singing, dancing, and performing prepared skits for each other. Now, they were being ordered into single file lines to exit the cafeteria and return to their cells. I immediately thought of a poignant comment Keyoka had said to me when I first approached her: "When this is over, we are going back to reality, though," she said. "It's like a fairy tale."

In this section, I explore the personal battle to pass the time while incarcerated and the individual triumphs of the women I interviewed. In the prior chapter, I examined the power struggles behind bars and how women united together as a coping mechanism. Here, I look at the internal struggle—how these women made life behind bars bearable, how they, as some put it, "stayed sane." Caring for each other and being part of a community certainly played an important role, but here I look at some of the spiritual relationships women developed—the internal struggles that they felt they had to conquer on their own.

Embedded in these narratives are the stories of women missing their families and loved ones while imprisoned. Family separation is a huge obstacle and for some becomes a marker of the passage of time. I've shown how power struggles with guards and practices like the strip-search can break these women down. But separation from family for some can be the most difficult part of incarceration, nearly all interviewees told me. It becomes a deeply personal struggle to accept a life apart from family members, and leaning on other inmates

is only one of many coping mechanisms. There are personal and emotional struggles that they must overcome to accept this distance, women told me. I open this chapter with my own experience entering Rikers to briefly illustrate the physical space—just how truly separated these women are from the rest of New York City and the journey required for a family member to visit an inmate. In fact, the process of visiting Rikers is certainly much more arduous than my ride to the prison on a fast track with a deputy commissioner alongside me. The Thanksgiving celebration was one example of relief for these women and fits into a much larger mosaic of diverse coping mechanisms.

This chapter is broken down into three sections. First, I explore the dynamics of family separation. Second, I examine religion behind bars—how women practiced their faith, what role it played in their daily life, and how relationships with God and higher powers were embedded in the experiences of incarceration for some women. In the final section, I examine turning points, transformations, and epiphanies—how spirituality, for some, shifted dramatically and became a central mechanism to combat the sorrows and frustrations of incarceration.

Separation Anxiety

Doris 's father died of a broken heart.

At least this is how she views it. Doris, the 51-year-old Queens resident who spent 27 years behind bars, told me in our interview that she was a "daddy's girl." And when she got handed her sentence, out of all her family members and friends, he took it the hardest by far. "My father died from a broken heart. My brothers and sisters blamed me, too. It took me a long time to accept that. But I

accepted it," she said. Her father died in 1991 at age 56, about halfway through her nearly three decades in prison. But before he passed away, he maintained a strict regimen of visiting his daughter. A lot. He came to prison nearly every Saturday to see her—even when he moved out of the state and had to trek hours just to get to the upstate prisons where Doris was living. Even when he was sick, he would visit her, she recalled. The support of her parents was important, she said, but it was also a constant reminder of how her situation deeply impacted so many others. It was difficult for her to accept the fact that her incarceration was taking a serious toll on her family, and this was one of the hardest parts about being locked up, she told me. "Throughout my incarceration, my mother kept saying, 'I'm just staying alive until you come home.' And I kept saying, 'Stop saying that, stop saying that.' There's power in words." As much as it was a comfort, it was also a burden she carried: The support of her parents masked the deep pain that they felt, and that she, in turn, felt as well. She got to leave prison and attend her father's funeral in 1991 when he died of a heart attack. But after the ceremony, she had to return back to what had become her permanent home—a prison cell in upstate New York.

Similar to the memories of strip-searches, reflections on separation from family during incarceration invoked some of the most emotional responses from the women I interviewed. For Doris, who spent the longest time in prison out of everyone I spoke to, the separation anxiety manifested a form of guilt, creating a heavy burden that she had to learn to accept. A lot of women said this challenged their faith and spirituality—especially those who prioritized family values above all else. Much like the responses to guard mistreatment or abuse, a sense of

powerlessness arose in these women. For some, it felt like there was quite literally *nothing* they could do. They were separated from their families, their relationships were falling apart, they were neglecting their roles as mothers, daughters, sisters, aunts, and more, and there was no recourse. They knew they were not there for their children, and they knew there was no solution. Yes, they could write letters and maybe their children would be able to visit a few times a month, at best, but at the end of the day, the lives of their loved ones were going on without them. And they had no control in the matter. Here's how Sharon explained it, discussing the impact of her incarceration on her family and the ways in which she measured the passage of time with the years she spent apart from her kids:

> We can't forget about the families' lives that suffer at the hands of this. When I went to prison, I imprisoned my whole family for 20 years. My daughter was 8 or 9 and my son was 2...[I was always] hoping to go home, three months, a year, next year, this appeal, that appeal, this clemency, nothing ever happened. One year turned into to two years turned into five. Five years into ten, [and] after ten years, I was like, 'Okay, am I gonna go home?' I was separated from my family, my children were growing up without me. My mom was getting older. She was getting sick. I was getting older. 30 years old—I was still in my youth.

What's interesting to me is the way in which Sharon interwove her frustrations with the passage of time and the perpetual uncertainty of her release date with her sorrows tied to lost time apart from family.

After years behind bars, women told me they began to really feel the weight of time—which was increasingly exacerbated by the aging of those outside of prison. For Sharon, the death of her mother was one of the most heartbreaking moments of her 20 years of imprisonment. "I'm an only child. ... My mom stuck this out with me for as long as she could," she told me in our interview, pausing.

"She died in 2008, and I was still incarcerated." Sharon went on to describe to me the experience of leaving prison to see her mother on her deathbed. She had had a stroke, and Sharon was allowed to go see her at the hospital. But not without handcuffs on. "Oh it was awful, awful. I had to go see her in handcuffs…while she was in the hospital." It was the last time her mother saw Sharon—in prison attire and shackles.

So how did this separation actually impact the mental health of these women? Here was Dinah's response when I asked her that question:

> It takes a really, really big toll, especially with the women. It's not just us. It's our children, our families. We are normally the caretakers, and the people we leave behind, it takes a toll on them, and it affects us even more. My kids—just seeing them coming to visit me in Rikers Island religiously and to seem them leave and have tears in their eyes saying, 'Mom, why can't you come home?'

For Dinah, it almost felt as if everything she believed in was coming undone; her love for her children was being pushed aside by a larger institution that had complete control of her. Her children mattered most to her—in fact so much of what she had done in her life that led to her imprisonment was *for* her children. In Florida, where she grew up and began raising her children, she was impoverished and sold drugs to support her three boys, who are now four, 17, and 19 years old. When she was released from prison in Florida the first time, she had nowhere to live with her children. She had no job and couldn't pay rent. She told me that a caseworker at the time told her to bring her and her family to a bus shelter to sleep; in other words, try homelessness for 24 hours or more.

"I was shocked. I was hurt. I was distraught. I have kids, are you serious?" she said, recalling the caseworker's suggestion. She couldn't bring herself to do

that, so she violated her parole and came to New York City where she had connections and knew the shelter system would be more helpful for her and her kids. She didn't lie to the parole officer—in fact, she told her what she was doing. She felt she had no other choice and was determined to get her children into some kind of stable environment. She asked the parole officer to at least let her get her children situated in school in a stable home and then she would turn herself in. But the parole officer, she recalled, sent a squad right to the shelter to arrest her. The living conditions in the shelter were bad enough—one room was a bedroom and another room was a kitchen, living room, and bedroom for the boys all in one. But once she was arrested, it felt as if everything was truly collapsing. She was sent to Rikers for a week before she was sent away from her children back to Florida for violating her parole. Recalling this moment, she said she faced the greatest challenge of all: losing her kids, again:

> That Sunday, I had a visit with my children. I just wanted more time with my kids. When I asked the correction officer if I could get more time with my kids, the CO said no. I felt so helpless. I'm their mother. I shouldn't have to ask someone else to spend more time with my children. Right then and there knowing that was the last time I was gonna see my kids, I didn't know what was going to happen. I really, really felt like, 'This is it.' I didn't know if I could do this again. This is the end. Knowing they had all the power over me.

It was one of the lowest points in her life. In her description of the situation, it's clear that she felt this great sense of hopelessness, powerlessness, and purposelessness. Everything she was and everything she believed in was being taken away from her. The relationship between imprisonment and her faith is simple here: When she no longer had the ability to see her children, let alone take care of them and provide them with a stable life, how could she believe in

anything? All she could do was mourn. And she did: “I cried. I cried a lot. I cried until I couldn’t cry anymore. I spoke to some of the other girls that were in there with me that had been through this before. They helped me. They were my motivation. They reminded me of what a good mother I was.”

It is easy to discuss these stories with women and overlook some of the basic hardships of being away from family for such an extended period of time. Along with the depression and anxiety that this separation incited in these women, there were practical consequences that I never would have thought about—missing events, getting news about a development in a child’s life weeks after it happened, and more. Mercedes talked to me about an aspect that she said was particularly heart wrenching: missing graduations. Mercedes, now 46 with three children, said that she missed every single graduation, except her youngest son leaving high school. Mercedes’ mother would always film them, though, and bring them to her in prison, she recalled, smiling during our interview. Due to prison regulations, she usually had to watch them under supervision in a room with fellow inmates—which often turned out to be a nice experience, she said. “It was as if it was happening then and there. We all cried together. We all laughed together.” In retrospect, she said, she realizes it really was *not* the same as being there, but it was a moment of relief. It brought her a little bit closer to her children, who, most of the time, felt so far away. The sheer difficulties of coordinating visits only made it worse. Mercedes remembered countless instances of her children waiting for more than four hours before they could see her. (And recall the quick anecdote from last chapter in which Doris’ sister went to multiple upstate prisons before she could even track down Doris; her mother

and sister thought she had maybe been killed in prison, since it was so hard to find her). Mercedes said she reached a point where she told her family to stop visiting; it was too frustrating to see them have to wait so long.

Missing good times is rough—as those at the Thanksgiving celebration expressed—but missing the bad times can be even worse. Mercedes, for example, remembered a time when one of her sons was mugged and beat up and her family members didn't get a chance to tell her until days later. It was one of the toughest times, because she felt angry that her mother had delayed in telling her, and she felt frustrated and helpless that she couldn't leave prison to be with her son. Justine said she too felt out of control and knew that her son was heading down the wrong path—a similar path to hers—but couldn't stop it. "The hardest part is not being able to call my kids—that was my main link," she told me. "Not being able to give input on what they're doing." When I asked her for an example of this, she immediately recalled her son going to jail because his school found marijuana in his locker. "I couldn't do anything." She tries not to blame herself, she said, but it's a challenge. "It's frustrating, because I'm not there," she said. This is perhaps an even darker side of family separation—the potential perpetuation of a cycle of crime in families. After all, Justine's mother had, and still to this day has, serious drug problems, which both Justine and her sister cited as a major influence that eventually led them to jail. But behind bars, what could Justine do to stop her son from making the same mistakes she did? Not much, she told me.

Finally worth noting in this discussion on the impact of family separation is the role children played in helping women through their incarceration. If

separation from family was one of the main causes of emotional breakdowns, for some women it was also one of the greatest sources of strength. Dinah perhaps explained this idea best. While it hurt so much, she was so glad she had children waiting for her on the other side. In fact, she said, it made all the difference:

> My kids were a big part of me being able to get through it. For those women that don't have family or their kids are taken away from, I feel for them, because my kids got me through it. Knowing that they would tell me, 'Mom, we are there for you no matter what,' they were my moral support. They would write. I would expect their calls. They were just my foundation.

In the moments of great hopelessness—often incited by her separation from her kids—Dinah said she had to remember that they were the reason she needed to get through this process and make it to the other side. She had to stay strong, she had to stay sane, and she had to come out ready to be a mother to her children. Carolyn, 22, the youngest of my interviewees, expressed a similar sentiment, saying that her child was her primary motivation: "My daughter—she's a blessing. Having her gave me another way to think about life." She, as discussed last chapter, struggled with authority. But knowing she had a daughter waiting for her helped her control her behavior and resist pushing back, even if it was difficult. She knew she had to get herself in a mindset that would allow her to follow orders and get out as quickly as possible. Her toddler daughter, she said, needed her mother.

Violet, 58, said that she felt like she really lost her mind to drugs at that time in her life. This of course impacted her relationship with her children and ultimately sent her to jail. Within the haze of drug addiction, like Mercedes and Carolyn, her children waiting for her release from prison provided one of the few

meaningful incentives for her to turn her life around. She told me, “I was lost. I don’t even remember half the shit I did during that time. I was away from my children for 5-6 years. That’s sad that I abandoned my family like that. They never stopped needing me and they never stopped loving me. My job was to gain respect and above all trust—and it was that that drove me to do the right thing.” And for Violet, the right thing to do was survive prison and get clean and healthy and ready to be a mother to her children waiting for her on the other side.

Relying on Faith, Day by Day

In the darkest of times, these women, as we have seen, turned to each other for support or sometimes they simply reminded themselves of their families and friends back home. Other times, they turned to their faith. They turned to the Bible, their favorite stories, spiritual books, prayers, meditation, church meetings, their relationships with God, and more.

Prisons and jails typically have churches or ministries with some opportunity for worshipers to practice their religion. It’s worth noting here that the women I interviewed all had some sort of Christian background. This wasn’t intentional, but likely a product of the fact that these nonprofit organizations have ties to churches. It may have to do with the demographics of these women in general. Either way, my research is focused on these specific women’s experiences, and I did not look closely at what was and was not available for women of other religious backgrounds. (It’s an important question, but one that I see as outside of the scope of my research).

Behind bars, there can be in-prison ministers and preachers, and sometimes prison grounds will include separate churches. In other cases,

religious institutions outside of prisons will partner with correctional facilities to bring church services and bible studies into the prison or they may set up a visitor program through which inmates can actually attend services at a church off campus. There are also pen pal programs and ministries that work with inmates and their families.[75] [76] While in prison, inmates usually have an opportunity to attend faith-based programs and workshops and sometimes can form relationships with chaplains.[77] In this section, I examine the ways in which faith and spirituality functioned as basic coping mechanisms for a handful of the women I interviewed. Here I focus on the women who came from spiritual or religious backgrounds and relied on their pre-existing belief systems in some capacity when they were behind bars. As I demonstrated in the second chapter, many of these women faced difficult life challenges before incarceration that forced them to question their faith, or in some cases lose it. But here I look at how women used practices and ideas from their upbringings and churches at home inside prison. I look at how women's previous relationships with God helped them stay afloat behind bars. In the final section of this chapter, I examine larger epiphanies and religious transformations that women had while incarcerated, and in many ways, which occurred as a direct result of their incarceration. In both scenarios, it becomes clear that spirituality, in the simplest sense, was an important tool for the challenge of "passing the time" that nearly all of the women

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[75] "Pierre Raphael's Inside Rikers Island," *Correction History*, http://www.correctionhistory.org/html/chronicl/nycdoc/raphael/html/theology.html
[76] "Hope a glow," http://www.hopeaglow.com/prison_ministry.htm
[77] "Religion a safe have in jail, prison," http://www.gazette.com/articles/prison-103740-fists-brutally.html

discussed. In a much more complex way, spirituality was, for some, a method of not only "staying sane" but a means of self-transformation.

Sharon was religious before she was incarcerated, and while she had moments of epiphanies and feelings of deep loss of faith at times, for the most part, her spirituality and her relationship with God was constant. It got her through, it helped her pass the time, and it was a way to be productive. Faith was a way to stay mentally alive in a place that sometimes felt like it was designed to make its tenants feel dead. Sharon's recollections on the role of her religion during incarceration offer a clear insight into how spirituality can be closely linked with mental health:

> I know that when there was a time when I didn't think I was ever going to get out of prison, the church was there for me. I was very involved in the church. I worked for the chaplain. I sang in choir. I taught Bible studies. I did these things because I needed that sane place to be, in a place where there was so much insanity.

What stuck out to me in this comment was how religion for her was simultaneously a simple hobby—a way to spend a day behind bars—and also a complex support system that helped her "stay sane." After 20 years, Sharon had taken on many leadership roles, received degrees, worked with the chaplain, and more. A life of faith and religion was at the center of that. At the same time, it was something very personal, something that guided her internally.

Mercedes had a similar recollection of how spirituality kept her going. For her, and others I interviewed, it was about prayers—constant prayers. I heard this idea over and over again that women found strength in repeated praying. Mercedes said, "I prayed a lot. I prayed for strength. I prayed for God to let me keep my mind strong, to guide me in the directions I needed to go in." She even

prayed that God would help her keep her mouth shut when she was frustrated with the guards. Tying back to her greatest perceived challenge—the separation from family—she prayed for them. It helped her cope with the distance and the lack of control and involvement she had in their lives. "I prayed for God to take care of my family, my children. If anything happened to them, I don't know how I'd make it in there. It got me through."

I noticed a similar way of thinking in Dinah, who told me that she doesn't practice any traditional religion but is nonetheless very spiritual. And it was this spirituality that helped her get through. She meditated frequently. Similarly to Mercedes, her sense of spirituality was tied closely to her children waiting for her at home. "You try to zone yourself out and find that safe space even though you're in prison. It's a safe space within yourself. You take yourself back to where you are the happiest." For Dinah, that was with her children. It sometimes initially made her pain and sorrows more difficult, because the safe space was only in her mind, she told me, and not in reality. In reality, her children were thousands of miles away. "It would break me down emotionally, but it was also my safe space where I knew I was okay at that moment." It was just one of many ways she passed the time and was able to accept her situation. She read and wrote frequently, and also made amends with her past, she said.

Some women with whom I spoke told me that prayer, religion, faith, and spirituality all just make sense as a logical focal point for women behind bars. In a dark place where there's such a lack of hope, inmates *need* something to believe in. Because, ultimately, as several women explained to me, there is nothing tangible or real or positive to believe in inside prisons. It's just a world of

pessimism, and without some kind of faith, surviving it can seem impossible. One woman I spoke to while I was at Rikers Island illustrated this point for me (although our conversation was unfortunately quite short).

Athena, 32, from the Bronx, spent 15 months in Rikers, left for a short period, and was back again indefinitely awaiting trial for an assault charge when I talked to her. She told me that she is working on a book about her experiences in jail. She said she has seen so many awful things, such as a woman sent to jail for defending herself against a rapist, and a fellow inmate committing suicide in her jail cell. In that instance, she was left trying to do CPR on her, but it was too late. It was traumatizing. What else could she do but pray, she said to me: "I pray to God everyday to let me go. I can't come back here. …When I wake up, I pray. When I go to sleep, I pray. I've never prayed so much in my life. The other day, I just woke up with an unsettling feeling, and I just asked God to take away that feeling. And I felt so much better." She told me that she has always been religious, but added, "Prison has fueled my faith. It has made it more focused."[78]

Doris, who spent 27 years in prison, perhaps illustrated the challenge of the passage of time best. I felt claustrophobic and genuinely stressed just hearing her talk about it in our interview. Her story and her memories also offer a clear example of how a core pre-existing faith in someone can be reignited behind bars. Interestingly, Doris told me that during her 27 years, she refused to have any kind of calendar in her jail and prison cells, and she never looked at herself in the mirror. She was almost afraid of time—what it could do to her, how it was putting her life on hold as she aged, and how, in some moments, it just felt as if life was

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[78] Athena, Personal Interview at Rikers Island, November 21, 2011.

moving so very slowly. Sometimes she would just sit for hours on a ledge in her jail cell at Rikers and look out the window. But the true burden of time, which felt so weighty to her, hit her in one instant in the middle of the night one evening in her fifth year behind bars. She was reading a book called *By Reason of Insanity*, a novel about a serial killer. A boy with a tough childhood and a rapist father himself turns into a lunatic killer. He goes on a killing spree in a hospital, where officials finally catch him. This is how Doris recounted that night:

> As I was reading this book, I was saying, 'When they catch him, he's going to do life.' And it hit me. When they catch him, *he's going to do life*. It was 3 a.m. I jumped up to the door. That realization! I jumped up and I started looking around the cell. And I see the bed. I see the toilet. I see the little crack, and it just hit me. I felt like everything had just hit me. I felt like I was starting to lose my mind.

And in that instant of panic, Doris turned to prayer, she told me. "I started praying and I just kept praying and praying. I said, 'I can do it if you don't let my mind go. Give me some direction. Where do I go from here?' I had already done five years, but I had *twenty more* to go. What should I do?" The answer to that was complex, but God continually helped her through the struggle, she said.

She began to see the Bible differently—everything had so much more of a personal meaning. Her favorite psalms and proverbs became her encouragement to keep pushing forward and stay positive. She reminded herself repeatedly, for example, that "God is a forgiving God," and she read stories of sin and redemption. "I have a lot of stories where things that happened in my life today have happened in the Bible in past generations," she said. "It just shows you that whatever you go through in life, it has happened before, and you can overcome it. … It will give you strength and it will give you courage." There was basic comfort

in her faith, in knowing that she was not alone in her struggles and sorrows. Still, she said, she often asked God the question—*What do I do from here?* The answer was constantly changing, but for 22 more years behind bars, she kept on reading, and she kept on praying.

Epiphanies and Transformation

Spirituality helped many of the women I interviewed through the roughest of times and through the day-to-day challenges of incarceration. For some, though, it completely changed their lives. It changed the way they viewed and understood everything—the world around them, their circumstances, their imprisonment, and their past, present, and future. This is not to say that the religious experiences and beliefs of the previous women I have discussed in this chapter were not meaningful and in some cases life-altering. But in these women I discuss here, I heard about something different: an epiphany. A singular moment of transformation and change that was grand and tangible. For these women, these spiritual moments marked not only a shift in their life behind bars, but also an important turning point in their lives.

Joedy 's parents both struggled with drugs. They were bad examples for Joedy, now 37, and her older sister Justine, 40, and they were a major reason why they both ended up in jail, the two told me in interviews. Their mom, a perpetual drug user, was an atheist. Their father was never very religious until he left during their childhood and came back, as they both called him, a "freak of nature Jehovah's Witness." The combination of extremes left both daughters pretty faithless. They thought their father was completely insane, and they weren't too convinced by their mother's lifestyle and choices. When I went to

Hour Children to interview both of them, I first met with Justine without Joedy, and she tipped me off that her sister was very into the "religious thing." Justine told me that she believed in God and it was helpful to have that belief when she was in jail, but it never meant that much to her in terms of her incarceration. She got through it on her own. Her sister, she told me, could tell a very different story.

I was of course then eager to hear about Joedy's transformation. As she told me about the lowest points of fighting her drug habit behind bars ("I hated [all the correction officers], but I especially hated myself," she said), I asked her how faith and spirituality had helped her. She started off simple, talking about worship services in jail, and I thought perhaps Justine had exaggerated. Joedy said, "I just went to church." I wanted to hear more. I asked her how she felt about God and she started to untangle the complex shift in her belief system that occurred inside prison walls. One day, she realized He was real and important:

> I never believed in God before that. When I felt the experience of having God in my life and having God work through me kind of spiritually, I realized that God is real. He's really real. There really is a God. And it helped me to get through everyday. ... I went to the church, but the church had noting to do with it. It was me and God. You could go to church and sit there and say the same thing, 'Hail Mary!' Bla bla bla. ... I didn't want to hear too much about anybody's religion, but I had a lot of influence because of the lot of the girls in there were very religious before they got to prison. I wasn't. I was a complete atheist. I did it on my own.

Though she found comforts in the church's prison community, her faith ultimately had very little to do with services. As is evident from the language she used to discuss her religious experience and transformation, it was deeply personal. It was a new way of thinking. She developed a completely rejuvenated sense of self, she said, one that was the polar opposite of the self-loathing drug addict who screamed and hated everyone. Sometimes her spirituality was tied to

programs she was completing behind bars, such as a 12-step initiative that had a religious theme to it. But once she found God, it quickly became her way of responding to life behind bars, and it became a driving force to make it to the other side. "I felt like without God, I would never be doing this. I would never even care to do this. I started caring for myself—for once, because I didn't care about myself. And when you don't care about yourself, you don't care about anyone else." In loving God, she learned to love herself and love the people around her.

Sigrid, the 50-year-old Minneapolis native who came to New York in the late 90s and was in and out of jail and prison a dozen times, told me that she always had God in her life. But there was also a single moment of transformation during her final prison stay, when the meaning of God changed dramatically for her. Or, as she put it, she stopped pushing Him aside. One day, God helped her see, she said. "I had a life-changing experience happen to me. It was like: 'Bitch, wake up!'" she said. "All the running that I did throughout the years, I had nothing to show for it. Nothing. Nothing. It just came out nowhere. It was like '*bitch wake up*,'" she said, emphasizing each word, slowly and powerfully in our conversation. Let's backtrack briefly, though. It is not as if she found God, or even a new understanding of God, the way some other women described it. God was a part of her life—always. Here's how she explained it:

> I've always believed in God. Always. Even when I was smoking crack, sometimes I would pull out the Bible. And I'd start reading the Bible. People would look at me and say, 'You are bugged out. You are crazy.' And I'd be like, 'God loves us, God loves us. We shouldn't be living the way we're living. We shouldn't do the things we are doing. God says He knows the plans He has for us.' But I would leave God on the stoop and keep running.

It is a complex explanation, and I cannot say I fully understood it during our interview. As I kept questioning her about this idea, she reiterated that she always knew God was by her side and that He was there even in the worst of times. Her faith grounded her, and when she went astray—which she did many times as she struggled with drugs, abuse, crime, and incarceration—she would temporarily push God aside. But He was always there—especially when she finally "woke up" behind bars.

What is most interesting to me about her discussion of religion is that, ultimately, she seemed to be attributing a lot of her mental progress behind bars to herself and her own personal breakthroughs—not a higher, abstract power. In fact, her reasoning seemed very logical to me. She got sick and tired of prison and just woke up one day realizing that it was time for her to take charge and break the pattern. As she went in and out of jails, the signs that time was passing were growing clearer and clearer—she was seeing officers getting older and retiring. "The officers when they see me, they're shaking their heads and saying, 'Ms. , when are you going to get it right?' and I was like, 'These mother fuckers—they know me.' It was like, ' is back again.'" And she grew ashamed and embarrassed. She didn't know why this was happening. "I got tired of hearing that. The prisoners were getting younger. ... It was time for me to wake up." And she did. I was confused what this turnaround had to do with God, but she said that He helped her see her situation for what it was—pathetic, pointless, and a waste of time:

> God was taking the scales off my eyes and letting me see: 'Is this what you want to do? Is this how you want to continue living your life—in and out of

> jails? In and out prisons? Smoking that shit? And you're getting nowhere with it. You're just not getting anywhere with it.' And I woke up.

To get through her final days upstate, she sat with her Bible faithfully. It helped her pass the time. She would read in the dark, she told me, adding that the only light she needed was the light from the sky and the sun outside her window—natural light. And she would talk to God faithfully everyday. People would walk by and stop and stare, she said. But she didn't care. She was ready to go home.

Like sisters Joedy and Justine, Carolyn, now 22, was not religious when she entered prison. And for the first half of her two-year stay, she was convinced that spirituality was not for her. She only went to church because she was bored. She needed something to do with her time, she wanted another chance to socialize, and ultimately, there was no good reason not to attend a worship service, she said. But God quickly helped her understand the world better. In fact, she hadn't realized, until she found these religious beliefs, how truly lucky she was, she told me. She had broken more laws than officials were aware, she had taken unnecessary risks, and she had been selfish in her life. Two years locked up, in the grand scheme of things, she soon discovered, was not so bad:

> I knew if wasn't for Him I would've been doing things that would've led me to do more time. … I started to think it has to be somebody else. Cause I've done worse shit to go to jail for more than three years. I've traveled with dope. I did more shit that could've led me to deeper situations or longer sentences. If it wasn't for God…I believe that God has [given] me that role to say, 'Look you can go farther or you can dig yourself into the deeper hole.'

In all the women I talked to who valued spirituality—whether through these large moments of epiphanies or through a persistent grounding in faith—I saw this common thread of speaking to God. In many of these stories, God played a

central role in helping these women understand their lives, but the women still had a lot of agency in their triumphs. In other words, I repeatedly saw this idea of a choice. God was helping these women see the choices in a clearer light, but they still had to make the decision to choose the right path that would help them survive until their release and never return. Like others, Carolyn saw it as a binary. God was presenting her with two life options: one with drugs and one with her daughter. Through her newfound spirituality, she knew exactly what she had to do.

In the case of Violet, however, God didn't just help her see the choices in front of her. He shook her into her senses, she said. Violet—the lover of Latin music who found herself addicted to cocaine—was also not religious when she was arrested. In fact, the closest she got to being religious in the first several months of her stay was praying to God that she could be released so she could return to her drug dealer. God, she said, did not answer those prayers. ("I would pray that they would let me go, because I was going to see my dealer," she said). Instead of the release she hoped for, officials kept postponing her court dates. One day, she realized it wasn't just the system's bureaucracy holding her back. There was higher power at work, she said:

> You know what, I really believe in my heart that was the big guy grabbing me by the back of my neck here and shaking me and saying, 'You know what, little girl? You are no longer in control. You need to wake up. This is not for you. You are not on this Earth for this, I have other plans for you.' I swear, I felt it in here [pointing to her heart]. When I realized the message that was trying to be conveyed for me, I knew there was nothing more important in my life but my children and my family. There's no amount of white powder—who gives a shit where it comes from. I don't care if it's Bolivian rock. I don't want it. I want nothing to do with that life anymore.

She knew what she had to do and she did it. Within a year, she was on track to end her sentence as planned, addiction-free, and truly ready to go home. Her beliefs had changed, she said, though she had not adopted any formal Christian religion. She looked back on that turning point as the crucial moment of support from a higher power that she needed to get her on track. “That was a sign. I’m not religious. I don’t go to church,” she said, “but I have my own conversation with the big guy.”

I would like to close this chapter with the story from Sharon that I began in the introduction. Though Sharon has always been religious, there was one moment in prison when she really felt she lost her faith. And it was in the single moment that God returned her to that she knew everything would be all right. The Parole Board had told Sharon that she would have to stay another 24 months in prison in addition to the 20 years of her sentence that she had served, for no other reason than the “nature of her crime,” she was told. It pushed her into a massive state of depression, and she really began to question her faith in a way that she never had before. She wept and she wept and she wept, she told me. The night she got the bad news, though, she had a dream. In her dream, a parole officer came to her and said that she was going home. His face was red, and she asked him how it was possible, but he kept moving farther and farther away from her, and very soon she couldn’t hear what he was saying, she recalled. And then he disappeared. She awoke from the dream with a small sense of hope or comfort. “I know that dreams are gifts—I know that,” she told me.

She tried to regroup herself and get back to her routine, despite the devastating news that she would be separated from her family for two more years. Then one day in the gym, about a month later, this incident occurred:

> This day in March, the parole officer says he has to see me. He comes to the gym and he tells me, 'I have good news and I have bad news. Which would you like to hear first?' I said, tell me the good news. He says, 'You're going back to the Parole Board.' So I start shaking and crying. Everyone in the gym wants to come near me, but they don't want to invade my privacy. So I said, 'What's the bad news?' And the bad news is that he couldn't tell me when I was actually going to go home, just because I was going back. My glasses fell off my face. The screw fell out. The lens fell out. Everyone comes running out. I'm happy, I'm crying I'm telling people I'm going back to the Parole [Board] and people are saying, 'That means you're going home!'

She said she could feel something good might be coming her way, but she was very wary of getting her hopes up. She didn't want to jinx it.

"I'm upstairs [in my cell]...I'm putting my face to the glass. I'm seeing my fate, I'm feeling my fate," she said. She later was able to call a friend in Virginia who told her that she had a vision that Sharon would be going home. Sharon, though, was still so concerned about false hope that she did not believe her friend—she couldn't, she said. "I was losing it. ... You let go of your faith, that's how depressed I was becoming. ... I was crying morning, afternoon, and night." She was not ready to be crushed again. Her faith was deeply weakened. Then one morning before her Parole meeting, she had one of the most profound experiences in her life:

> I'm sitting there, the light is over my bed. My Bible is on the bed. ... I'm just listening to my music, meditating. So I put my glasses on and—I get so emotional when I tell this—I look under my Bible and I see the screw to my glasses [tears]. And I'm looking at the screw and I'm saying, 'That can't be. I've slept in this bed for weeks. I've changed the sheets in this bed more than three times. I didn't have my Bible the day that my glasses fell of my face in the gym, so it's not like it could've fallen into one of my creases. It's

> just sitting on the bed next to the Bible when I'm getting ready to do my morning meditation. I picked it up, and it was the screw, and I knew I was going home. I knew I was going home.

She went and told all her friends that were with her in the gym the day her glasses broke. Everyone cried, she said. "There's no way—no human way," to explain what happened, she said. God was with her again, and she wasn't even worried about falsely getting her hopes up. She knew she was going home. And she was. The Parole Board had denied her release in error, she learned, and she would be going home on time after all. In Sharon's story, we see that her faith and her belief in God helped her to see positively in her darkest hour. She had lost everything, and in an instant—the moment that screw appeared in her Bible—she knew everything was going to be fine. It was a sign. She knew that there was in fact something greater than herself. The indescribable anxiety of possibly being stuck in prison for two more years subsided. Feelings of deep uncertainty and hopelessness left her and she knew that God was on her side.

Every woman I interviewed—outside of the Rikers inmates—in fact did successfully make it to the other side. Whether it was a motivating epiphany, a persistent relationship with God, daily prayers, or a mental safe space, their unique senses of spirituality helped guide them through their incarceration toward their release. And all eleven of them made it. They all found ways to tackle inner demons and come to terms with the difficult realities of their lives—at least enough to convince the government that they were fit to return to society. But for most, the suffering and obstacles did not stop there. The next major battle for many women I interviewed was facing the daunting question upon release: What next?

CHAPTER FIVE—COMING HOME

Violet, at age 36, stood on the corner of 86th Street and Columbus Avenue in 1990. After three years, she had been released from prison. She was back on the Upper West Side where she had lived before she went to jail. Standing outside a Greek restaurant where she used to eat, she had no idea what she was doing or where she was going. It was the Monday before Thanksgiving, and she was clueless, confused, and aimless. She had $3,000 dollars from her work-release program she had completed (an option for incarcerated individuals preparing for release where they work part-time and earn some money in the final months of a sentence). She had decided the first thing she would do is go back to her old neighborhood. "I'm just standing there wondering, what am I going to do now? … I didn't know what to do. I didn't know where I was going. I *just didn't know what to do*," she said to me, articulating each word. As she stood on that street corner, something strange and unexpected happened—something that proved to her, once again, the existence of God.

Her mother walked by.

It was the first familiar person she had seen since she was released that day. She recalled the incident this way:

> I swear, God is the master emcee. She [her mother] says, 'Why are you standing here?' And I said, 'You know what, I really don't know.' She says to me, 'Well then, I suggest you put yourself in the first hole [subway station] you see and get to where you are going. Get to where you need to be.' It was the first time I saw her when I came out, and it just happened. … It was weird. It was really a strange thing.

It was an eerie story, and it's eerie the way she told it. She said she really didn't know why she was on that block at that time, and she didn't know why her

mother was there either. She didn't recall a huge hug or tears. It was a calm and surreal conversation with her mother—after three years of being separated from her. The environment was familiar, but everything felt different.

It was, though, exactly what she needed at that moment. Her mother decided to get an apartment for her and Violet, and the two, with Violet's youngest daughter, wound up living together. "She was very supportive, very loving. I think only once or twice she mentioned my past and said she's not going to mention it again," Violet recalled. She got to spend five years with her mother again before she died. Violet had been locked up for three years, and prior to that she had found herself lost in a world of music and drugs—during which time she had very little contact with her mom. Having those five years with her mother after Violet's incarceration meant the world to her.

This anecdote, not just because of the spooky coincidence, really grabbed my attention in our interview and retrospectively when I reviewed my notes on women's reflections on reentry. In this final chapter here, I focus on what is arguably the most important part of the experience of incarceration—coming home. I examine here the task of leaving prisons and jails and what it means to be "free" on the other side. In Violet's story, I recognized a lot of important themes around this complex topic of reentry—firstly the sheer confusion and disorienting nature of the process. Standing on a street corner in the middle of Manhattan completely directionless, Violet illustrated the jarring nature of reentry, which can be challenging, liberating, emotional, and frightening. In line with what I've examined throughout this work, the role of the relationships she developed after incarceration is an important part of her reentry story as well. In her immediate

struggle, I also saw the basic challenges inherent in the process of reentry. Where do I go? Where do I live? How do I spend my first day, month, and year? What is it like to walk around a familiar neighborhood after years, or sometimes decades, away? How do I decide what to do after years of guards deciding for me? These were the questions I heard regularly when women I interviewed reflected on their journeys home. For some, the most pressing question was this: How do I make sure I don't go back? Here, I scrutinize the complicated nuances of these experiences through the eyes of the women I interviewed. I argue that the system is broken and for the women in my study, there was not enough systematic support as they transitioned from incarceration to freedom. I argue that the struggles that the women faced behind bars carried into the lives these women developed on the other side. An important part of this discussion is how women relied on positive relationships—human and spiritual—during the reentry process to turn their lives in the right direction.

I have broken this chapter into three sections. In the first section, I examine the first days, weeks, and months out, and the initial shock and disorientation these women faced. In these experiences, women expressed intense emotion ranging from sheer joy to deep anxiety and fear. I examine in that section the basic, and often easily overlooked, challenges of adjusting to a life not behind bars. In the second section, I examine the most common practical challenges for women leaving prison: finding a stable home and a job. It is in this section that I examine closely the failures—and how these women perceive the failures—of the system to actually help women get their lives back on their feet and stay out of prison. In the final section of this chapter, I look closely at the

roles of spiritual relationships in the reentry process for these women. Embedded in this discussion are larger questions of how spiritual and religious discoveries of God behind bars, as explored in-depth last chapter, played an important role in these women's lives after incarceration. I also look in the third section at larger mental health challenges outside of prison—such as struggles with temptations to return to old habits, or women trying to understand their occasional desires to return to prison—and how spiritual belief systems helped them with these struggles.

Hour One, Day One, Week One

Doris, now 51, had spent more than half her life in prison by the time she was released. She, along with two others who spent decades behind bars, did a good job of trying to help me understand the reality of years and years without freedom. Try to imagine the weight of 27 years behind bars—it's difficult. It's really challenging. When she first got into trouble with the law and went to jail, she was in her early 20s, the prime of her youth, as she described it. When she left prison in 2008, she was nearly 50 years old. She had spent decades without her children, her parents, without the freedom to choose what to wear, what to eat, when to eat, when to sleep, and so much more that can easily be overlooked. She spent decades unable to turn lights on and off. Unsurprisingly, the moment she stepped out of prison to finally come home was an emotional one. For one thing, she told me, 27 years would give any prisoner doubt about her prospects of actually one day coming home. Here's how she recalled the moments to me in our interview at a diner in Jamaica, Queens, where she now lives:

> I was in a daze, and I was so happy. I always had hope that I was going to go home, but I thought the day was never going to come. When I got that paper [for official release], I kept it on me, because I thought it was like a dream. When I stepped out, I was in a daze. I was in such a daze. And my family was there—they had a limousine there for me. It was wonderful.

But it wasn't the freedom, the fresh air, or the limo waiting for her that had the most impact on her. Given the struggles of separation anxiety that I discussed in the previous chapter, it shouldn't come as a surprise that the most intense moment in her first hour out was her reunion with her son. He was seven years old when she went to jail at age 22. (She had him when she was only 14-years-old). When she got out of prison for good, he was 35. She paused a great deal when recounting this moment for me, forcing me to pause and sometimes just consider the weight of what she was saying—trying to understand what it means to leave a child who is barely in grade school and come home to a full-grown man. She had of course seen him on visits, but this moment was the first time in decades that she was greeting her son without shackles, without guards, and without the knowledge that their visit had a tight deadline.

"My son," she said to me, letting out a sigh. "I walked into my son's arms and he hugged me. He *hugged* me. I waited for that day." The meeting happened outside Bayview, a facility upstate where she spent her final years of her sentence. "He hugged me so tight, and he broke down." It immediately recalled a hug she had received from her 7-year-old son 27 years prior when she was at a police precinct preparing to go to prison. When she was first sentenced to 20 years to life and had to tell her son that she would be leaving him indefinitely, he had hugged her around the waist, sobbing. He refused to let her go, and the young boy was pried out of his mother's arms, she remembered. In the embrace 27 years

later, the memory immediately came to mind, she said. “That day that I came out, my son gave me that same hug and broke down. But this time when he hugged me and broke down, I was able to say, ‘It’s over.’ It was the same hug I had received 27 years ago.” And just like when he was a child, he did not want to break the embrace, she recalled. “He hugged me, and he would not let me go. [Back then], he was holding me around my waist. They had to pry him off. But this hug, he hugged me around my neck, because he was grown now.” It was as if the force of time was symbolized by that single hug from a person who had grown up, grown tall, but still needed his mother, she said. “I was able to just say, ‘It’s over. It’s over.’ It was touching, you know?” At this point in our conversation, a few tears streamed down her face, but Doris was smiling.

Here is her recollection of the conversation she had with her mother in that moment. Standing outside of Bayivew, before getting in the car to go home, her mom said:

> I waited for this day. *I* did 27 years. I felt *every day* of those 27 years. I felt when you were sad. I felt when you were all right. I felt those days when you prayed, those days you didn’t feel like praying. I felt those days when you were sick. ... Now, I can go on and join your father.

It was a heavy thing for her mom to say in those first few minutes out of jail, but her mother really meant it, Doris told me. “I said, ‘Ma, don’t say that.’ I looked at her and I could tell she was touched.” But Doris—who if you recall from Chapter 4 had to leave prison to go to her father’s funeral—could tell her mom did not look so well. “I could really, really tell that my mother was tired.” And it was the thing her mother said next to her that hit her the hardest: “She says, ‘You are a strong woman. I have five kids, but none of them could’ve did what you did.’” At

the end of the day, her mom, she recalled, was proud of what Doris had accomplished. She had served her time and made it to the other side. Doris, too, was proud of her mother who had stayed so strong while her daughter passed through her 20s, 30s, and 40s without her family. She looked at her son awhile before she got in the car. And she locked eyes with her mother. It was a lot for the first hour out.

These kinds of stories of emotional reunions are common. In fact, I can say with confidence that every woman I interviewed had a story like Doris' reuniting that was heart wrenching in one way or another. A pattern I noticed in these stories, which was accentuated in Doris' account, was the weight of time and the weight of separation that these women felt in these moments. Very much tied to the suffering related to the passage of time that I discussed last chapter, in these first moments out of prison, it was often a cathartic moment of release, or a surge of emotion tied to realizations of just *how long* they were actually locked up. Stepping outside and seeing family members who have aged just like they have—it's almost like a slap in the face, or a wake-up call. It's exciting, it's unnerving, and it's frightening.

Let's take Mercedes, for example, who spent 20 years behind bars. When she described to me her first moment out of prison, she remembered the long walk out through gates and different checkpoints before she was really freed. (Recall my experience entering Rikers from the last chapter to get a glimpse of how great that space can be). "It was emotional coming all the way out to the front gate," she said. As she approached the exit, she saw her brother, her mom, her niece, and her four children waiting for her. But even before she reached

them, the march out felt serious and ceremonial. She said guards were high-fiving her and congratulating her. She saw sergeants waving at her from atop a hill as she exited. Some even complimented her and thanked her, saying, “Good luck!” and, “You were never a problem, here.”

Once she made it to her family, 20 years after she had originally been separated from them, she just wept:

> We all stood there crying. It felt like hours we were standing there crying. My son was two months old when I was incarcerated. Now, he’s 19 going on 20, and he already had a daughter. I think he cried the hardest. It shocked everybody, because he’s not a crier. Him crying made everybody else cry.

But it was the next moments in the car ride home that really forced her to feel the gravity of the moment and the time that had passed. She saw familiar sites and many more that were unfamiliar in a world that she once knew but had grown 20 years older without her. Everything from the technology around her to the new stores in her old neighborhood signified, dramatically, how much had changed and how much of her life she had spent behind bars. “It’s so crazy,” she recalled. “I was looking at *everything* going home.” She went to the neighborhood in Brooklyn where she had lived before she was incarcerated and it just felt, for lack of a more sophisticated word, weird. “I felt strange, walking around. All the kids that were…kids when I left was grown up now. I didn’t know who these people were!” People were hugging her and telling her they were glad she was home, and she was smiling uncomfortably, asking her brother who these people were. It was at once a place she had called home and also a place completely unfamiliar to her. This was another trend I saw in the women’s stories of their first moments of reentry: Coming home, women immediately grappled with what it meant to be in

a place that was familiar yet so distant given the years and years they spent inside a prison cell, disconnected from the outside world.

Embedded in these emotional journeys home—and I'm referring to just the first days and weeks—is this deep uncertainty. On top of this great sense of lost time that some women said they felt was this larger shock and fear, like that in Violet's first story. It's the immediate question: What now? But even before those anxieties set in, for Johanna, the question on day one was even more basic: Where the hell am I? Johanna, now 31, if you recall from chapter 2, is a Mexican immigrant who had never been to New York City and spoke no English when she first went to jail for smuggling drugs into the country at age 19. She had learned English during her four-year incarceration but she had quite literally not step foot on the streets of New York City in her whole life—aside from John F. Kennedy Airport and Rikers Island. She did not know what the subway system was. She didn't know how to get anywhere. And the first thing she noticed was just how unfriendly New Yorkers really were; they had exceeded their bad reputation.

"People are so rude. People are so fast. Always on the go. [I had to] adjust to the rhythm of these people. They are not nice," she said. I asked her when she was preparing to leave during the fourth year of her sentence, what her expectations were and if she was nervous. "I was scared. Doing five years in prison, I got the rhythm," she told me snapping her figure repeatedly. "Going to school, waking up early, doing this and that, dum, dum, dum." She then told me that she thought it was a really interesting question for me to ask—surprised that I might think that women could have anxiety and fears about what awaits them on the other side. (She even stopped to ask another formerly incarcerated woman

in the room at Hour Children if she was scared when she left). "I didn't know anybody. I didn't have family. I didn't have anyone to go to. Where am I going to go? … I was scared to come and face reality." The initial days out might have been uniquely trying for Johanna—who had no real support network and nowhere to go—but I found that her experience of immediate disorientation was a major factor in a lot of women's recollections. For Johanna, it meant learning how to buy a MetroCard and swipe it. (She said that on her first try, she lost a lot of money standing in the subway station and swiping and swiping without going through the turnstile).

For Mercedes, the first battle came with her new cell phone. In the limousine ride home, her family gave her a pocketbook with a Metro PCS cell phone similar to a blackberry. When she had been incarcerated 20 years earlier, mobile devices essentially did not exist. Her family dropped her off to meet with her parole officer and told her to call them when she was out so they could pick her up. "I didn't know how to make a call!" she said to me. "They didn't explain it to me. I didn't know what to do. Every button I pressed, nothing was happening and I didn't know any phone numbers by heart." She stood on a street corner, clueless. Eventually her brother showed up and picked her up, but she was momentarily lost—paralyzed by the simple task of trying to use a piece of 21st century technology. Sharon, who was incarcerated for 20 years and now works as a reentry coordinator for STEPS to End Family Violence, explained the basic challenges to me well, pointing out things that I never would have considered: "For someone like me who comes home after 20 years, a MetroCard. What's that?

Google, what is that? HopStop [a trip planning website] *what is that?* Oh my God. Emails! I am still learning."

Echoing the conflicting and intense emotions that so many of the women described to me with regards to their first days out, Dinah, the 38-year-old Florida native, told me that when she first stepped out of prison, she kissed the ground. She took her first step outside and literally got down on the ground, she said. And she drank a Pepsi. As soon as she was out, she called her children, cried on the phone, and told them she was on her way home. At home, she had a big dinner, though Dinah said she wasn't hungry. It was all too surreal for her to really process, and it took time to accept that this was her reality, she said:

> I didn't eat. I just kinda stared at my kids the whole time. I couldn't believe it. It just felt so unreal. Am I in my safe place or am I in my reality here? I remember, that first night, I couldn't sleep. ... I kept staring at the wall, turning the lights on and off, just looking around me, just making sure everything was real—that I wasn't dreaming. I kept looking at my kids, making sure they were ok.

She had been in and out of jails and prisons numerous times, but the final time, she really had trouble processing it all. As I outlined last chapter, being separated from her children had been one of the most traumatic experiences in her life. To be in their presence again and to be in a home, without guards, without a curfew, without someone turning the lights on and off for her, it felt completely unreal and ultimately very overwhelming. Dinah said she felt at once liberated and also a bit fearful of what was next. What was most interesting to me was the difficulty she had accepting the safe space at home. As I discussed in the last chapter, her spiritual coping mechanism involved imagining a safe space in her mind, which

typically involved her children. Now, she was actually there and it was simply hard to digest. It wasn't just her mental safe space—she was actually home.

Part of this kind of shock women described to me was tied to the simple idea of independence. In jails and prisons, these women were being ordered around in all aspects of their lives. Now, they could go where they wanted, do what they want, buy what they want, and sleep when they want. And it's a transition that happens in an instant—when they first leave the gates of prison. One of the instances when it hit Mercedes was when she went shopping on the first day back. She told me that she had saved up some money in prison and had an urge to go to the grocery store when she got back home to Brooklyn. Her mother offered to go with her, but Mercedes told her she wanted to walk by herself. She went and cashed a check and wandered around the store. "I didn't want nobody to say, 'Don't buy this. Don't buy that.' It felt really, really good. I bought 200 dollars worth of nothing." It was almost a landmark moment for her—one more sign that she really was out of prison. "I bought all the things I wanted to taste." As she told me about this day, she recalled how in one of her prisons, if the women listened hard enough, they could actually hear the sounds of ice cream trucks passing by. She said that she and her fellow inmates used to joke with each other that they were going to go and stop the ice cream truck. And on that first day home, going to the store and buying some ice cream—and $200 dollars worth of whatever else she wanted in the moment—was a significant step in her life. For Mercedes, this was freedom.

In Search of Stability

"They say it takes a village to raise a child. It really takes a village to raise you once you get out of prison, because you can go back so quickly." This is how Dinah described the process of reentry to me. So often she felt like the challenges were truly insurmountable. Recall that Dinah was the one who had no place to live or take her children when she was released from one of her first prison stays and was told by a social worker in Florida that they should try being homeless at a bus station in the meantime. She wanted to provide for her children, but she felt she couldn't do that without leaving the state, violating her parole, and going somewhere where livable homeless shelters existed. Forget about finding a job, she said, because she had much more immediate concerns the first time she was released, mainly finding a roof for her and her children.

Mercedes put it more bluntly: "Reentry sucks." In two words, she summed up the sentiment I heard from every single woman I interviewed: The reentry process is extremely challenging and demanding, and the Department of Corrections does little to help women prepare for it. The two greatest obstacles to finding stability are securing jobs and housing. As convicted felons, both are difficult to find. Landlords don't want someone who has been to prison and neither do employers. Each woman I interviewed recounted their own personal sagas trying to find work and a place to live. After lengthy conversations about this process, what became clear was that the prospect of success was so deeply dependent on the women's surrounding environments and support networks, or lack thereof. This is where relationships became so important in the process of reentry. With a loving parent with a spare bedroom or couch, some women had a

place to start. Others had fewer options: the street or a home with the very drugs or abusive individuals that had led them to jail in the first place. In this section, I examine some of the struggles that these women faced and pay particular attention to their grievances and frustrations with the system. It is important to restate here that all eleven women I interviewed are today involved with nonprofit groups dedicated to helping women with reentry. Several went back to jail multiple times before they found the organizations that they work with today. Ultimately, these nonprofits are not huge and many women pass through the prison system in New York without their support. While my project is never an attempt to tell any kind of universal story of female incarceration, it is important to make a special note here that these are the stories of reentry for these specific women. I am confident that there are many women who, without the support of networks like Hour Children, WORTH, and STEPS, fare far worse.

This is why reentry sucks, according to Mercedes: “They tell you you have to get a job. They tell you that you have to get housing, that you can’t be without housing. And you have to pay fees to parole officers,” she told me when I asked her if she had concerns with the reentry process and the services the Department of Corrections offers. “But you can’t get a job, because most places don’t want to hire you. You can’t get housing either; they don’t want someone on parole. If you can’t get a job, they tell you to get on public assistance,” she said. It gets harder and harder. “When do you even have a chance to apply for food stamps?” I found frequently that women were the most passionate and used the strongest language when discussing these difficult processes. Certainly, I heard a lot of strong emotions with regards to mistreatment and abuse in and out of prison, but in my

discussions on reentry, there were consistent sentiments of pure anger and resentment. Take, for example, Joedy, the Staten Island native with a sister who also spent years behind bars. She was giggly and smiley when we chatted at Hour Children, even when discussing some heavy topics, and when I asked her about reentry, she said, matter-of-factly and with a chuckle:

> The reentry system sucks. Most of these women should not go back to where they came from. Most come from slummy project areas, living horrible lifestyles. They should not go back there. And if they have nowhere to go, then they throw them into a shelter. That's bad too. That's where everyone is doing drugs and getting high. ... You're walking out of those doors, and you have absolutely nothing.

That final sentence underscores the frustrations I heard over and over again—that they leave prison with nothing and are expected to make something out of it.

Ultimately, women told me, the process of finding housing and employment is one where women constantly have to prove that they are worthy of a second chance. It is a predicament that can take a toll on them, they said. The stigma of incarceration is real; additionally, the job market in New York City is competitive and the housing stock is expensive. A criminal record very much becomes a scarlet letter these women must wear at every job interview or meeting with a potential landlord—if they can even get that far. Dinah said, "You are trying to get on your feet. You're trying to have people look at you for the person you are and not what you've done in your past, and no one is giving you that opportunity." Without a job, it can feel impossible to find housing, but without stable housing, women can't spend time hunting for jobs, Dinah said. "It's a catch-22. You're stuck. You're damned if you do and damned if you don't." And for someone who has not lived outside of jail or prison for decades, they are at a

further disadvantage. Some told me they didn't even know how to use the Internet to search for jobs in the first place.

These challenges are underscored by the way these women described to me the occurrences in their lives that finally got them on the right paths. They were, as so many of them said, very "lucky." Johanna told me about her relationship with the founder of Hour Children and how fortunate she was that she was able to get a job interview. They had met behind bars and having an advocate who believed in her and was willing to support her on the other side made all the difference. The timing of an opening at the organization also just worked out well, she said. When we chatted, she wondered out loud what would have happened to her if a position were not available at the time. Joedy said she sent letters to different organizations when she was preparing to leave and was so blessed that Hour Children responded to her inquiries. Mercedes said she doesn't know what she would have done if she hadn't had friends and family supporting her along the way. (And years later, she still lives with her father; so does Sharon). Some didn't have high expectations for themselves, especially since they had seen women fail to make it on the other side and wind up back in prison. Because of that, for some, the fact they are where they are today—in stable jobs or taking classes—is nothing short of a miracle.

One way to better understand the failures of the system to give these women meaningful support is to look closely at the services these nonprofit organizations provide. In one way, they are partnering with government and helping to fill in a gap in reentry services. But in reality, they are actually offering whole systems of long-term support and care that are far removed from anything

provided by the Department of Corrections. Women on the Rise Telling HerStory goes into prisons and meets with women in regular workshops preparing them for the challenges on the other side, for example. Hour Children prides itself on being a one-stop shop—an organization that is connected to everything women need when leaving prisons—housing, employments, counseling, and more. Sister Tesa Fitzgerald, director of Hour Children, told me about her reentry philosophy, which highlights some of the fundamental flaws in the system. She said that women coming out of prison often just are not ready to live on their own, find permanent housing, and find jobs. That's why her organization first places women in communal living situations. I visited one of these houses in Long Island City, Queens. It's homey and comfortable. Three women were cooking lunch together on a Tuesday afternoon when I dropped by. There are communal rooms with toys and televisions where mothers can bring their children, there's a carpeted area with books, and there are smaller rooms with computers where women can work on job applications.

As I presented in the reflections on the first moments of reentry in the last section, the dramatic transition can be shocking. Hour Children aims to ease that shock significantly and help women avoid relapses. The communal living thus provides women with structure, chores, and rules and regulations; they don't have to face the burdens of complete independence on day one. After women spend time in this style of housing and begin to adjust and perhaps find work, Hour Children can move them to one of their other houses, which offer more independence. Women often get involved in the program by developing relationships with organizers while they are still incarcerated, or in some cases

they may be referred to the program upon reentry. Word of mouth, it seems, also plays a role in connecting formerly incarcerated women to Hour Children. The ultimate goal is to place these women, with their families, in permanent housing where they can live independently with stability. Sister Tesa explained it to me like this: "Once you have a roof over your head, and you know it's clean and safe, then you can start to take advantage of programs and do job training. If you're coming home to chaos or coming into a situation where there might be violence, or you don't know who is going to be at your door, it's common sense that it's not going to work." Talking to Sister Tesa, it seems so obvious. In prison, she said, women lived with very strict, regimented routines where they had few opportunities to make any personal choices about their lives, big or small. On the other side, women suddenly have to make a whole host of potentially life-changing choices all at once. And there's absolutely no room for mistakes, she said. Supportive housing, alternatively, gives women a safe space to make some mistakes and helps them learn how to make positive choices.

Ultimately, most women came from families or environments that did not have values that supported a positive future: "It was a spiral of negative patterns that led them to the street. From there, prison was the next step. Once they're in prison, they're guilty of leaving their children and messing up their lives," Sister Tesa said. As they face reentry, they are vulnerable and must surround themselves with positive figures. She said she emphasizes this by constantly telling women to make good memories for their children; they can't change the past, but they can impact the present. The passage of time in prison can be daunting and traumatizing in some cases, as I have discussed throughout this

project, but, interestingly, the best gift these women can receive upon reentry is time, Sister Tesa said. They need time to figure themselves out. They need time to come to terms with their lives and their family situations. And they need time to adjust. That can be impossible without meaningful support. All the women I talked to at Hour Children expressed genuine gratitude for the organization. Sigrid's eyes even welled with tears when she introduced me to one of the directors at Hour Children, telling me that she was like a mother to her.

The organizations I talked to also place a big emphasis on self-esteem, which the directors said can be so low for some of these women upon reentry that it makes it impossible to even begin to try and tackle tasks like job hunting. At Women on the Rise Telling HerStory in East Harlem, women have an opportunity to discuss the hardest parts of the reentry process and learn that they are not alone. This is evident simply by the posters on their wall from group workshops. When I visited, Mercedes, a coordinator for the organization, showed me several of these projects. One large sheet of paper had a list of challenges that women were going through, including relationships, employment, trust, and sex. Index cards around their office have encouraging statements written on them.

Sister Mary Nerney, the founder of STEPS, told me that low self-esteem can be one of the biggest obstacles during reentry. Not only do these women have to make big decisions on their own for the first time in years, they have to face rejections and slammed doors at every step, she told me. She said she hears sentiments like this frequently: "I am so depressed today because I'm just thinking of the fact that I have very little food in this little place, or I'm in a horrible [shelter]. Wherever I am isn't where I want to be." Dozens of employers

may not even acknowledge that they received a job application. These kinds of discouraging signs make it so difficult to stay on track, she said. What I learned from advocates and the women themselves is that not only does the system not do enough to help the formerly incarcerated get situated post-imprisonment, there is often little the women can do on the inside to prepare for the personal and emotional hardships they are likely to face on the outside. Having meaningful support can help women not give up. Philosophies like the one Sister Tesa described to me offer a step in the right direction. She told me: "People always say you give people a second chance. No. For many of our families…that didn't have the structure or education to do life right in the first place…this is not a second chance. This is a first chance."

While a lot of women told me that they were lucky to succeed and find stability, for some of them, it was in their stories of great perseverance that I really felt like I gained a meaningful understanding of just how difficult reentry can be in practice. Joedy offered the best example of this. Though she said she was fortunate that Hour Children responded to her letter, make no mistake, *she* made her luck happen. Here's how she described her outlook on life post-incarceration:

> I hit the ground running, and I'm still going. I'm studying radiology. I'm taking remedial classes. I'm working part-time here [at Hour Children]. I'm working part-time for a cleaning company I hate [laughs]. I wanted to get out. I did in one month what some of these girls do in two years. Everyday, I was up at 6 a.m. out the door. I was just going. I just wanted to not waste any more time. Right now, I'm on parole, but I'm not just gonna sit here and say I can't do anything.

Sitting with her in an empty conference room in one of Hour Children's offices, I could feel her energy. She's undoubtedly driven and inspired. It's never easy, she

said. The process is so hard that it in fact demands this kind of relentless ambition, she told me. As determined as she is, it doesn't mean she doesn't get frustrated and upset with the inherent challenges of reentry—after all, she's still on parole, she said. But even in the darkest moments post-incarceration, one thing is certain, Joedy said to me: She's not going back to prison.

Keeping the Faith

Sharon has in fact gone back to jail and prison—but not with shackles and a jumpsuit. As part of her job as a reentry coordinator, Sharon, last summer, began preparing to return to state prisons and jails to work with women behind bars. And in the fall of 2011—a year and a half after she finished her 20-year sentence—she returned for the first time to the prisons that had once been her homes to work with incarcerated women. She even visited former inmates. I had the good fortune of catching up with Sharon on Rikers Island for the STEPS Thanksgiving celebration, which was her second time returning to jail. In discussing what the complex experience of returning to Rikers meant to her, I started to understand more of the nuances that have defined her process of reentry. A few minutes before the Department of Correction officials told me it was time for me to leave, I stopped Sharon in the middle of the cafeteria in the women's unit and asked her what the event meant to her. She told me:

> This is the second time I've come back, and it's inspiring. It gives me an opportunity to leave them with something. I can see the tears in their eyes. I see the pain in their eyes. I can relate. It hurts. I know I've left something for them. ... All this brings joy to a sad moment. ... It means they are not forgotten.

While it is an important opportunity for her—to share her experiences and show women that there is reason to maintain hope, she said—it is a personally

challenging job. Entering the prison gates and knowing that she will be leaving at the end of the day, while those inside may not taste freedom for years, is a daunting task, she told me. Five minutes earlier, her speech to the 60 or so inmates subtly underscored this tension. She said to them: "I want to let you know there's life after prison. There's life after pain. There's life after sorrow," as women in jumpsuits and party hats crowded at cafeteria tables cheered. "I came home and I was able to start my life again from a new beginning. The only time I look back is when I come here to be with you on the other side. We as women being here for each other lift each other up," she said.

In this motivational speech—that had women on their feet applauding her, some in tears—Sharon alluded to an important challenge in reentry: coming to terms with the past. She told these women that she does not look back and she has been successful on the other side. And she has—she is the reentry coordinator for a major nonprofit group based in New York City. She has a salary. She has a home. But it doesn't mean she doesn't grapple with the demons of her past life behind bars. Over the course of several interviews, she told me that, more than a year after her release, she still struggles mentally and emotionally with what she went through in prison on a regular basis. It manifests itself in strange ways she cannot fully explain. In this final section here, I look at the more nuanced post-incarceration mental health challenges women described to me and how their belief systems, religious faith, and spirituality played—and continue to play today—an important role in confronting these struggles. I examine here how the experience of imprisonment impacts women's mental health well beyond the initial shock of reentry. I look at how these women, after their release, faced

temptations and developed ways to fight them. And I explore the ways in which their relationships with God, just like the in-prison transformations I looked at last chapter, continued to evolve after incarceration.

It's a lot of up and down for Sharon, she told me. Some days, she will feel charged and excited to go to work, and other times she just may not feel like getting out of bed. There are lingering feelings of stress and angst that have nothing to do with her current situation, she said. A year later, she has adjusted to cell phones and e-mail and the subway system. But there's a part of her that still feels utterly confused. For months after her release, she told me, the concept of freedom was still difficult to digest:

> At certain points, I crashed. And it felt like insanity. I felt like I needed to talk to somebody. It felt like I wanted to be back inside. It felt like, 'Gosh, did I really know what I was praying for when I asked to be free?' Then on the other side of it, I'm like, 'Girl, snap out of it!' You have to be grateful.

She said that as time passed, she felt this kind of anxiety less and less, but it remains difficult to comprehend. Why would she ever want to return? On a basic level, the world around her when she left prison was simply overwhelming. And not just in the day-to-day ways I discussed earlier in this chapter. Getting up everyday and living a life that is really hers has sometimes been challenging, she said. Back in prison, she knows that there are others still stuck, but today she is—in the real world, on the streets of New York City—free. In my second interview with her, recalling the first few months after her release, she said, "So now that I'm out. Freedom?" She paused for several seconds, repeating the word "freedom" as if it were in some foreign language she didn't understand. Here's

how she described some of her struggles—how freedom actually makes her feel afraid sometimes in her father's house where she lives:

> It's...those moments when I'm just by myself. I wake up to go to the bathroom, but I might be afraid to get out of the bed, because when I was inside and got up, there were always other cells where the women were. There was the movement of the officer out there. So I always felt safe. I drive my father nuts now! I always make sure all the doors and windows are locked.

I asked her why that was so important to her. She replied: "In my mind," pausing, "I need to be locked in." She went on to describe her feelings that her mind is not truly in the present. Her mind is sometimes in prison. Or her mind is in the world of New York City that existed 20 years ago. Her mind is not always in 2011.

Sharon believes deep in her heart that God and her faith got her through her 20 years in prison. She prayed regularly in prison and God helped her find her way out. On the other side, nothing has really changed, she said. She still leans on God. She looks to Him in her darkest moments, when she feels she may not want to get out of bed, or feels afraid or vulnerable in her own home. When I asked her how she dealt with her anxiety, she, without hesitation, discussed her faith. She said, "I pray when I walk. I pray when I'm on the bus. I pray when I'm on the train. I pray when I can't keep my eyes open."

Sharon's work also helps her, and her relationships with women who have faced similar hardships are important to her. Supporting other women who have recently been released from prison, or returning to institutions and giving speeches to current inmates, is fulfilling and rewarding. It reminded me of a comment Mercedes made about being a mother and auntie to women in prison. Sharon helps herself by helping others, she said. Tied to my earlier discussion of

power struggles, part of the joy of being an authority figure and role model for others is that she feels in control, Sharon said. Knowing that she can help women and can make a small difference in their lives helps her feel better about herself. “It makes me feel in a place of power, a place of greatness. It makes me feel that my passion for helping others is coming to fruition. It’s like an awakening,” she said. With each passing day, she said, she believes more and more in herself and the importance of the works she’s doing. And she keeps on praying.

For some of the women I interviewed, faith in God was a weapon against temptation upon reentry. Carolyn, the 22-year-old who spent two years behind bars, had a religious transformation during her incarceration. Prior to prison, she had never really believed in God and was not spiritual. That all changed inside prison, and she has continued to use her faith to stay on track today, she told me when we chatted in a room inside Hour Children’s housing complex in Long Island City. Though she had shifted her mentality away from drugs and that lifestyle, coming home wasn’t easy. The quickest way to make some cash would be drug dealing—and she certainly knew how to do it. In fact, she had even received some tips from inmates in prison about the best places to get the cheapest drugs. “That was on my mind for the first fucking two weeks. I prayed and I prayed and I kept thinking about Mariah [her 4-year-old daughter]. I kept thinking about my daughter and I kept saying, ‘I don’t want to go back to prison.’” So far, she said, the praying has worked. The first months were filled with temptations; after two years without any material goods, she said she was even just eager to shop for new shoes, a plasma-screen television, clothing, and

more. But in the past her drug money had supported that—not an honest wage. "When I came home, it was the biggest temptation in my life."

Similar to Joedy's mentality, Carolyn said she was eager to do things right and control her urges. "I was really energized. I wasn't tired. I was anxious. I was really ready to run," she told me. But part of her really wanted to use that energy to get quick money in the best way she knew how. What is particularly interesting about Carolyn's description of her situation is the way she linked her prayers to the harsh realities of imprisonment. Praying, she told me, helped remind her of where she did not want to end up. It's as if her faith was a way to care about the future and maintain disdain for the past. She said: "To fight those temptations, I had to look back. I prayed about it, and I stopped thinking about it. If I'm sitting in bed and thinking, I need some Prada [merchandise] and I need to try to find a way to get it, I think I need a drug deal. Then I think that a drug deal will lead me back to prison. ... And I would pray." In her analysis, it is clear that her relationship with her daughter and her relationship with God both help her take her mind off of her desires and help her stay focused. Because she knows that there is something greater than herself looking out for her, she can accept her situation and be confident that she is not going to give in. She said, "I would pray, and I would be like, 'I 'ain't gonna think about it anymore.' And I leave it in God's hands.'" That doesn't mean that sometimes she doesn't feel like she could slip up, she said, but armed with her larger sense of faith and trust in God—and motivated to be a good mother for her daughter—she knows she is headed in the right direction.

For some women, this is a mindset that they must keep at the forefront of their thoughts: They are lucky to be where they are—free on the other side—but any mistake could result in incarceration once again. Dinah said she is pushing forward with her life and certainly doesn't want to live in fear. But she has to be modest and gracious and remember how fortunate she truly is to be free and alive post-incarceration. She said to me, "You can very easily just slip into the abyss and…go right back in [to prison]. It's a tricky situation. Coming from where I come from, I know that I've gotten far. But I also know that it doesn't take much for you to go back. And I always keep that in the forefront." If you recall, Dinah is not traditionally religious, but spirituality nonetheless played an important part in her experience of imprisonment. She found a way to go to what she called a safe space in her mind, and that got her through. On the other side, she also found salvation in mental strength. Her belief system during the reentry process involved what she called a mental "transformation." She said, "You have to transform your mentality. You have to transform everything—you're way of thinking about people, places, and things." I asked her for more specifics, and she told me that a big part of it is opening up, letting people in, and really taking the advice of people around her. For Dinah, it seemed like she needed to break away from the distrust she had developed from negative relationships behind bars and learn how to embrace positive relationships with supportive people around her. Not only does she remind herself regularly that she could easily go back to prison if she slipped up, but she devotes herself to a way of thinking that is positive, where she is optimistic about the world around her. She tries to no longer be

resentful, but instead be grateful for her sisters and leaders at WORTH and other organizations. This helps her get through, day by day.

I heard this idea of actively taking control of their lives and shifting their mentalities in a lot of my interviews. Let's not forget how tough these women really are. By the time they had reached their release date, they had experienced so much hardship in their lives—from abuse prior to incarceration to power-hungry guards inside prisons. Several women I talked to told me that their transformations in prison and on the other side often involved a repurposing of the skills they had once used on the street. It's not easy to face abuse. It's not easy to prostitute. It's not easy to sell drugs. The strength and bravery that these women had shown in their bad habits could easily be applied to choices and actions in their lives that helped them move away from the world of crime. This concept recalled something I heard at a speech given by New York City Councilmember Jumaane Williams at an all-day prison reform event at Riverside Church last fall, called "Think Outside the Cell: A New Day, A New Way."[79] He had said to the crowd, "The skill set that a gang member has to survive in a gang could be tweaked a little bit to survive in corporate America in a fortune 500 company."

Sigrid, 50, explained this idea best to me. She had backtracked numerous times and was in and out jail frequently. After she was released the final time, things were different, she said:

> When I came home, everything that I had put into the drug life, everything that I had put into the streets, everything that I had put into the negative, I was going to reverse that—take all those attributes and twist it to the

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[79] "Think Outside the Cell."

> positive. I hustled hard in the streets. ... I vowed that and I vow it today. ... I live for the positiveness in my life. I live, I breathe, I sleep, I eat for the positiveness in my life.

It is in fact through her spirituality that she can keep this vow, she added. I asked her if she feels confident that this time, she's not going back to drugs and not going back to jail. She said, sternly, "I'm not. I refuse. I'm not. I refuse, I refuse, I refuse. There's nothing in the past that can do any good for me. My future is so bright." And it remains bright, she said, because she prays. "I pray every single solitary day that I will accomplish a good paying job. ... The rest of it is gonna come. I'm praying on it."

For some of the women I talked to, the hardest part of life after prison is accepting the fact that the aftermath of incarceration does not wear off quickly. For Johanna, for example, the fact that she was imprisoned is a reality that she has to confront on a regular basis. And she has had to learn how to cope with that. The clearest example of that is the anxiety she felt around telling her son that she had in fact been to prison. While she was incarcerated in New York, her toddler son grew up in Mexico until, after her release, her family flew him to New York City to reunite with his mother. Recently, after he turned 11, Johanna sat him down and told him the truth. Reuniting with him after four years of separation was difficult enough—the anxiety she felt at that time kept her from sleeping. But even as she began to rebuild her life with her son as her priority, she was constantly reminded of the fact that her incarceration was a fact of life that the two would have to confront together. It took a toll on her. "It was a big baggage, and I was carrying it with me everyday." Johanna also isn't religious, but she needed to find the inner strength to confront this and tell her son the

truth, and that was a big obstacle to moving forward. With the help of a therapist, she finally sat down and told him that his mother had been locked up for four years. Today, she said, she's still worried about how her son is processing the news, but everyday, she said, she learns more about herself and her son.

As I talked to more and more women about the challenges of reentry and the role of their spirituality in combating these obstacles, it occurred to me that the whole experience is perhaps so trying and so difficult that it only makes sense that women believe in something greater than themselves. As I've shown in several of these reflections, many of these women felt that the process of incarceration and reentry really demanded that they change themselves, rethink their identities, confront difficult pasts, and become someone different. Whether locked up in a small jail cell, or on the other side living on a couch in a family member's house, these obligations can feel impossible. In prison, the new way of thinking that Joedy developed, in part to kick her drug addiction, became vital to her survival on the other side. She couldn't have done it without God, she said:

> I asked God to remove all these character defects, but the big thing is you gotta replace them with something. When you take something away, you gotta put something there. It's like math. ... I think the main thing is when you're done, you're done. ... Either you are or you aren't ready, but you just do it.

Grounded by her faith, Joedy said she finally had the strength to push past her addiction—a process that was closely linked to a reimagining of her identity. In the absence of negativity, she had to make room for positivity in her personality and in her values. God helped her do that, but she took charge of her life and hasn't stopped today, she told me. Her sister Justine, who is much less religious, said that God and faith didn't make much of a difference during her

imprisonment. But on the other side, she even believed that there was some greater power supporting her in the uphill battle to build a stable life. In many of these women's descriptions of how God helped them during reentry, I repeatedly heard this belief that they wouldn't have made the kind of progress they did without some kind of divine support. It's perhaps a testament to just how insurmountable the obstacles of reentry can feel. Justine is a good example of this, because she doesn't believe strongly in religious transformation, yet she told me she couldn't accept the fact that she just made it on her own. Upon her release, for the first time, she no longer had the desire to drugs. "I really don't have the urge to do those kinds of things anymore," she said. "There definitely is some kind of higher power at work."

Successes upon reentry—whether finding a home, getting hired, reconnecting with a child, or battling depression—often, and justifiably, felt like major feats for these women. Some thanked God for good fortune, while others said God helped give them the strength to make their goals a reality. Others cited a few individuals in their lives that made all the difference, whether a supportive parent, an encouraging mentor from the nonprofit groups, or a child inspiring them to be a better person. In most cases, reentry was tied closely to deep personal growth; women seemed to figure out what it is they care about. After facing so many struggles that sometimes made they feel empty inside, this was key. Achievements during reentry were tied to larger realizations that they mattered, that they had a purpose, and that they cared about the people around them. These discoveries, many told me, helped them learn how to slowly but meaningfully push their lives forward—past their histories of incarceration.

CONCLUSION—DOES THE PRISON SYSTEM BUILD HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS?

In the front of the cafeteria in Rikers Island, around ten inmates in the women's unit were performing a skit they had rehearsed. The small performance for the 50 or so other women at the Thanksgiving celebration was inspired by their frustrations dealing with correction officers, social workers, and other government bureaucrats. I couldn't really hear what was going on from where I was sitting, but the women in the audience and those performing kept bursting into laughter. I decided to take the opportunity to chat with Josie White, a Rikers service coordinator with STEPS to End Family Violence, the group organizing the holiday event. There reporting for the *Daily News*, I asked her why this event was so important to her, and she told me that these women need joy in their lives, especially during the holidays. I mentioned to her that a lot of the women I had just interviewed seemed particularly distressed since they didn't even know when they would be going home. Rikers, remember, is a jail, not a prison, which means that, generally, most women there are awaiting trial and may not have even been sentenced yet. (In some cases, women can serve a one-year sentence in Rikers). I knew this going into the event, but I hadn't really thought deeply about the implications of this factor. Josie said:

> People forget this about Rikers—that the vast majority of people there haven't been convicted of anything. ... For the most part, these are people who were arrested and are waiting for the resolution of their cases. If you think about our legal system, you are [supposed to be] innocent until proven guilty, right? On a socioeconomic level, if these were women who were middle class or upper class, they would pay bail and they wouldn't have to be here. It's just a very sad thing. You just wait until a resolution.[80]

[80]Josie White. Personal Interview at Rikers. November 21, 2011.

Her comment hit me hard. I looked around at the women in the jail cafeteria, dressed in party hats and "superhero" outfits, dancing and singing. Shanise, a 23-year-old inmate who I had interviewed earlier in the day, was up at the front of the room, with a microphone singing her cover of Alicia Keys' "Fallin'" with a few tears streaming down her face. I had started to think about the implications of this during my interviews when I naively asked the women at the event when their release dates were scheduled. Most told me they didn't know. But in that moment, it occurred to me that on top of all the difficulties of being behind bars, many of these women were up against such great uncertainty and powerlessness, which for some might have been one of the greatest sources of stress and anxiety. Their relationships with each other, apparent from their interactions, helped. One cried and said she just wanted to be home with her daughter on Thanksgiving, while another put her arm around her and told her it would be okay. This uncertainty seemed to exacerbate the challenge of trying to maintain relationships with family members on the other side. Many of them, Josie told me, could be completely innocent and a jury or a judge may even eventually determine that. But in the meantime, they literally had no choice—their lives would continue behind bars.

I bring up this point in at the conclusion of my work here, because it taps into an underlying question at the crux of my work: Does prison work? In relation to my topic, the question is this: Does prison actually help women overcome bad relationships, form productive ones, and carry that progress through to life on the other side? If the goal of prison is to rehabilitate (there's a

reason it's called the Department of Corrections), then shouldn't the process of incarceration help these women push past negative relationships that put them in jail in the first place? Shouldn't it help them develop strong, positive relationships that will keep them out of prison? In that moment at Rikers, I felt that the whole thing seemed rather absurd. In one of the most disorienting moments of my visits, a young girl, around 17 or 18 asked me where I went to high school. I told her that I went to LaGuardia, a performing arts school by Lincoln Center in Manhattan. She briefly attended that school too in the same department as me, she said, telling me that I looked familiar. At that point, the Correction official escorting me told me to stop talking to her and only chat with the designated interviewees, so I didn't get to hear much about her or even learn her name. I wanted to say that she looked familiar too, but it was hard for me, in that instant, to believe that someone in a grey jumpsuit behind bars might be a person I once interacted with years prior on the other side. I wondered where she might end up or if her experience was helping her. She seemed so young. Would she return?

Throughout this work, I have shared bits and pieces of the lives of eleven women who were at one point in their lives arrested, convicted, sentenced, jailed, and released. A majority of them faced serious traumas before they were incarcerated and during their imprisonment, and most of them today continue to struggle—whether to make ends meet, to find housing, or to mentally and spiritually come to terms with their past. They all faced some kind of negative relationships in their lives that pushed them to imprisonment. Behind bars, they battled negative relationships that sometimes triggered traumas from prior

abuses. Through new relationships, they leaned on each other and they leaned on God in all different ways. These relationships evolved dramatically and played important roles in their lives post-incarceration. Some experienced major spiritual journeys. Others developed friendships that are still important to them today. Many were both inspired and crushed by their strained relationships with children on the other side. Despite spending hours with these women—visiting them at the organizations that often function as their second (and sometimes first) homes—and even having the great fortune of meeting a dozen or so women behind bars at a celebratory event, I can't begin to *truly* understand their experiences. And I'm left wondering whether or not their time in prison really helped or not. Did these women succeed in forming positive relationships because of the rehabilitative process of incarceration, or in spite of it?

I return then to these daunting questions that I must admit feel rather unanswerable but nonetheless crucial as I conclude this work: Why does prison exist in the first place? What did it *really* do for the women I talked to in terms of building strong relationships? For whatever reasons, these women have grown over time, overcoming huge obstacles, turning themselves around, and building relatively stable lives on the other side. Many told me that they never would've imagined they would make it to where they are today during some of their darkest moments of incarceration. Every woman I talked to—remember, that they do all have some kind of support through the nonprofit organizations—told me that their outlook on life has become positive. Did incarceration put them on the right path, or was it nothing more than a hellish, traumatizing experience that robbed them of years, or sometimes even decades, of their lives?

As I completed my fieldwork for this project, I brought this question up more and more with the women I interviewed. In other cases, it came up organically. What is so interesting to me about this question—whether or not prison is effective—is that I got such a diverse range of answers. Sometimes women who had very similar stories said the exact opposite thing with regards to the larger role of prison in their lives. Let's start with Dinah. Here's how she addressed the question:

> If you don't go in crazy, you come out crazy. It retraumatizes you. I was an addict … [and] there was no type of rehabilitation…to heal you or make you better or make you *not* be a criminal. You go in a drug trafficker, you come out a murderer. The things that you learn in prison—you are so frustrated with the way they treat you, you just come out wanting to get back at the world. … I think the system is corrupt—more corrupt than the criminals. I absolutely know there's no rehabilitation in the prison system. … It screws you up. You go in, and you think, 'I'm gonna change this time. This time is gonna be my last time coming in.' … [but] … what the fuck, excuse my language, how am I going to change? There is no out for you. … They really think they're doing something with these prisons and they're not. They're not helping anyone.

It was definitely the most impassioned diatribe against the institution of prison that I heard from any of the women I interviewed. I included such a long excerpt here just to emphasize how unequivocally angry Dinah told me she felt toward the system. Sharon expressed a similar sentiment, saying, "I wouldn't wish incarceration on anyone. It robs you of humanity."

But for several others I talked to–often despite all the traumas and hardships behind bars that they outlined for me—prison was nothing short of a blessing. Doris, referring to the abuse she faced prior to her 27 years of imprisonment, said this to me: "The only thing that saved me was me going to jail. That's the only thing that saved my life…because I would've been dead." That

doesn't, though, mean she necessarily needed three decades to become "rehabilitated." Josie, the STEPS coordinator who I spoke with at the Thanksgiving event, actually expressed a similar sentiment to me, saying that for some of these women in Rikers, it might be the first time in many years that they are finally in a safe environment. While she was the one who really brought my attention to the alarming socioeconomic disparities of low-income women being forced to wait for trials behind bars, she also—I realized retroactively—made me see how this could arguably be a good thing. Aren't some of these women safer at Rikers than they were on the streets, perhaps facing daily abuse from a partner or battling homelessness? Joedy, one of the women who experienced a major spiritual transformation behind bars, told me she is thankful that she went to prison. Her relationship with God helped her develop self-motivation, which pushed her to turn herself around. Here's how she described it to me:

> I was physically and mentally screwed up. I was in denial of the whole thing, of reality. One day, I just woke up and I figured I have to start working on myself. Obviously, I have some serious problems [laughs]. I did every single program they have in prison to help people. I worked on myself by myself. I utilized everything I possibly could. I read every single book in the library. I was in the gym. ... I have a stack of certificates that are this big [signals a huge stack with her hands, referring to classes and programs she completed]. ...I worked on myself. I think that having all that time is what helped. I really had a lot of character defects to work on—all these bad habits that I had to get rid of and replace with new habits.

I just want to underscore the main point of her statement: She said that she thinks having all that time behind bars helped her, and she made the most of the experience. This is not to say that Joedy did not have serious frustrations with the system, but she entered prison a negligent mother and serious drug addict, and she came out clean, ready to dedicate her life to her son. Today, she wants time to

slow down, she said, so that her son does not turn 18 and move out. They're close, and their lives improve each day as she achieves more and more, she told me. Her sister Justine, who is much less religious and spiritual, expressed a similar sentiment, saying, "The amount of time I did helped. I learned more about the drug… I looked at it like it's gross. It just changed my whole perspective." After her time in prison, she finally saw her life with her drug-addicted mother for what it really was—dark, pathetic, and depressing, she told me. And she wanted none of it.

Sigrid and Mercedes independently said nearly the exact same thing to me: Prison was the "best thing" that ever happened to them. Sigrid, who faced abuse from multiple individuals in her life, said, "I thought that maybe that was the best thing that happened to me—the imprisonment at that particular time. … [It forced my] eyes to open up. It was like a life-saving experience." Mercedes told me, "I tell people all the time—which may sound crazy—that me going to prison was the best thing that ever happened. It made me think different. It made me see things different. It made me value things different." When chatting with me about this, Mercedes raised a really important question: Where would all these women be today if they had not been incarcerated? Mercedes would've been on the street, she told me: "I came home 20 years later and the people I left out there were still doing the same things. They did not grow. … I'm a better person, and I can do more to help my family now."

Even behind bars, Loretta, one of the women at the Rikers Thanksgiving party, told me that she could see the value of this experience. Desperate to go home to her daughter—whose birthday actually falls on Thanksgiving—the

sadness she feels is, in a weird way, productive, she said: “It’s difficult for me. [The holidays] make me depressed. I feel depressed, but it’s a good feeling because it makes me want to not make the same mistakes and come back here ever again.” Is that perhaps in some way the point of jail?

One reason not to just accept this somewhat “positive” side of incarceration is that, even if prison turns people’s lives around, the barriers after incarceration are still so challenging for any convicted felon. While many of the women I interviewed left in an arguably better condition than when they came into prison, they were forced to face a very steep uphill battle on the other side, and the system, in most cases, did little to prepare them for it. If we think of society as composed of different relationships for the people who are part of it—and we think of prison as a system meant to improve society by rehabilitating offenders—I’m not convinced after all my research that incarceration on the whole is very effective. Does the system function to end criminals’ negative relationships and support and help create positive ones? While many said they don’t know where they would be if they weren’t incarcerated, nearly every woman I talked to also said that the support of the nonprofit organizations played a fundamental role in their success after jail.

Johanna, the employment coordinator from Hour Children who was incarcerated for drug trafficking, said that her experience behind bars did nothing for her, and even if some felt they benefited from the process of incarceration, that kind of perspective doesn’t really look at the serious barriers upon reentry. “We don’t learn anything while we are in prison. … [And then] there’s a lot of discrimination for this population [during reentry], whether it’s

employment or housing. They deny you. You are not even given the opportunity to...prove that you're eager to learn and deserve a second chance."

I wish I could offer some grand conclusion from all of these firsthand accounts and personal perspectives on incarceration. But to do so would be a bit ostentatious and irresponsible. These are the stories of a small handful of women who, when I met them, were in the process of turning their lives around and recovering from a life behind bars. By no means do they offer a complete or even representative picture of women's imprisonment in New York City. It would likewise be difficult to predict where they would be had their interactions with the criminal justice system been different. Regardless, prison is something that *happened* to each of them, and their stories are important. I am focused primarily on telling and analyzing stories and am not necessarily looking to make specific policy recommendations.

That being said, one thing is abundantly clear to me: Prisons need more comprehensive, systematic approaches to the reentry process. These organizations are a good start, but they come from the outside and sometimes don't even have strong working relationships with the Department of Corrections. Prisons must do more to prepare women for their release and work with them post-incarceration to help ensure that they don't return. The system needs to help connect women to positive relationships—whether through housing, jobs, or community groups—that will provide a support system on the other side. Likewise, officials need to do more to help ensure that they do not return to the negative relationships that put them in jail in the first place. While these kinds of programs might seem costly, just think about how much it costs

governments to incarcerate individuals. Ultimately, what's the point if they are expected to return anyway?

My research here has been a broad examination of various stages of incarceration through the lens of relationships as coping mechanisms and through the eyes of a handful of women willing to share their stories. For future projects that could complement this work, I would be interested in learning more about movements in the policy realm to address the systematic problems and inequities I raised through these women's stories. In that vein, there needs to be more in-depth statistical research that looks at the prevalence of these trends. What kind of mistreatment by guards in women's prisons is still happening today? How frequent is it? Across the country, how many women struggle with the various obstacles of reentry that I've outlined? Looking at recidivism rates is not enough. What do the challenges of finding jobs and housing in 2012 actually look like for formerly incarcerated women? What kinds of mental health support do these women typically have after incarceration? Are there meaningful and large-scale movements within and outside of departments of correction to reform the reentry process? If not, why not? These are all questions that my research has raised for me, and women behind bars deserve to be studied more closely.

In future research, I would of course want to spend more time inside prisons and jails, hearing from women who are in the middle of the unique experience that is incarceration. Another project that could also complement my work on spirituality would be to look more in-depth at the kinds of religious services that actually exist behind bars. I focused here more on personal spiritual relationships, but I am very curious as to how churches actually function in

prison and how different religions and denominations are prioritized or not. I did not investigate this question closely, but I do not believe there is substantial information out there about the actual religious services that exist in jails and prisons and how incarcerated individuals take advantage of them.

As important as these research questions are, ultimately, more stories of women in prisons and jails simply need to be told—by scholars, by journalists, and by the women themselves. There is a whole world just north of Queens on Rikers Island that most of the millions of New Yorkers in the five boroughs know nothing about. It is an isolated plot of land that can feel so distant and removed, yet it houses a population of tens of thousands of residents who spend every hour behind bars while they are there—whether they are serving a short sentence, or waiting for a judge to get to their case.[81] It is almost daunting to think about everything that could be happening behind bars that is going unreported and remains unknown to the public. Inside those jail cells are real people who have families and lives on hold waiting for them on the other side. Their stories matter and they must be told.

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[81] U.S. Census Bureau, 2005-2009 American Community Survey, 5-Year Estimates, 2009.

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Appendix

FIGURE 1: Snapshots
(All photos by author unless noted otherwise)

From Hour Children in Long Island City, Queens

Johanna (left), Hour Children's employment coordinator for Hour Working Women Program, who spent four years in prison. The walls of their office are lined with poster images of women and children (right and below). Women in the program can stop by and use computers (bottom right).

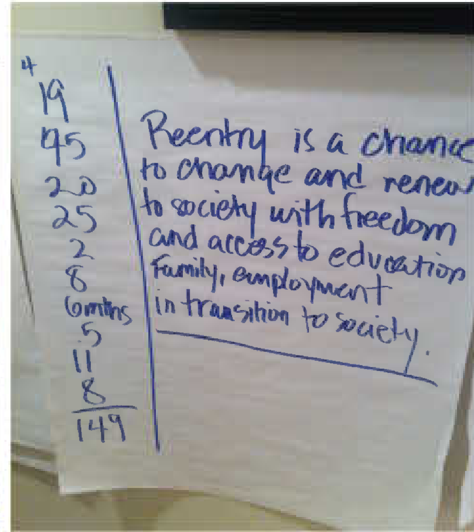
A member of Hour Children, and part-time employee, at her desk in the office space of the organization.

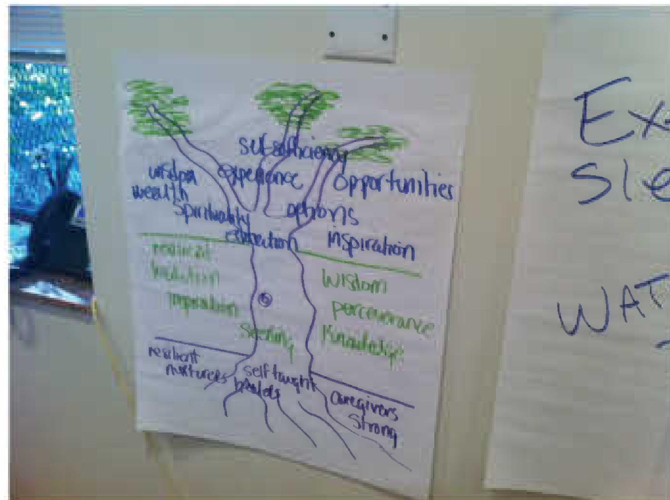
Another member of Hour Children (right), standing with one of the leaders of Hour Children

Hour Children resident, standing in transitional housing complex, where she began living after she was released from prison. Snapshots below of some of the common areas of this house in Long Island City, across the street from the organization's headquarters.

From Women on the Rise Telling HerStory in East Harlem

Two women who now work at WORTH, standing in the central kitchen space of the group's headquarters. Both women joined WORTH after they left prison. Below are snapshots of their space, which is lined with motivational quotes and relevant statistics and has different posters up from group activities.


4
19
45
20
25
2
8
6mths
5
11
8
149
Reentry is a chance
to change and renew
to society with freedom
and access to education
Family, employment
in transition to society.


opportunities
options
inspiration
wisdom
perseverance
knowledge
self-taught
caregivers
strong

Another WORTH member.

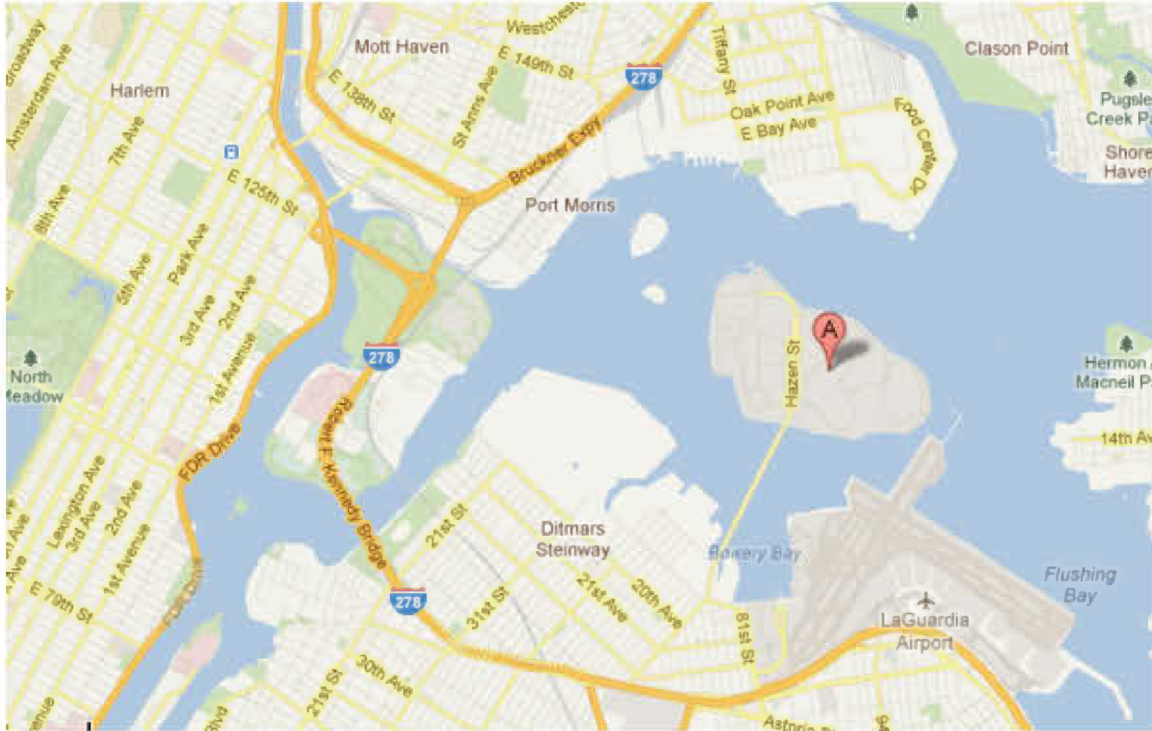
From STEPS to End Family Violence in East Harlem

Sharon, who was incarcerated for 20 years and who now runs the reentry program at STEPS. Photo by Mariela Lombard for the *Daily News*.

Advocate counselor for STEPS.

Thanksgiving celebration in the women's unit of Rikers Island on November 21st, 2011. STEPS leaders and other volunteers serve the women. Photo by Enid Alvarez for the *Daily News*.

FIGURE 2: Map of Rikers Island



Rikers Island marked by the "A." North of Queens, south of the Bronx, and east of Manhattan. It is technically a part of the Bronx, but it is accessed through Queens. From Google Maps.