

Hearts of Service

TO GIVE OF YOURSELF IS DIVINE

Leading From the Feminine

Emerging Women founder Chantal Pierrat decided she would develop a global network and media platform for women. She is bringing this year's event to Denver with her sights set on bridging the gap between our perceived separation and the truth of our interdependence on this planet.



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This and cover photo by Holli Sharp

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Did you know? 3 things about this issue:

- 1. Chantal Pierrat started dancing at a young age, including ballet, jazz and modern.*
- 2. Authors Bonnie and David Paul spent 11 years developing "Freedom to Choose."*
- 3. The word service is used 40 times and is the focus of this month's issue.*

GUIDE FOR SPIRITUAL LIVING

SCIENCE OF **MIND** MAGAZINE



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Science of Mind® | Vol. 90, No. 3
Ernest Holmes, Founder

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For all subscription services, please call our subscribers' toll-free number from the United States and Canada: 1-800-247-6463.

Outside North America, call 818-487-4572.

You can email us at ScienceOfMind@PubService.com.

POSTMASTER: Send address changes, payments/renewals to SCIENCE OF MIND, P.O. Box 15368, North Hollywood, CA 91615

Science of Mind (ISSN 0036-8458) is published monthly for \$29.95 per year (\$3.95 per single copy) in print and available online for \$9.95 per year.

The magazine is published by Science of Mind Publishing, a division of Centers for Spiritual Living, a not-for-profit Colorado Religious and Educational Corporation, 573 Park Point Drive, Golden, CO 80401-7042.

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Printed by Imagination Arts, Castle Rock, Colorado

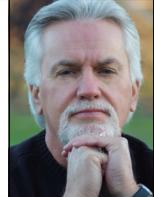
Only accepted articles will be notified. Manuscripts will not be returned.

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DR. DENNIS MERRITT JONES is on a lifelong quest to inspire and lift people to higher expressions. The author and speaker's latest book, "Your (Re)Defining Moments: Becoming Who You Were Born to Be," was released by Tarcher/Penguin in 2014. Visit DennisMerrittJones.com.



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BONNIE PAUL, PH.D., & DAVID PAUL, M.D., PH.D., founded The Freedom to Choose Project in 2013 to uplift people in the areas of criminal justice, addiction, recovery and other at-risk populations. Visit FreedomToChooseProject.org for more info.



REV. DR. PETRA WELDES is the co-spiritual director of CSLDallas, a Center for Spiritual Living. Most recently, she co-authored the "Joyous Journals" trilogy with Rev. Dr. Christian Sorensen — "Joyous Living," "Joyous Freedom" and "Joyous Abundance." Connect at CSLDallas.org/Staff.



Transforming Prison Culture: **CHANGE FROM THE INSIDE**



Bonnie Paul, Ph.D.

David Paul, M.D., Ph.D.



There is no place in the world that is more loving than the prison gym on one of those Freedom to Choose weekends.

We know a place where the people who live and work together respect each other as part of one human family, where forgiveness and loving is the norm, and where engaging in service to help others is both common and valued.

It's a community with a diverse range of ages, ethnic backgrounds and languages. And it is growing rapidly. What may surprise you is that this place is not in some cloister, monastery or imaginary future utopia. It is inside a California state prison for men, and it is transforming the culture in the prison in ways we never in our wildest imagination thought possible.

How did this happen? The Freedom to Choose Project (FTC) is an outgrowth of a university service project we began in 2004. Our first workshop included 56 female inmates serving long-term or life sentences in a maximum-security prison in California.

Our work expanded to men in 2013, and to date we've worked with more than 4,000 men and women in prison, many of whom have participated in FTC for years.

The program was created from the ground up and has been so successful that elements of it are starting to be incorporated into other inmate-led self-help groups. Our workshops assist people in learning practical ways to choose their actions, the skills needed to de-escalate when emotions run high, and the tools to remove anger triggers so they naturally experience more peace.

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Beginning With Compassion

Our methodology, which we call “compassionate experiential education,” is unique among rehabilitation programs. “Compassionate” means our primary focus is an increased awareness of the presence inside each person that is inherently peaceful, compassionate, kind and (impersonally) loving. Many would call this source “God.”

“Experiential education” refers to learning through the experience of practicing communication and emotional intelligence skills.

The program leverages recent discoveries in neuroscience (the mirror neuron system) about how people learn through modeling and imitation. This is a major departure from the traditional “I tell you” approach of a teacher reading from a prepared presentation and telling people what to do without also consistently demonstrating proficiency in the skills being taught. Neuroscience now explains the veracity of Ralph Waldo Emerson’s quote, “What you do speaks so loudly I can’t hear what you say.” This educational model requires that both the facilitators and the volunteers walk the talk and authentically demonstrate the skills in their thoughts, words and, most importantly, actions.

In our program, inmates who completed previous workshops became mentors to their peers. Using the skills taught in the workshops, the inmates created a community of like-minded and like-hearted people inside the prison walls. This has resulted in a shift in the culture toward one of communication, connection, less violence and arguments, and greater levels of cooperation and support.

This web of support continues beyond the prison walls. Using their newly acquired skills, the inmates reunify with their families and support each other in the often difficult adjustment to life outside of prison. Imagine what it would be like to suddenly rejoin society after an absence of 20 years.



This educational model requires that both the facilitators and volunteers walk the talk.

A Program Unlike Any Other

We began work at a men’s prison in 2013, after nine years of experience with female inmates. After the first breakout communication exercise, the men had the opportunity to speak to the entire group of 110 people about their experiences. Inmate after inmate stood up and spoke of their relief in having a place to lay down their guilt, their burdens and to finally find a place to shed their tears: tears born of hurts they had suffered at the hands of others — often when they were children — and tears of regret and shame for the harm they had caused others.

One man stood up and told us, “You don’t understand. Men in prison don’t cry. We can’t cry because it’s not safe to be vulnerable.” And then he burst into tears, adding, “But it feels so good to cry.”

Another man stood up and said, “You people are like dinosaurs! I’ve heard about people like you, and I’ve read about people like you, just like I’ve heard and read about dinosaurs, but I never thought people like you existed — so genuine and loving.”

The inmates, many of whom told us they had participated in every program available over their 20-plus years of incarceration, told us repeatedly that our program was unlike any other they had attended. In their view, we provided the missing ingredient that would make all the other programs work better. Our workshops provide both the skills and experience of the unconditional love that we have found exists at the core of every person we’ve ever met. The result of this awareness is deeply transformative for everyone — inmates and volunteers alike.

What have been the results of this transformation? Our preliminary data indicate a recidivism rate of less than 10 percent for women who completed five or more workshops (average recidivism for women in California is 49 percent).

“You people are like dinosaurs! I’ve heard about people like you, and I’ve read about people like you, just like I’ve heard and read about dinosaurs, but I never thought people like you existed — so genuine and loving.”

Our work at the men’s Valley State Prison in Chowchilla, California, is too new to have recidivism data. However, the qualitative data are consistently compelling.

The men found so much value in the program that they have self-organized into a group that meets every week to practice the skills. As of this writing, 140 men participate in this weekly group, which significantly accelerates the skill level of the participants. These men have created a community of support, caring and forgiveness within the prison.

When something “goes down on the yard,” they know they have a support system to turn to. Our large workshops, filled strictly by word of mouth, are now overflowing with a 100-plus-person waiting list of inmates who want to experience what has transformed the lives of their cellmates and friends.

Some of these men have also chosen to participate in a new program for the prison called the Youth Offender Program (YOP), where newly incarcerated 18- to 22-year-old men are matched with older men who can serve as positive role models (in contrast to the typical experience of gang leaders serving as role models).

In recognition of the value of our program, FTC was invited to create a new class for the YOP. We developed a special curriculum for this group, and although the youth offenders have a reputation as being “hardened,” they are opening their hearts in response to the compassion experienced and expressed in our classes.

Imagining the Cultural Shift

Our nonprofit is funded primarily by private donations and small grants, as the prisons don’t pay for any of our expenses. We recently received a state grant that was awarded to “programs that have proven successful in serving long-term or life-term inmates” to cover the first year’s expenses of expanding our program to the California Institution for Women in Corona. We are expanding our volunteer training program to support this expansion.

The men in Valley State Prison have a vision of offering this program to everyone in the prison, which has a population of about 3,500.

Imagine what would be possible if the culture in the men’s prison support group were adopted by the majority of people in the prison?

The cultural values would shift to respect, support, forgiveness, love and selfless service. When we look at what is currently happening among the participants of our program, with a relatively small investment, we see so much hope for all of humanity.

What Is the Freedom to Choose Project?

The Freedom to Choose Project is a small nonprofit organization that offers life-changing, experiential programs to the incarcerated and underserved in California prisons. Our compassionate experiential psychology curriculum is a unique blend of neuroscience and various types of psychology — and more than a little bit of love. It is designed to effect lasting, profound change from the inside out.

Our signature workshop offers economies of scale by working with up to 300 prisoners at a time. Our trained volunteers work in breakout groups with prisoners, practicing exercises that teach emotional accountability and responsibility, forgiveness, self-acceptance and acceptance of others, resolution of long-standing shame and self-worth issues, and the skills to recognize anger triggers and respond peacefully.

We work together to resolve underlying issues, and we support and celebrate each other’s healing. ❧

You cared about me, and it changed my life.

— INMATE PARTICIPANT, FREEDOM TO CHOOSE

For more information and to learn how to get involved, visit FreedomToChooseProject.org.



Below: FTC and Centers for Spiritual Living volunteer Deanne Drda coordinated a volunteer effort to create original artwork for inmates around their names and words of God. More than 200 were mailed to inmates in 2017.

