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theories and
methodologies

When Muddy
Flowers Bloom: The
Shakespeare Project
at Racine Correctional
Institution

JONATHAN SHAILOR

ABOUT ONE HUNDRED INMATES ARE SEATED IN THE PRISON GYM, WAITING FOR THE PERFORMANCE OF *KING LEAR* TO BEGIN. THEN JAMAL, as Edmund, steps out from behind the makeshift set and paces across the stage, his sharply trimmed goatee pointing outward like an accusing finger, his burning gaze fixed on the audience. He raps: "Secret fears are brought to life on stage. / My life is in a rage, and to write my life / One page is not enough. / But if I had one mike I might be able to / Escape this cage . . . bring Shakespeare to life through my high beams." Appropriating Cordelia's words, he declares that "I am not the first who have incurred the worst / But I have concurred with those who oppose my life's worth. . . ." He continues:

They label me violent because I stay bottled up and silent
And although my life is like a raging sea
My heart sings . . . no life is quiet.

Stop complaining, you say, but I can't because
I'm trapped on the stage of life's lies.
And I ask you

Why brand they us with base? With baseness?
Bastardy? Base? Base?

The inmate actors who performed *King Lear* in April 2005 at Racine Correctional Institution (RCI), a medium-maximum-security prison in Wisconsin, are, of course, men who have been branded base. But twice a week in the prison library they have found (in the words of Damian, who played Regan) "a safe haven to conquer our own defeat . . . a sanctuary . . . a place to rehearse / With a dozen or so in Shakespearean verse. . . . We have been given a chance and a means / to release from confinement our thoughts and our dreams."

In 2004 I initiated the Shakespeare Project at RCI, where I have worked on a volunteer basis as producer, director, and occasional ac-

JONATHAN SHAILOR is associate professor of communication at the University of Wisconsin, Parkside, where he directs the Program in Conflict Analysis and Resolution. He is author of *Empowerment in Dispute Mediation: A Critical Analysis of Communication* (Praeger, 1994). His current research focuses on prison theater programs and the challenges they pose to the prison-industrial complex in the United States.

The photographs on the following pages are by Gregory Shaver. © 2005 The Journal Times.

tor alongside thirty-four inmates, whose participation is also voluntary. With the ongoing support and supervision of the warden and his deputy, as well as the director of education, we have produced four full-length Shakespeare plays: *King Lear*, *Othello*, *The Tempest*, and *Julius Caesar*. Inmates and staff members provide production assistance. Each year, approximately two hundred inmates and seventy invited guests attend the performances.

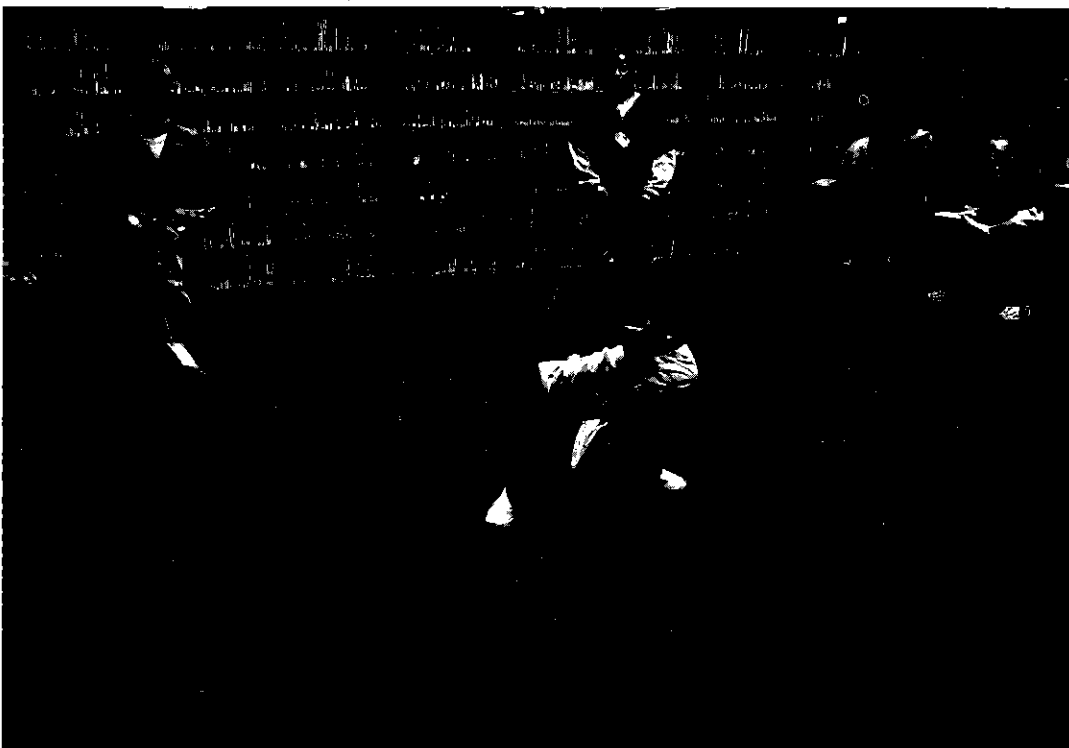
In this essay, I take a look at the genesis and development of our initial production, *King Lear*—in particular, the meaning of the experience from my own perspective and from the point of view of the inmates and the community.

The Theater of Empowerment

The Shakespeare Project at RCI has emerged from my own long-term commitment to theater as a tool for social change. For the past twelve years, I have taught a course called The

Theatre of Empowerment at the prison. In this course, inmates use performance as the primary means to explore and transform their habitual ways of dealing with conflict. In our examination of alternatives, we investigate archetypal male roles (positive and negative) as presented in classical literature and popular film. Four years ago, I was ready for a new challenge, and that's when I met Agnes Wilcox. Agnes is the founder and artistic director of Prison Performing Arts (PPA) in Saint Louis, Missouri. At that time she was in the final phase of the Hamlet Project, a production of the Shakespeare play that was completed act by act over a two-and-a-half-year period at Missouri Eastern Correctional Center.

I already had many years of experience in acting and directing (including Shakespeare) and would soon play Prospero in two productions of *The Tempest* later that year, but I had never before considered the possibility of staging a full-length play with inmate actors—and certainly not Shakespeare. However, as Agnes



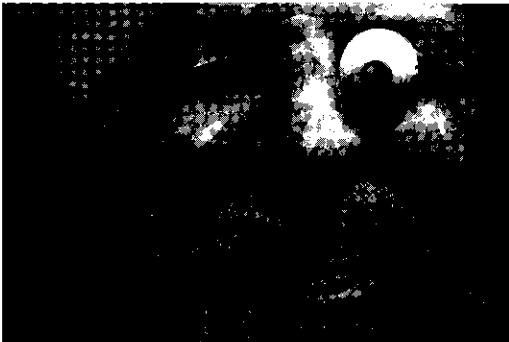
Alexander (the inmate assistant director) demonstrates an appropriate stance for the Fool (center). Marcus (our original Kent) sits with a board across his shoulders to suggest his confinement in the stocks (left).



Gary (Cordelia) shaves his legs just before the public performance.

and I shared our stories and, as she spoke of the challenge and joy of introducing inmates to the performance of classical literature, I warmed to the idea. On the spot, I announced my intention: my next project at RCI would be *King Lear*. Agnes smiled like a fellow conspirator and said, "Do it." That was all the encouragement I needed, at least at the beginning.

I decided that the overarching values of the King Lear Project would be close to the ones I had used to guide the Theatre of Empowerment: the empowerment of the individual (an increased sense of dignity, discipline, creativity, and capability); the development of relational responsibility (the practice of empathy and establishing good working relationships); and the cultivation of one's moral imagination (a critical and compassionate understanding of the psychological, historical, social, cultural, and spiritual dimensions of our shared humanity). I presented specific



Bill (Gloucester) tries on one of the fake eyeballs.

goals that would help us realize these values: cultural literacy (familiarity and facility with Shakespeare's language, plots, characters, and themes), performance (acting ability), empathy (appreciation, respect, and concern for others), insight (the ability to reflect on and critique patterns of perceiving, thinking, feeling, acting, and responding), self-awareness (the ability to apply insight to oneself), teamwork (listening to and respecting one another), and playfulness (humor, gentleness, kindness, and creativity—the healthy exercise of imagination). These values and goals have proved useful as points of orientation and evaluation throughout our process.

On 29 June 2004, I presented a one-man promotion for the project in the prison gym in front of an audience of eighty inmates. Forty inmates signed up on the spot, twenty were eligible for the program (because they had at least an eighth-grade reading level and had not committed major infractions in the past ninety days), and seventeen completed it almost a year later. The first class meeting and rehearsal were held in July, and for the next eight months we met every Tuesday and Thursday from 6:00 to 8:00 p.m. in the prison library. During the ninth month of rehearsal, we met for longer periods, from four to six times a week. Our process included theater games and exercises, a careful line-by-line study of the play, lessons in how to perform Shakespeare, viewing and discussion of several films of *Lear*, training in stage combat, journal assignments, and discussions of key issues in the play.

The casting of roles was a complex process that involved a combination of professions of individual desire, group discussions, auditions, and executive decision making by the director. Some of the initial members of the group left for various reasons: our original Fool was placed in segregation (solitary confinement) for laughing at an officer who tripped and fell down in the yard. Another man removed himself from the group on learning that one of our members had been convicted of sexually

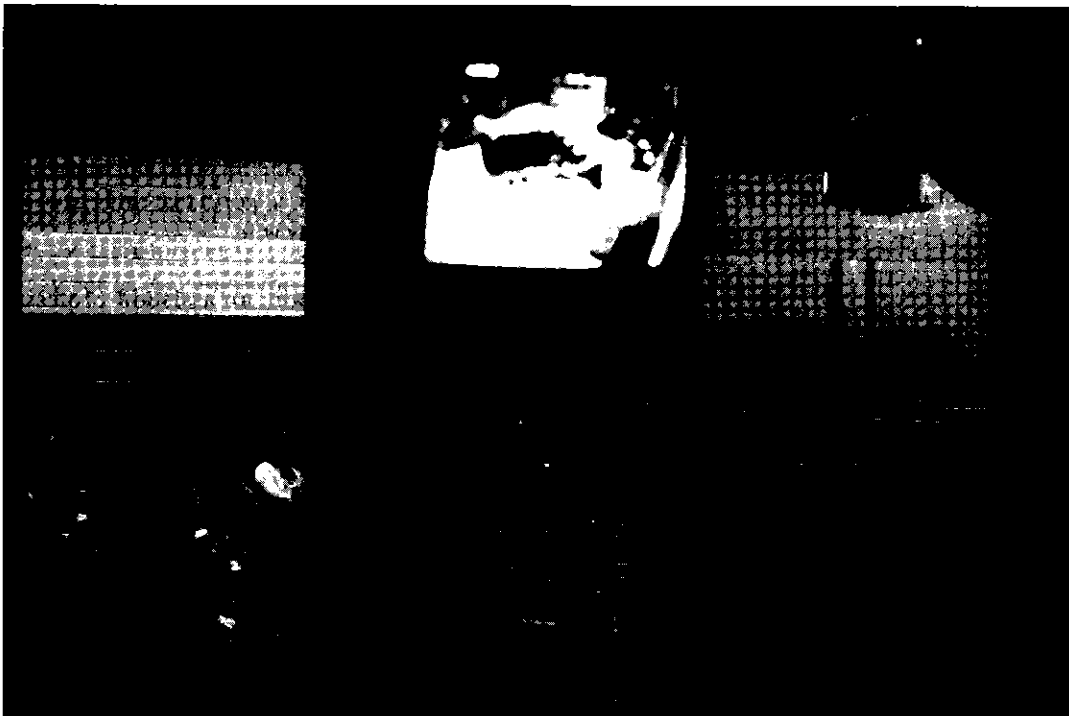
assaulting a child. We also lost our original Lear (to a prerelease program) and Kent (to segregation). Short by several actors, we continued to recruit through much of the year. I took over the role of Lear. John, who became our Oswald, was “tricked” into participating when our assistant director (an older inmate) asked him to come to the library so they could “talk about his case.” When John arrived, he found himself at a *Lear* rehearsal. After some initial hesitation, he decided to stay. In a group discussion about halfway through the process, John explained why:

I'm a vet, and I'm in here on a murder rap. I've only been good at bombing shit and killing people. But this play is giving me a chance to do something different—to socialize, to be with people, to go out on the streets. It's given me a new look—not to be cold, like a dog, all the time.¹

A few weeks before our performances, we talked about possible names for our fledgling theater company. The inmates sug-

gested names like Free on the Inside, the American Prairie Players, and the Raising Consciousness Interplayers (RCI). The name that generated the most interest was the Lotus Troupe—proposed by Russell (the Doctor). He explained that the lotus, a beautiful flower that emerges from the depths of muddy swamps, is a symbol of growth toward enlightenment. The men thought that the metaphor was apt but that the language might be too esoteric. I suggested an earthy variation, which they enthusiastically endorsed: the Muddy Flower Theatre Troupe.

On 25, 26, and 27 April, after nine months of study and rehearsal, we presented *King Lear* to two inmate audiences (about a hundred men attended each performance) and one public audience (about seventy attended, including family members of the performers, prison staff members and administrators, university representatives, and other members of the community). One of the cast members recalls the inmate response at the conclusion of the first performance:



The play as seen from the security officer's desk.

When we walked back out on stage for our curtain call I was expecting a round of applause out of courtesy. After all, there were a lot of staff and inmates in the institution who thought it was a joke. Boy I was in for a surprise. When Albany and Edgar left the stage after the last scene of the play everyone began applauding. But it did not sound like the half-hearted courtesy applause that I was expecting. Instead, it sounded like the gym was filled with rolling thunder. As we all filed back out on stage to take a bow, I saw that the whole audience was standing and clapping like they were all trying to throw their shoulders out of their sockets. They were putting their elbows into it as if they were playing crack-the-whip with their hands. I almost choked when I saw it. I felt that if what we did was able to get that kind of reaction out of a group of our peers and staff members (some of which did not take us seriously from the start), then we had accomplished something great indeed.

My brother Christopher, a high school drama teacher who was running his own summer Shakespeare theater at the time, flew out from Massachusetts to observe our final rehearsals, offer encouragement and advice, and videotape our performances. (His visits have since become an annual tradition, eagerly anticipated by all of us.) Rashad (Burgundy) wrote that, for him, the most engaging moment of *King Lear* occurred dur-

Edgar, Lear, and
the Fool.



ing a brush-up rehearsal the afternoon before our second performance. Someone brought a guitar, and Chris and I sang a couple of songs that we had written years ago. Rashad wrote:

The interaction between adult brothers is emotional to me because my foster bro and I have those memories—but I've been incarcerated most of my adult life and my brother no longer wishes to hear from me. . . . The brotherhood a cast can develop over the course of a project is something I've missed and wanted to be a part of for years.

The inmates received a very warm response from the seventy guests who attended the public performance on the final evening. The cast formed a receiving line, and family members, friends, and invited guests shook their hands and offered them congratulations. Damian, who played Regan, hugged and kissed his wife and his thirteen-year-old daughter. In his evaluation of the project, Damian wrote:

Hello humanity! Welcome back! I know first hand for certain we [definitely] left an overwhelmingly positive impression on both the staff and inmate population. It's been over a week now and I'm still hearing compliments and congratulations. And the impression on my daughter's face is [forever] etched in my heart, my mind and my soul. The whole nine month process was worth that smile from my daughter and my wife.

Jamie Cheatham, an assistant professor of theater arts at the University of Wisconsin, Parkside, wrote a review of the show, which he found to be

surprisingly strong. . . . The players embraced the language as their own. . . . In execution, it was clear how the inmates had grown to love their lines, their new language and their characters. It was clear how much it meant for them to have an audience with which to share this new found love. The play was treated with respect and passion. As a result,

despite the blue covered surroundings, the occasional blip of a security device, despite the odd fitting costumes and the necessity of full light scene changes the story was utterly engrossing. Because the players cared so much for it, so did the audience.

We also received reviews from a Shakespeare scholar ("The cast members really got what *Lear* is all about" [McLean]), and the education director of the Milwaukee Repertory Theatre ("lovely . . . a performance marked by their tenacity of spirit" [qtd. in Flores]).

We were surprised—and thrilled—by the deluge of media coverage: two days after the final performance, we were the lead national story in the *New York Times* (augmented by a slide show on the *Times* Web site). The *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* gave us the front page. The Associated Press picked up the story, as did the *Chicago Sun-Times*. Local newspapers ran multiple front-page stories, with dozens of photos. The Fox News TV affiliate in Milwaukee taped its story and interviews on location and featured *King Lear* on the 10:00 p.m. report. A month later, the *Racine Journal Times* ran a two-page spread that documented our process from beginning to end.

Thanks to the press, we received responses and correspondence from across the country, including from a class of Wisconsin high school students who shared their essays on the transformative potential of *King Lear*, a lawyer in Arizona who praised our efforts and donated generously, a teacher in upstate New York who felt inspired to begin her own Shakespeare production behind bars, and the Shakespeare Society in Green Bay: a group of fifteen women who now travel three hours each year to attend our production and who donate books and funds.

The men had successfully performed one of Shakespeare's most difficult plays. They had been effective in bringing it to multiple audiences made up of inmates, their families, prison personnel, and community members.

Of even greater significance is the meaning that the men made of their experiences. In the passages that follow, I share a few of the inmates' stories.

Gary (Cordelia)

Gary writes that he has been in trouble with the law since he was five years old. He was taken into the care of the state at age seven and a half. "My mother has said so many times that my life is a waste, I should have never been born, I should have been the for sure abortion." His crimes, which have "ranged in severity," have included a fair amount of drug abuse. At the time I met him he was nearing the end of his fourth incarceration.

As was true for the other members of the cast, one of Gary's opportunities for growth came in his developing relation to his character. Early in the rehearsal process, I worked with Gary to help him access feelings appropriate to Cordelia's emotional confrontation with her father in act 1, scene 1: "Unhappy that I am, I cannot heave / My heart into my mouth . . ." (90–91). I asked Gary to think of an important relationship and situation in his own life where he did not feel properly seen, heard, or understood. Then I asked him to physically rearrange me (*Lear*) and the

Cornwall gouges out Gloucester's eyes. The rest of the cast watches for the first time.



other actors in the scene so that our positions would better express his feelings about that real-life relationship and situation. Gary did this, and then we ran the scene several times. He remembered that "it felt like a 50-50 roll of the dice. But given a moment and a few run-throughs I just let what I feel daily inside edge the surface . . . tears of pain that swamp me from knowing that things are all messed up with my life. . . ." Gary, speaking as Cordelia, heaved his shoulders as he took in more oxygen, and his eyes, riveted on mine, filled with tears. Later he would reflect on this experience as "the purest of emotional therapy. . . . I am Cordelia in so many ways and *in being her I am learning me*" (emphasis added). As if to demonstrate this symbiotic relationship between himself and his character, Gary appropriated Cordelia's voice to proclaim a new intention: "I beseech you prison, with wash'd eyes I see you for what you are, let this man change, let this ID number fall. Gary has come, and will not bow any longer."

Guy (Cornwall)

Guy is one of the older members of the cast—tall, severe, with a salt-and-pepper goatee and gaunt eyes. At a rehearsal about two months before our scheduled performance dates, we worked on cleaning up the blocking in the scene where Cornwall orders the guards to bind Gloucester to a chair. When I interrupted the scene to make some changes in the blocking, Guy exploded with anger, throwing up his arms and shouting, "What! It's different now? That's not how we had it before. We practiced this, and now you're changing it? It's all out the window?" He paced frantically. In a clear, calm voice I explained that we needed to do this; it was a small change that would solve a problem for us. The other men stood still while Guy continued to vent: "Oh, sure! Yeah, a small change. Whatever." I continued: "Guy, this is something that all directors do. We've only rehearsed this scene a few times, so we're still figuring things out. And in the professional theater directors often make changes



Bill (Gloucester) has fallen and is approached by his son Edgar.



The education director, Jean Thieme, snaps the cast photo.

in scenes up to the last minute. . . .” Guy got quiet. A moment later, his voice considerably calmer, he said, “Yeah. OK.” A little while after we began to work the scene again, he took the opportunity during a pause to call out to me from his position on stage: “Hey, look. I’m sorry. I’m sorry about that.” I told him that I appreciated the apology, and that it was OK—I understood that I had thrown him off.

We continued working the scene, finally reaching the moment when Cornwall gouges out Gloucester’s eyes. After a grotesque and convincing simulation of the first eye gouge (by thumb), Guy dropped a small white object on the floor. It rolled about fifteen feet, all the way up to my chair. I picked it up and saw that it was a plastic sphere that was carefully painted to resemble a human eye. There was some nervous appreciative laughter from some of the other men. I smiled and returned the “eyeball,” and the scene continued. A few moments later, a second eyeball dropped and rolled. After some additional laughter, I asked Guy how he had made the eyes. With guilty pleasure, he told me that he had pried

the balls from roll-on deodorants. When I suggested that the image of eyeballs rolling across the stage might elicit laughter from the audience, Guy assured me that he would be able to make them drop in place.

At the end of rehearsal, Guy asked to speak with me. Looking me directly in the eyes, he said:

I just wanted to say again that I’m sorry. It’s the PTSD thing, you know. I’m a vet, Vietnam, and I’m disabled, one hundred percent—now they call it “medically retired”—but *that’s* my issue. So, you know, when I think I know what’s going on, you know, down to the last detail, and then boom! somebody *switches* something on me [he demonstrated physically by reeling in front of me]: Aaargh! I really get thrown for a loop. So that’s why. Maybe I should write to you about this in my journal, what this is all about.

Bill (Gloucester), who was standing next to us, thought that was a good idea: “That’s what this class is all about—learning to work through things like this.”

Bill (Gloucester)

After the final performance of *Lear*, I asked the men to recall the one moment in the entire process that had been most vivid and engaging for them. Bill told this story:

During the final performance, after Gloucester's eyes had been gouged out and I was about to throw myself over the cliffs of Dover, I had my blindfold on. And as I was on my knees, hands raised into the air, and I spoke these first words: "O you mighty gods! This world I do renounce!" I heard my voice *fill* the room and echo back into my ears, and I suddenly had a spiritual experience. Even though I couldn't see, I could "feel" *all* the people in the audience. Each and every loved one, family and friend. I could feel them "lean" forward, as it were, to hear what I was going to say next. I could feel the *pain* of *each* one of them for those of us incarcerated. The pain of their separation of being away from their loved one (us—the cast members), and then I felt the pain of all of us cast members (us inmates). The pain we have of being away from them—*our* loved ones. It was so overwhelming I could not handle it, and I broke down and began to *really* cry! It was *real*. I was no longer acting. If it wasn't for the music getting screwed up and snapping me out of it, I would have been there for the next five-ten minutes blubbing. We would've had to probably stop the play momentarily. But it *really* shook me, and after I went backstage I was still bewildered by it.

And ever since then, every time I've tried to talk about it—to my wife, the chaplain, other actors, friends, coworkers—I *still* break down; I can't help it. I don't understand what all happened out there, even yet. After talking to the Lord about it in prayer times all I know is that I either "broke *through*" or into something or it broke through or into me! But I believe God is going to *use* it in my life as part of his plan for my life in future-present ministry. It's like I touched the tip of the surface of the *pain* he has for us as his creation and the desire for everyone to be reconciled with him and us to be with one another.

Shakespeare, Emotion, and Personal Transformation

In the closing speech of *King Lear*, Edgar proclaims, "The weight of this sad time we must obey / Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say" (5.3.322–23). The "sad time" served in prison severely circumscribes emotional expression. Pain and frustration expressed in the form of anger are threats and are dealt with accordingly. "Natural responses to imprisonment," such as grief, fear, and insecurity, "are deemed as weaknesses and will not be tolerated"; and even the finer emotions, such as pity, love, and friendship are discouraged, if not derided. In this repressive context, prison theater "provides something of a refuge" where inmates can engage in a wide

After their performance in the prison gym, the cast members stand along the wall for the evening head count.



range of self-expression, allow themselves to be vulnerable, and forge relationships based on openness and compassion (White 186).

Too often, prison is a place where men learn fear, submission, dependence, and despair; new forms of physical and emotional violence; and narrow, egocentric pathways to "success." Arts programming in general, theater more specifically, and Shakespeare in particular can teach something else: individual empowerment, relational responsibility, and moral imagination. Shakespeare's plays provide a structure, a safe vehicle for this most daring journey. The strangeness, difficulty, and excellence of the plays are precisely the stimulus and the container that are needed by men whose emotional lives are troubled, chaotic, and volcanic. While Shakespeare's language at first seems formidably complex and alien, in time the men make it their own, and through making it their own they find a new voice. Those of us who witness their performance can no longer see them as base. We see fathers, sons, and brothers. We see members of our community, many of whom will soon return to us. Who will they be to us, and who will we be to them?²

NOTES

1. After reading a draft of this essay, John had this to say: "About that 'quote,' it's not mine, it's part of a toast to Uncle Sam I heard from a SEAL team member, thanking the U.S. government for giving him a career and teaching him to love the two things he loves in life: 'killing people and blowing shit up.'" He told me that he appropriated the words in order to "shock people"—so that they would leave him alone: "The consequence is having people think I actually am serious."

2. After this essay was completed, I read it aloud to the Muddy Flower Theatre Troupe. One of the men commented on its impact: "It was emotionally moving. Even to the new guys that have joined this year that were listening very intently. . . . I don't know if you had a chance to see—since you were reading—but the intensity level was high. . . . The emotional content stirred the group to the same uncomfortability as a showing of *Days of Wine and Roses* would bring out at a rehab session. . . . I think your reading established to the new guys that they are truly into something special that may change their lives."

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