What we wish we had been told when first going into prisons

Advice from some Quaker women volunteers who are old prison hands, to new women volunteers, Quakers and others

1. Prison is, to you, a foreign country. As in any foreign country, it is wise to be quiet, observe, listen, learn the language and identify the values of the prison culture before advancing too many strong opinions or taking any drastic action.

2. Don’t be afraid to define yourself clearly. You are not required to be all things to all people at all times, nor to live up (or down) to any stereotype (including the one about the sainted Quaker lady). You are entitled, more over, to define for yourself and for others what you choose to be or not to be, do or not to do. This will take some time, but you should be aware of the need to do it, from the beginning of your prison visiting. Even after you have clearly defined yourself, expect to be tested, again and again, in many ways, including sexually, morally, and religiously. Eventually, however, if you are firm in sticking to your definition of yourself, others will adjust to it.

3. Expect to meet many tremendous and valuable people in prison. Expect also to meet some champion manipulators. Do not be surprised if these sometimes turn out to be one and the same person. Manipulation is a form of survival for the powerless (a fact that women, historically, have had ample cause to know).

4. Especially at first, you will find it helpful, as soon as possible after your prison visits, to share with a trusted woman friend the feelings generated by the prison experience. It is a rare woman who does not experience anger, fear, pain, outrage, wonder, and other strong emotions upon contact with the prison environment. These feelings, shared, can lead to much that is constructive and rewarding. Unshared, they can lead to emotional burnout and ill considered actions. The need to share them, therefore, never ceases.

5. Expect to feel an unfamiliar, very heady and very addictive “super star” feeling, especially at first. It may arise from sexuality in a deprived environment, from the unfamiliar real power to help the helpless, or other sources. Do not let it go to your head. Remember that you will be constantly tested and probed by prisoners and staff alike, and that no leading lady’s image can survive the footlights forever. If your mascara runs in the heat, remember to be real.

6. It is possible that you will feel alienated, after prison visiting, from other people who have not shared and do not understand this experience, and from the society that produced and maintains the prisons. It is a difficult ministry, but a ministry nonetheless, to share the experience and the light that you have in this area of darkness.

7. Expect to find in prisons all the corruption and evils of society, as well as all the goodness of human nature—both magnified larger than life. Therefore, resist the temptation to:

   a) Romanticize the prisoner. If his being caged does not necessarily make him a monster, neither does it necessarily make him a saint. To assume otherwise is always inaccurate, usually patronizing, and sometimes dangerous.

If you do not have such a community (and a Quaker Meeting at its less-than-best may not offer it), then you must seek out such a community or build one for yourself.

14. Expect to be sexually turned on some time early in your prison work. Almost nobody escapes this experience, from beautiful and innocent young girls to happily married (or widowed)
matrons of a certain age; not to mention single women, divorcees, engaged women, gay men, and those who have foresworn all such relationships and feelings. When this happens to you, it may possibly be the beginning of something that may mature into a viable relationship in time. But it is also possible that other and less romantic but more powerful elements enter into it. When it happens to you, don’t panic and don’t go overboard. Examine yourself to see whether the feeling does not contain one or more of the following elements:

a) The sexual deprivation of prison life creates an electrical charge in the very air when a woman enters into his environment—a charge that no woman can fail to respond to or at least to feel.

b) The balance of power between free women and imprisoned men. One of the few milieus in our society where a woman is more powerful than a man is in the prison situation, where the woman is free and the man is a prisoner. As men have long known, but women frequently do not realize, the possession of power is a sexual turn-on. Indeed, women have had so little experience of the phenomenon, that they may not recognize the sexual overtones of power and may mistake it for love.

c) The inaccessibility of the man of a normal everyday relationship. This allows both parties to fantasize but commits neither to live with the results of a relationship in the real world. As long as one of them is locked up, the parties are, in a sense, safe from each other. The dark side of this is that you may be exploiting another person without being aware you are doing so by projecting your fantasies and your needs on him or her as a promise that in the real world you cannot or will not keep. Experience shows that neither sex is guiltless of this kind of exploitation. When you are seized by this strong emotion, whatever it turns out to be—give yourself plenty of time and room to find out what it actually is before you act on it. Hang in there, and you may get over it. Or hang in there, and you may find that the fantasy does not fit the reality. Or hang in there, and let the relationship mature into something worth having, if it will.

15. Do not be surprised if you become overly preoccupied with an individual prisoner. Romantic attraction is only one of the roots of such preoccupation. Others are compassion, admiration for a strong personality or a valuable talent, or a sense of perceived injustice. Try to keep a balance and not invest all of your valuable energy in one person where there is so much need in others also.

16. Prisons have proved that people do not learn very much from punishment. Quaker (and human) experience proves that they frequently do learn from example. What you do in prison, therefore, is more important than what you say there. Quakers acting religiously as ministers in prison meetings should always be mindful that our being true to the manner of Friends is far more eloquent than our preaching.