March 2002

Dear Colleagues and Friends:

We continue to move ahead, expanding the CLTL program as we go.

Our 10th anniversary celebration is set for April 19th at Henderson House. It should be a stimulating day, filled with wonderful conversation and intellectual strength. The renowned scholar, Milner Ball, will be joining us from the University of Georgia Law School to kick off the day with an exploration of the relationship between literature and the law. Marjorie Agostin, the international poet and human rights activist who graced us with her work the last time we gathered at Henderson House, will also be with us. We expect other supporters as well, writers and thinkers, activists and visionaries, friends from Texas, New York, Maine, Kansas and England. Please be sure to save the April 19th date on your calendar.

We are also planning a session for CLTL facilitators on March 21st at the UMass Office in downtown Boston. This meeting should be a good time for the facilitators to exchange ideas and strategies, and to reflect on why literature does make a difference. A group from England, led by Mary Stephenson, will also be joining us for this session. I look forward to seeing many of you there.

Our budget is very tight, as you know. Thanks go to Mark Montigny though, chairman of the Senate Ways and Means Committee, for his remarkable effort to keep CLTL in the state budget. As Mark put it in a recent news article: "The program has proven itself successful time and time again. A program that helps to keep past offenders out of the criminal system and preserve taxpayer's money is an asset to us all."

Once again our coordinator, Susan Jennings, has put together a noteworthy newsletter. By taking the time to read through this newsletter, you will get a renewed sense of the scope and depth of our program and what we have been able to accomplish working together over these years. Please let Susan know what you think.

I look forward to seeing all of you on April 19th. Congratulations.

Keep the vision,

Bob

Bob Waxler
Questions of what constitutes equitable sentencing are not limited to the United States. Over the past ten years, the promise of Changing Lives has inspired interest throughout the world. A British House of Commons Report on model sentencing programs named just two in the United States, one of them Changing Lives. The program has been profiled in leading newspapers in England, Italy, and Egypt, as well as in the Carribean.

This fall, Professor Jean Trounstine, co-founder of the women's Changing Lives program, spoke about her work at an international conference on women in prison held in Australia. Professor Edith Shillue, facilitator of the Dorchester Women's Group, is headed to Belfast to pursue a doctorate at Queens University and is exploring the idea of starting a CLTL program in Northern Ireland.

During the last few weeks in March, a group from England is coming to Massachusetts to visit several prisons and CLTL programs. Mary Stephenson, a writer-in-residence at Channings Woods prison, is leading the group.

Stephenson writes: In January 1999 at a Writers in Prison Network conference, I first heard about CLTL from Clive Hopwood who had found details of it on the Internet.

Wendy Robertson, who was there as well, set up her own version of CLTL at HMP Low Newton. With my colleague Neil Galbraith, I started 'Connections' in April 2000 at HMP Channings Wood undertaking ten-week terms with groups of ten men, focusing on short stories and excerpts as in CLTL. Another group has been started at Rampton High Security Hospital, working with patients who have learning difficulties.

On March 21, the English group will meet with other facilitators at the UMass President's office to discuss reading and writing assignments and to exchange their Changing Lives' experiences.

Programs in several states have grown and matured, demonstrating their willingness to be self-reflective and versatile.

In Arizona, for example, probation officers are finding that their more careful selection of students has led to a non-existent attrition rate. P.O. Mark Stodola reports that “when we first started, we lost 45% of our students. In the last few classes, we lost no one.”

The men’s program in Kansas graduated their largest group ever. P.O. Randall Nester says: “We did decide that 14 is too large a group. With that many students it is too easy for guys to try and not answer questions or talk about things, just speak up when they think they can safely answer.”

From Texas, Dr. Larry Jablecki writes: “I am very pleased to report that 543 probationers have completed our classes. Next month a new female instructor will be with us to teach the class at Brazosport College in Lake Jackson. Dr. Jill Carroll will continue to teach the female class at Alvin Community College and Rice University. Yours truly will teach his next class at Rice University in May along with Dr. Charles Henry, Vice-President and CIO of Rice University. The Revolution continues.”

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From Suffolk County Day Treatment Center in New York, Linda Jacino reports that her CLTL classes are so popular that they’re meeting almost daily.

Jacio’s groups include men and women and range up to 22 students. Last fall they read The Diary of Anne Frank and Tim O'Brien's The Things They Carried, chosen after September 11th. Both novels worked well, Jacino says. The group also attended a play based on The Diary.
Judge Robert Kane, co-founder of Changing Lives says: “In my courtroom, I see a lot of ugliness. But in class, Bob Waxler shows life in a sense as an idealistic journey. He allows offenders to see things, their own lives, in mythological ways.”

The idea of Changing Lives seems simple, almost simplistic. A 12-week class discussing literature is clearly not going to mend the many holes in the lives of probationers.

But the remarkable success of the program, its rapid spread, and the passionate support of those associated with it, speak to the transformative power of story.

Dr. Waxler believes that story is “hardwired into human consciousness.” In a world where decision and consequence, action and reaction are often disconnected, story allows us to see life in a holistic way. For those who offend because they see the lives of themselves and others as cheap and meaningless, story offers the sense that the details of everyday life are freighted with meaning.

For many CLTL students, the printed page had told a story of alienation. When and if they read, the words told someone else’s story. For the first time, sitting around the Changing Lives table, many discover the pleasure of looking at the page and seeing themselves reflected there.

We all—professors, court officials and offenders—come to the table dwarfed by the blaring neon magnitude of 21st century life. We come burdened by our inadequacies, crushed by the weight of our losses. Yet somehow story transforms us, allows us to see our struggles through a different lens.

The characteristic patterns and players in story echo across time and connect us to each other, to our shared history, and to the future we hope to shape together.

The program’s success at reducing recidivism and sending many students back to sobriety, back to their families and back to school, can be laid at the basic fact that sitting at the Changing Lives table has raised their expectations of themselves and their futures.

This core validity has fueled the expansion of CLTL worldwide, each new program broadening the dialogue and enriching the whole. Changing Lives has the energy of a grass roots organization combined with the sophisticated backing of its professional proponents.

But our current resources do not allow us to respond fully and in a coordinated way to the number of inquiries we receive. Many potential students, facilitators, probation officers, and judges are waiting to be connected to one another. In Massachusetts alone, eight new programs are waiting for funding in order to gear up for the fall. In several other states incipient programs also lack significant financial support.

The need is pressing. There are 2 million people imprisoned in the United States and the prison-building business is booming. Changing Lives offers the opportunity of an alternative sentencing program with a track record of success for an average cost of $300 per student.

This spring we are launching a major grant-writing effort aimed at national humanities foundations and governmental agencies. Our goals are broad-based and long-range.

They include:
- Nurturing the programs we already have running in Massachusetts and elsewhere.
- Providing support and guidance to incipient programs.
- Spreading the word about Changing Lives through conferences, the media, and an expanded web site.
- Piloting juvenile programs in several states.

Stable long-term funding will help us to build on our multifaceted success, allowing court officials to participate in a truly rehabilitative process, connecting professors to the communities they serve, and giving the public a belief that there are valid alternatives to incarceration.

Waxler says: “I still believe that literature is the best tool that we have to humanize society.”

It would not be too much to say that myth is the secret opening through which the inexhaustible energies of the universe pour into human cultural manifestation. Religions, philosophies, arts, the social forms of primitive and historic man, prime discoveries in science and technology, the very dreams that blister sleep, boil up from the basic, magic ring of myth. The wonder is that the characteristic efficacy to touch and inspire deep creative centers dwells in the smallest nursery fairy tale—as the flavor of the ocean is contained in a droplet or the whole mystery of life within the egg of a flea.

Joseph Campbell  The Hero with a Thousand Faces
CHANGING LIVES WORLDWIDE

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CHANGING LIVES NATIONWIDE

After ten years, the media is still fascinated with the CLTL program. In the past year alone, The Los Angeles Times, The Houston Chronicle, and Counselor: The Magazine for Addiction Professionals have featured Changing Lives.

Presentations on the program were made at several conferences for probation officers, at the Working Class Studies Conference, and at the World Peace Conference. Julia Walking of the Maine Humanities Council shared her council's experience of starting five CLTL programs at the National Conference of Humanities Councils.

Inquiries from these articles, conferences, and our website have drawn letters from people in Connecticut, Vermont, Kansas, New York, Rhode Island, and California hoping to start new programs.

Nationwide, over 2800 men, women, and juveniles have graduated from Changing Lives classes.

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In Arizona, for example, probation officers are finding that their more careful selection of students has led to a non-existent attrition rate. P.O. Mark Stodola reports that when we first started, we lost 45% of our students. In the last few classes, we lost no one.

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Worcester Probation Officer Heather Rocheford shows how very quickly an idea can flourish when an individual is backed by an institution. Rocheford heard about Changing Lives at a conference last year and immediately started tapping into the energy of her entire department. Chief Probation Officer William Mattei and Judges Elliot Zide and Austin Philbin (who had heard about the program from Judge Kane) became enthusiastic supporters.

The first Worcester men’s group graduated last spring and this fall both men’s and women’s classes were held. Through it all, Rocheford has been a guiding force: educating her fellow probation officers, finding facilitators, arranging a mock class with the help of Dr. Robert Waxler, helping to choose probationers, and spending her free time reflecting on the successes of the program and various texts.

A victim’s advocate for 12 years, Rocheford joined the probation department four and a half years ago.

Her dedication is characteristic of the probation officers who have kept Changing Lives running since its inception. In a job where demands increase yearly and burnout is high, CLTL classes offer probation officers a chance to interact with their clients in a different setting.

Six of her colleagues participate regularly in the classes, which are “an uplifting change from the daily grind,” says Rocheford. “We look forward to Tuesdays.”

Rocheford continues to hone her ideas about what makes an ideal class. She’s working at perfecting the mix of students and reading materials. She solicits the students’ opinions of the reading and their classroom experiences.

She and Professor Carol Botty, facilitator of the women’s group, also pitched in to buy books to give as graduating gifts to their students.

One of the strengths of Changing Lives has always been in the team concept—the professor, judge and probation officers not only assuming their varied roles but also supporting one another around the CLTL table. Ray and Sandi Albertson-Shea, professors from Middlesex College and co-facilitators of the Concord Court’s men’s program, have raised the team concept to an art form.

“Ray and I really rehearse what we’re going to do. We have very clear discussion questions and know which one of us is going to field which issue,” says Sandi. After class the Sheas go out to dinner and discuss their perceptions of what happened and what they could have done differently. They preview new reading material by reading aloud to each other on long car trips.

Inspired, like many others, by the work of Professor Jean Trounstine, the Sheas began facilitating CLTL classes in the Fall of 1997. “I’d been very fond of the concept for a long time,” says Sandi. “I’m just glad to be doing something in this field because I feel that our criminal justice system has so many flaws in it.”

For Ray the classes offer an opportunity to be closer to students on a personal level. “We do tend to live a rather comfortable and somewhat protected life. It’s a good way for us to be in touch with people.”

The Concord group meets in “the nicest room” at Middlesex Community College. Students sit around a mahogany table surrounded by bookcases and a fireplace. They’ve been joined by probation officers Ed Gaffey, Randy Ryan, and John Rourke as well as by Judges Janet Sanders and Joseph W. Jennings III.

The Sheas’ success at creating a democratic community in their class has been attested to by many of the participants, including Ryan, who says: “In the seminar we read the same books, we do the same writing, we have to participate in the same way. It shows each of us that we’ve all been rejected, we’ve all been victims, we’ve all been perpetrators, we’re all human beings on the same journey.”

The Sheas find that their CLTL experience has enriched their professional lives as well as their marriage. When Ray prepares for his Middlesex classes he thinks “What kind of questions would I ask the Changing Lives group to get them to talk about the real issues? I also tend now to be more precise and concrete in my writing assignments.”

For Sandi, who is a Quaker, CLTL provides the opportunity to “integrate my profession with an issue of social justice that I care about.”
Profile

ROBERT McPHAIL

Robert McPhail is a man who tells the truth. But that honesty has been bought dearly. McPhail struggled for 28 years with a heroin addiction. He lost jobs as a policeman, a fireman, and a security officer through his anger, his alcoholism, and his addiction. He spent 7 1/2 years in jail.

McPhail grew up hating needles and hating alcohol. He lays his eventual addiction to both at the feet of the sexual abuse he endured from the ages of 6 to 10. He believes that many addicts were abused as children and that their substance use masks a history of pain.

A student in Roxbury Court's fall CLTL class, McPhail says that “the stories are here to do surgery. They're in there to trigger the feelings. Each story would relate to me in the sense that I could see myself, things that I did wrong, decisions that I made. I was eating it up like a starving man.”

McPhail discovered heroin in the fall of 1967. He recalls going into the gym at MIT for an Upward Bound class and seeing a guy with sunglasses sitting on the grass in a total state of bliss.

“When we came back three hours later, he was still sitting there, so blissful, so at peace. He hadn't moved. I decided whatever it was that he took, I wanted it. I wanted to be at peace like that.”

But the peace came at a price. McPhail says: “Here's what I know about addiction. When you've had a number of years of it, you don't remember the pain. You don't remember your family locking the door and shutting down the shades. You don't remember withdrawal. You don't remember selling your television set. You don't remember going to jail. All you know is that good feeling when that dope goes in your system: Yeah that's mine right there.”

McPhail’s been in recovery for 2 and 1/2 years. He’s an inspiration to the many alcoholics and addicts who turn to him for support and guidance. His words also resonated around the Changing Lives table where he told his fellow students to “speak up, know the truth. Silence and anger can eat you up from the inside out.”

McPhail is currently a member of the carpenter’s union and DJ’s on MIT’s radio station on Sunday nights. His voice is clear, drug- and bitterness-free: “I’m real proud of where I’m at.”

Profile

JUDGE ROBERT KANE

Superior Court Judge Robert Kane holds in his erect carriage all the dignity and power of the justice system. But his manner is softened by discrimination and compassion. So it is no surprise to find this former prosecutor still championing the maverick program he founded with Dr. Robert Wexler 10 years ago.

Kane was a district court judge in New Bedford when he began sentencing felons to the first Changing Lives class in 1991. Frustrated by seeing the same faces appear again and again before his bench, Kane was willing to experiment with Wexler’s idea of offering some of them a chance to read and discuss novels instead.

“It was perhaps that very first group that led Kane to the notion of surprise, a notion that keeps him coming back again and again to the classes at UMass Dartmouth. “I believe that reading great books can surprise people into believing in themselves, into discovering and building a faith that life is not an end but a series of opportunities.”

“Changing Lives is an outgrowth of my philosophy of what the bench needs to do. I have a bedrock belief in learning. What I try to create in my room is a welcome mat for lawyers to challenge ideas in a reasonable way.”

Kane welcomes the challenges that offenders throw at him in CLTL classes as well. A man who is used to being listened to and who knows what he thinks, Kane brings the full force of his attention to the student's ideas.

“Through discussions about human struggle, offenders learn to develop clarity about their lives,” Kane says. “Through the give and take of conversation they learn to craft language. The language of the street is sloppy. Dialogue forces them to become articulate.”

Kane himself speaks eloquently of the program, most recently with Wexler on the Commonwealth Journal, a weekly radio show aired on WUMB. He also shares his enthusiasm with colleagues; Nearly every Massachusetts judge associated with Changing Lives was inspired to participate by Kane’s example.
We are grateful for the remarkable tenacity court officials and facilitators demonstrated this fall. Probation officers selected students for 12 classes and facilitators chose reading material, ordered books, and reserved rooms at universities, all without knowing whether or not we had funds to pay them.

Their confidence paid off as Senator Mark Montigney managed to keep us in a budget almost devoid of adult education programs. Their confidence also paid off in the changed lives of the 96 CLTL graduates, including 23 women and 9 juveniles.

Three new programs debuted this fall. Framingham District Court, with a team of enthusiastic probation officers including Charles Ashe, Ann Schneider, and Lenny McLean, held classes at a School of Nursing with Judge Robert Grecco often in attendance. Worcester added a women's program, and a pilot juvenile program, organized by Lt. Joseph Cordeiro of the New Bedford Police Department, held classes at UMass Dartmouth.

We also added three new facilitators to our wonderful team. Dr. Jane Hale from Brandeis University taught the Framingham class; Herbert Stern, a publisher and retired college professor, took over for Taylor Stoehr's Dorchester group; and Carol Botty, Director of Counseling Services at Anna Maria College, facilitated the first Worcester Women's program.

Returning facilitators found plenty of challenges in their classes and responded with their characteristic willingness to tailor their teaching to their students. In Dr. Waxler's first class, students asked to read "Greasy Lake" aloud, around the table, because they couldn't focus on reading to themselves. Prof. Trounstine's students were better readers than usual, allowing her to add longer and more difficult novels to her mix of reading.

Throughout the state, facilitators adjusted to a wide range of abilities, with some students who had done graduate work and others who clearly suffered from undiagnosed learning disabilities.

Pilot juvenile programs held at UMass Dartmouth showed that CLTL holds the same promise for young people as it does for adults. In addition, it holds out the hope of healing the broken relationship troubled teens often have to school and to the written word.

What we must have are those books which come upon us like ill-fortune, and distress us deeply, like the death of one we love better than ourselves, like suicide. A book must be an ice-axe to break the sea frozen inside us.

Franz Kafka

Framingham's Prof. Hale had some initially-reluctant students: It's a welcome challenge to have an "unconvinced" group of students -- i.e. people who don't just automatically assume that studying literature is a good and worthwhile pursuit. It keeps me honest as a teacher and as an intellectual, and makes me constantly question whether what I am doing and how I am doing it are in fact of any real relevance to the world.

Favorite books this term included Tuesdays with Morrie, [used in Concord and Bernie Sullivan's Dartmouth House of Corrections classes], and Walter Mosley's Always Outnumber. Always Outgunned [used at UMass Dartmouth].

For Prof. Gail Mooney's class of Woburn and Concord women, White Oleander by Janet Fitch was the favorite reading. The women also liked Kent Haruf's Painsong. One woman said, "reading this book was like taking a vacation because the writing is so calm and people are so decent."

Prof. George Albert's Barnstable class read short stories drawn from "The Best American Short Story" collection. Probation Officers Rochelle Burgos and Pedro Tavares' Roxbury students also read short stories and visited the Huntington Theatre to see "Heartbreak House."

Many classes use writing as a way to deepen student responses to literature. Worcester Prof. William Hosmer writes: "In future classes, I will ask students to write more frequently, provide them with the chance to reflect and express at a less public time-then share some of the reactions."

Prof. Edith Shillue, who facilitates the Dorchester women's group tells of one of her students who wrote quite beautifully about her childhood in Puerto Rico after she read Zora Neale Hurston's line: "There is something about poverty that smells like death." Each time she struggled through the text she came across something that touched her own life and she bravely shared that with each of us each week. It was her consistent courage and persistence in reading that really inspired me.

Being sentenced to a Changing Lives class is not an easy ride for any probationer. Completing the reading can be a struggle for those who lead chaotic lives. Sandi Shea recalls one student who would lock himself in the bathroom and get in the tub for three hours to read.
Students have to keep up other probation obligations, work, and care for their families. Many are jobless, have abusive partners, or live in poverty. For these offenders, just finishing the program is a success.

Shillue writes: I think that this second group gave me a lesson in how very far we are asking our students to come when we invite them into the circle of people who read 'literature.' One of the first conversations we had in class was around the idea that 'sentencing' was the appropriate term for homework and reading.

School has always been someplace where our students also 'did time.' It was not a place where they were made to feel either welcome or worthy. The classroom and the reading homework assignment are both places of incredible vulnerability for these women and they respond with enormous, understandable resistance.

What teachers and Probation Officers need to remember is that resistance is overcome with informed, realistic encouragement. The world of ideas is one where we are all free to express ourselves (so we are told, in the US) - so why not make sure that our classrooms are the same?”

Stem used most of Stoehr’s syllabus questions with his Dorchester group. The writing assignments allowed students to reflect on childhood wounds and healings, on the guidance from others they didn’t get and the guidance they did, on anger and cruelty, what it means to "hit bottom," and even, in the end, on justice.

Our was a remarkable group. There was a seventy-year old man, once a successful singer, who wrote sentences like this: "The first memory of the man my mother accused of fathering me was his face as he glared, first at me, clutching her dress near her knee, while trying to hide behind her leg because of terror I'd not felt until he looked at me, then at her, with teeth gnashing to spit sounds of denial."

There was an ex pro hockey player whose anger filled the room, and an aging addict whose last essay on his attempted suicide was an extraordinarily powerful piece of writing. And then, there was Roland, the star of the class, whose good sense and ability to transform a lot of bad experience into positive resolve was an inspiration to all of us.

On graduation day, long after the rest of the students had gone home, one remained for a long time after. Taylor and I talked about it afterwards. It was obvious that he just didn’t want to go home, didn’t want to let this glimpse of another world close down for him.

Probation officers continue to work hard at choosing students who are likely to contribute to the classes. In Worcester, for example, P.O.’s discovered that it’s important to mix older students with seasoned voices into the men’s classes; they have an impact on the younger, less mature students.

This summer we hope to have a statewide meeting with probation officers to discuss strategies for sentencing, for enlisting departmental support, and for choosing students.

Several judges joined classes and publicly noted students’ accomplishments in ceremonial graduations held in courtrooms around the state.

They included: Judge Dever, Judge Kane, Judge Reardon, Judge Grecco, Judge May, Judge Hanlon, Judge Jennings, Judge Redd, Judge Zide, Judge Philbin, Judge Jackson-Thompson, Judge Borders and Judge Cronin.

The Library of America donated beautiful hard-bound books to every graduate: tangible proof of the journey they’d each taken with language.

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Fourteen programs are currently holding spring classes.

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**CHANGING LIVES THROUGH LITERATURE**

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Visit us on the web at:

http://www.umassd.edu/specialprograms/changing/home.htm**
Changing Lives Through Literature

10th Anniversary Celebration

Friday, April 19th, 2002
9 am - 4 pm
Henderson House, Weston MA

Keynote Speaker: Dr. Milner Ball

Join us for a day of celebration and reflection on the meaning that Changing Lives has for the criminal justice system and the humanities.

RSVP: 508-990-2282

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