

## Fields of Force

*Simone Weil was a French philosopher and religious thinker who lived from 1909 to 1943. André Gide called her "the most spiritual writer of this century." An intellectual par excellence, Weil was also passionately committed to social justice. Her thinking was shaped by a Christian sensibility deepened by mystical experience.*

*Her essay "The Iliad, Poem of Might" was published in 1940-41. On the surface, it is an exploration of the centrality of force in Homer's epic. However, it was also addressed to her French compatriots living under Nazi occupation. (She was to die in London in 1943 after refusing to eat any more than the scanty rations given in occupied France; her death was ruled a suicide from self-starvation.) This essay treats in depth the rule of force in human affairs—its ability both to intoxicate the one with power and to dehumanize the victim. As such, it seemed an appropriate vehicle to use in exploring the role of force in the prisoners' lives.*

### Power Makes You Stupid

He who possesses strength moves in an atmosphere which offers him no resistance. Nothing in the human element surrounding him is of a nature to induce, between the intention and the act, that brief interval where thought may lodge. Where there is no room for thought, there is no room either for justice or prudence. This is the reason why men of arms behave with such harshness and folly. . . . They never guess as they exercise their power, that the consequences of their acts will turn back upon themselves. (Simone Weil, "The Iliad, Poem of Might," 163)

**Tray:** I used to have this aura from being in so many gun battles. I could be dead wrong but people would do what I wanted because they feared me. "You can't sell nothing in this neighborhood—you're on my turf!" It made me feel *grand*.

**Dreze:** It sounds almost like a drug you get high on.

**Tray:** Indeed.

**John:** Once I whipped a guy who had treated me wrong in a drug deal. When you get into that kind of rage it shocks everybody. I could see the looks on everyone's faces, watching. And for me, it was a mixed feeling. You like the respect. You don't worry about guys pushing you around. But you see people looking at you different than they would a normal person. And that didn't make me feel particularly good.

**Tony:** Another thing—if you're smart, then in the back of your mind you know that sooner or later somebody's going to want that power you have. The only way you get to be king is to knock the king off. That's why you have a lot of killing out there.

**John:** But there's also another side to it—in a hostile environment sometimes you need force just to survive. People will set out in increments to take advantage of you until you draw a line in the sand. If you draw that line you might be able to live out your existence peacefully. I don't know if this environment would be considered the same as the one the Trojan War was set in—I don't think so. But growing up in hostile environments, we had to make it clear that some things couldn't be done to me nor my family.

**Tray:** It's like when you come through this penitentiary door, if you have a reputation of being soft, people will take your commissary stuff and kick you in the butt. But if you draw the line in the sand, you can live peacefully. And it's the same on the street. Even for the judge in his courtroom, the president of the country, the business man—for anyone to enjoy their life anywhere, they have to embody some kind of force.

But Weil's right that power makes you stupid. I could relate to what she said but I didn't like it. I was thirteen or fourteen when I was made to believe I had more power than I actually had. Older men feared me. If I told somebody "Run here! Do this!" people *obeyed*. I started feeling bigger than God. I wouldn't pay my associates. I would go to Atlantic City and blow fifty grand, mess up my partners on sharing the money. I could do whatever I wanted and wasn't nobody going to buck my authority.

I didn't see it at the time but I was losing their loyalty. So when I came to prison, when I met a power bigger than me ("I fought the law and the law won"), I needed them and they weren't there for me. Because when I had the power I would talk to 'em *grazy*.

If somebody had had a force greater than mine, I would have *considered*—considered before going to the crap parlors, to the motels with prostitutes, messing everybody up. But I did whatever I wanted because couldn't nobody stop me. Power makes you stupid.

I'm not saying it isn't true. I just resent her saying it.

**Drexx:** It's not a truth you enjoy contemplating.

**Tray:** There you go.

**Donald:** When I was thirteen I beat a guy with a two-by-four. I think I was intoxicated with that experience because I overdid it. I beat him unconscious. And the thing is, while I was beating him I felt sorry for him in a way. But I just continued.

**John:** I remember starting to make a lot of money in drugs, and that money really gets you intoxicated. You have at your disposal most things you want. And when my trial date came up I just said, kindly and politely, "Call my lawyer and bail bondsman, call the judge, and tell them *I'm not coming in*." It was around Christmas so I thought I'll stay out and take care of my kids. *After Christmas we'll talk about coming in.*

So legally speaking I was a fugitive from the law, wanted on a capital offense. But I still ran around and did my business. If police pulled me over—at that time they weren't so hot on photo ID cards—all I had to do was tell a person's name, address, driver's license number, and they would check it and let me go.

And it got to a point where I was intoxicated with what I was doing. I paid no mind to the fact that I was a fugitive. Where initially I would lay in the house all day, only coming out at night, eventually I just did what I wanted. Went to all the clubs, visited my family, stopped going from hotel to hotel, and just stayed in one. I stopped being cautious.

One day I went to visit my daughter in Pittsburgh, drove back, and went to sleep in a hotel room. The police woke me up. I wasn't really interested in staying out much longer because I was meeting my goals—but I could have if I hadn't become so ignorant. I was saying "Stuff that may apply to everyday persons no longer applies to me. *I'm above that*."

**Drexx:** There was an article in the *New York Times* last Sunday. The basic theme was that criminals are *dumb*, to put it bluntly. Like the two people who shot Michael Jordan's father—they took his cell phone and made calls that were easily traceable. Why would they behave in this fashion? The article said it's because most criminals haven't made it in life and, honestly, are not that bright.

But as I listen to you talk I hear a different analysis. Maybe it's not that these guys were stupid, but that they were intoxicated by being able to blow someone away. You begin to lose the sense of your own mortality and vulnerability. It's as if you're in a magically protected place.

**Selvyn:** Yeah. I lived in a black community surrounded by all-white, where we got into a lot of scrapes with white guys, making them walk in the mud, or just outright attacking them. One morning I had nothing better to do than walk up to a guy's house and kick the door in. It wasn't like I was trying to rob him—I just wanted to kick the door in and walk all through the house.

When the police came, I was one of the spectators watching them look for the person. I stood there laughing, and asked them, "Did you see it?"

Did you *catch* him?" And I knew they were looking for me! I did get caught eventually, but at that time I felt invincible.

**Drew:** As Simone Weil says, that sense of unlimited power is what ultimately leads people to overreach themselves. In the *Iliad*, first Agamemnon goes too far, and then Achilles, then Patroclus, then Hector. Everybody, all the invincible warriors, fall victim to a kind of drunkenness that leads them one step over the boundaries of their power.

**Tray:** Weil says everybody's going to succumb to force. But you still have to make up your mind what side of it you want to be on. The victim or victimizer.

**Drew:** You'd still prefer to be on the victimizer side?

**Tray:** Indeed!

### Under the Thumb

Might is that which makes a thing of anybody who comes under its sway. When exercised to the full, it makes a thing of man in the most literal sense, for it makes him a *corpse*. . . . The might which kills outright is an elementary and coarse form of might. How much more varied in its devices, how much more astonishing in its effects is that other which does not kill, or which delays killing. It must surely kill, or it will perhaps kill, or else it is only suspended above him whom it may at any moment destroy. This of all procedures turns a man to stone. From the power to transform him into a thing by killing him there proceeds another power, and much more prodigious, that which makes a thing of him while he still lives. . . . The soul was not made to dwell in a thing, and forced to it, there is no part of that soul but suffers violence. (Weil, "The *Iliad*, Poem of Might," 153-55)

**Drew:** This passage raises the question of what happens when you're totally under the power of another, feeling force bearing down upon you. When have you been in that position?

**Donald:** I was playing in the street and a guy in his car almost hit one of my friends. We started pounding on the car, and I stuck my head in and started cussin' at him. He pulled a gun, put it directly on my head, and said, "*I could kill you right now.*" And it was like my whole world was suspended. I never felt that feeling before in my life.

It seemed like I was there for a long period before my friend (he tells me) pulled me out of the car and the guy continued on.

I think I did become a corpse at that time. Since then I've tried my best to make sure that *nobody* is in a position to bring that much force on me. I tried to carry a gun most of my life so if I was placed in that situation I'd be able to bring equal force.

**O'Donald:** One time I was banked. Now before they banked me, about fifteen of them surrounded me in a circle.

**Drew:** You were what? Banked?

**Tony:** Operationally defined, jumped on by more than one person.

**O'Donald:** When you get banked, they don't really jump on you. *They wait a few minutes.* And this was the scary part for me, the waiting. After they jumped on me, the fright was gone and the anger took over. But as I was getting banked, though I was helpless I felt power because it took fifteen people to jump on one man. That tells me I'm a *threat*, that alone they wouldn't have a chance. So I felt powerful and also, at the same time, powerless.

**Tray:** Every time I came under a greater force, it kind of angered me. In here a couple of times, I had an altercation with the police in the kitchen and they dragged me out and threw me in the cell, and each time I felt humiliated. So I never let it happen again.

And then there was times when I tried to establish a [drug] shop in a certain neighborhood and dudes would tell me I had to go. They'd be so much more powerful than my crew that we'd move. But I'd say, "Never again. It can't happen again." I didn't feel scared. The only thing I been afraid of was this could happen again.

Like once a guy had a shotgun on me. When you're looking through the barrel you can actually see the bullet. And the shotgun was cocked. I noticed all this but it seemed like I stepped outside my body. I thought, "Goddamn chump! This ain't supposed to happen to *me*. I'm a king!" And I tried to make my life where I won't ever have to go through that again.

Right now I'm under this force, and I feel the strength of it everyday, every time I look at them bars. The humiliation of it—shit, I feel it. And all I think of is I *never* want to go through it again. That's why I study so hard. I study economics, psychology, everything, so I'll know the ways of the world and I won't have to succumb to this might again.

**Drew:** It's a different kind of power from the kind you were seeking out on the street. It's not the power you got from selling drugs or having guns.

**Tray:** No, it's the *same* power. It's the same power, but I went for it the wrong way. I think everybody's searching for everlasting peace, happiness, financial security. And that's all I wanted. You know, the respect of my peers, being able to protect my loved ones, that's all I ever wanted. But I used the drugs and all that stuff to do it. Now I don't have to. All I have to do is know how to function inside American society, to become an educated person who can make it in *your* ring.

**Selyva:** For me, the most helpless I ever felt was about halfway through my trial. It hit me: "You're going to jail. It don't matter what you do or

what you say to these people. You're going to jail for a *long time*." The attorney, he turned his back on the judge and laughed. He said, "I don't care whether you did it or not, you going." From then on, I just gave up. The next four years was the lowest part of my life.

I had cut my family loose; I didn't call or write them or nothing. But one day I got a letter in the mail. It was my sister and she said, "I'm looking for my big brother. Regardless of what happened in your past I still love you. If you're that person, call me and let me know. If you're *not*, write or call to let me know you're not my brother so I can continue looking." That's basically what the letter said. And I was touched. That was like a light at the end of the tunnel.

I started pulling myself up by my bootstraps. All the drugs, I stopped all that, and smoking cigarettes and messing around. I realized, hey, there is something for me to live for. Now the light keeps getting closer and closer, and as it does I'm getting some of my humanity back.

**John:** What Selwyn said brought something to mind. For me, and I guess for a lot of African American men, coming in contact with police and the criminal justice system is really where we see ourselves most powerless. The first time I can remember this is in high school. Two security guards walked up to me and told me, "Where're you going?" And I said, "I've been suspended. I have to leave the school." And they said, "Nah, you don't go to this school." And one of them knew I did. He was the main one that grabbed me. I was struggling with them and they picked me up and slammed my face into the wall. I had to turn, hoping that my nose didn't get broken. And that's when I began having a problem with the justice system.

As I got older, when I was up to something wrong I never felt that what the police were doing was out of hand. But I remember times I was just walking, ain't doing nothing, and the police would pull their guns out and yell "Freeze!" One of them would have a gun to my head and was patting me down against the wall. That's a very miserable feeling—I know from experience that it don't take anything for a gun to go off.

But the worst was like Selwyn said. When I was convicted—and I'm not going to argue the innocence or guilt aspect of it—I knew in that situation that I'm being taken advantage of and *there's nothing I can do*. The jury comes back and says you're guilty. You want to say, "Wait a minute! All the facts didn't come up. Everybody listen!" But you can't do that. You got to sit there and accept it.

When I was walking out of the courtroom, my son's mother looked at me and I could see her kind of cry. I said, "Don't do that. Don't let these people see you cry. That's the *last* thing you want to do." When you come out of the neighborhoods we're from, you learn you can't show weakness. But this all had such an impact on me that I remember sitting in diagnostic for ninety days. I felt like I'd been beaten with a baseball bat. I didn't

have no physical bruises, but I just lost the will to live. I couldn't think. I kept putting on a front, but inside I was walking around in a daze. I could not put two and two together to save my life. Any suggestion that popped up in the air, like a rope to life, I was ready to grab it. But inside, I said, "Man, you done *lost* something here."

## Karmic Forces

Thus it is that those to whom destiny lends might, perish for having relied too much upon it . . . they go beyond the measure of their strength, inevitably so, because they do not know its limit . . . and here they are, exposed, naked before misfortune without that armour of might which protected their souls, without anything any more to separate them from tears. . . . This retribution, of a geometric strictness . . . punishes automatically the abuse of strength. . . . (Weil, "The *Iliad*, Poem of Might," 164)

**Drew:** Simone Weil says that exactly the same kind of thing you experienced under the foot of the criminal justice system—powerless, delivered over, your life taken away—would reflect back the same power you inflicted on others as a criminal. This retribution is called *karma* in the East. What do you think about this concept of karmic payback?

**John:** I can understand it in an individual sense. I may have done things that then come back. But the criminal justice institution does these things and never experiences them back. Being part of the system lets you abuse so many others but walk away looking a hero.

**Drew:** Well, Simone Weil would probably say that the people who are misusing their force in that fashion—it could be cops, maybe there are guards here—

**John:** Prosecutors, judges, everybody. . . .

**Drew:** —that they, in turn, at some point will fall victim to force. They too will receive a karmic payback.

**John:** That's something we never see.

**Donald:** When John was talking I was thinking about the first experience I had with the criminal justice system. I couldn't imagine anything I perpetrated on anyone so terrible to suffer the kind of pain I experienced in that courtroom. It's like each day they take a part of your soul away. After my trial, I had to—it's hard to even find words to articulate it—I had to reestablish my humanity all over. I had to sell myself that I was worth something. The last day of the trial, the sentencing, they got all these different names for you.

**Drew:** What kind of names?

**Selvyn:** Heinous monster.

**Donald:** That's one of their favorites—heinous monster. The judges use that when they're sentencing you. So I had to rename myself.

**Drew:** Ordinarily when we think of force, as in the Weil article, we're thinking about *physical* force. But this brings up the idea that certain things that are non-physical, like words, are also embodiments of force that can do violence to an individual.

**Charles:** Y'all talking about names—in court they called me a “notorious gangster,” Charles “Lucky Luciano.” And for a while I actually tried to live that name out. But now I'm at a point in my life where I hate that name. It's a dead person's name and I'm not a dead man at all. I'm well and alive.

But you know there's something that happened to me, Doc. When I was about fifteen, right, I followed this woman all the way up to Eastern Avenue and snatched her pocketbook. And man, this woman screamed and hollered. Out of all the robberies that I ever did in my life, sometimes when I make my prayers I think about that woman. I say, “God, *please* forgive me.” And that's been almost twenty years ago.

**Wayne:** I only recall one instance like that; this old lady, she had asked me to see whether her watch was ticking. She said her husband had bought it for her a long time ago. When I got the watch, I took off with it but in the process of running, something began to tell me “This is wrong.” Later, I come to find out it's a *conscience*. We've been talking about going through the legal system—but, you know, your conscience has a built-in legal system. If you do wrong it's always nagging until you straighten it out.

And so in the process of running I felt like a victim to some unidentified force. I didn't know what was going on, but it had me in its grasp. I had to stop, think, run back. This force was growing so much, there was nothing I could do. I went all the way back, but the lady wasn't there. I wondered how many buses took off within the last five minutes. I knew if I felt the weight of this force now, imagine what it's going to be like if I never catch this woman! I chased down four buses. When I found her and returned the watch she said, “Oh thank you. You're so kind, young man.”

**Drew:** So that's also a different force from the physical one Weil focuses on—a *spiritual* force or a *moral* force of conscience. In this case, instead of it robbing us of our humanity, it restores our humanity.

**Wayne:** But the two forces can work the same way. If you're afraid—you're surrounded by people and about to be pounded on—it causes you to sweat, your heart to palpitate. The force on the inside does the same thing. It causes you to *sweat*.

## Victim / Victimizer

Donald mentions a gun pointing straight at his head. John speaks of another, wielded by cops. Tray goes one step further: he can even see the bullet. And it doesn't seem to matter whose hand the gun is in. An irate motorist, a suspicious cop, a drug dealer—same thing. A gun trained at your head makes such subtleties fade.

These men had come under the rule of force. Here was a moment when all the forces circulating in their lives had crystallized into a single diamond-like node that would leave its mark forever. As Tray says, “I tried to make my life where I won't ever have to go through that again.” He would fight force with force. But his response brought what he most feared upon him. Now a man hovers above him in the guard tower with a shotgun, perhaps for the rest of his life. Sometimes our worst nightmares come true.

Does that make Tray and his fellow inmates victims? According to the dictionary, a victim is a person who suffers from a destructive or injurious action or agency. These men clearly had so suffered. For many of them, inner-city streets, busted-up families, impoverished schools, all had taken their expectable toll. Prison was but the fuller expression of such confining forces.

And it's hard not to see a racial dimension to this victimization. Most, though not all, of the inmates I taught were black, not surprising in Baltimore, a city with a black majority. John says, “For me, and I guess for a lot of African American men, coming in contact with police and the criminal justice system is really where we see ourselves most powerless.” He's not kidding about “a lot of African American men.” Fully one-third of black men between twenty and twenty-nine are caught up in the criminal justice system, whether incarcerated or on work release, parole, or probation. An astounding figure. If you're black in the United States, you're eight times more likely to end up in prison, at some point, than if white. Or to put the figures in perspective, our country jails its blacks at a *four-fold greater rate than South Africa under apartheid*. Whether you deem this the result of discriminatory sentencing, or of the poverty, restricted op-

portunity, and despair that drive so many African Americans to crime, it's hard not to see in such figures a pattern of racial victimization. But whatever the ultimate causes of their crimes, the men I taught were not simply victims. They were *victimizers* as well. Through their criminal activity these men had brutally violated others. Most, I knew, had *killed*.

Victim/victimizer. I had been trained to see these as irreconcilable opposites. The victim is in a relatively powerless position; the victimizer is a possessor of force. The victim suffers; the victimizer perpetrates an injury. The victim is worthy of compassion; the victimizer is deserving of contempt. Like light and dark, good and evil, the two terms gain meaning by their opposition. But how then should I react to meeting these men, who seemed to me victims and victimizers both?

It is wondrous what the mind can do in the face of seeming contradiction. Denial is always an option—make one side of the contradiction go away. And I was guilty of that, I admit. The problem was I *liked* these guys. I liked it when Charley gave me a big hug, showed me pictures of his wife, called me his “main man.” I liked Tray’s curious mixture of the Ego-from-Hell and self-deprecating humor. I liked Wayne’s cheerful Christianity, and John’s fierce intelligence, which he used like a knife for stripping arguments to the bone. In one way or another I liked them all.

This made it easier to see these men as victims and to blank out the other side. Though I knew they were in for serious offenses, I usually didn’t inquire too much about these. Then too, there seemed an unbridgeable gap between the men I saw now and their criminal histories. Mark, who appeared such a gentle soul and scholar, was in for a double murder. Whither the difference, I wondered? Was it getting off drugs? Undergoing religious conversion? The fact that we were meeting in a guarded classroom rather than on the mean streets? Whatever, I found myself experiencing more of compassion than condemnation.

But should I have? Within my mind, a cynic kept blasting away at the bleeding-heart liberal within. “You’re such best buddies with these guys, so concerned for their plight. Cruel prison system. Poor victims of racism and poverty. But what about the folks they terrorized? The kids dead from crack? The merchants looted? People snatched from the street, a gun held to their head? And the bleeding corpses after your buddies pulled the trigger? What about those corpses? Where’s your compassion for them?”

The voice was right, I couldn’t deny it. I didn’t focus much energy on compassion for these crime victims. It made me feel almost complicitous in their murder. But I attribute it to something other than moral failing: maybe a failure of imagination. The word compassion means to “suffer with.” And it was simply easier for me to suffer with the prisoners (and they with themselves and each other) than with their victims. After all, I knew these guys. I could see the harshness of their confinement and the ghetto neighborhoods they had walked. I could hear their tangled stories

unweave themselves in pain. Perhaps the book’s reader will find himself or herself in the same position. It’s harder to imagine the unspoken tales of the dead victims. Gone, they are gone. My imagination remains woefully insufficient. Maybe when I myself am terrorized, or a loved one, God forbid, I will better know.

I would get a glimpse crossing the prison yard. That guy over there throwing the football—if I were alone in a dark alley with him, what might he have done? How about this mean-looking skinny dude, or that weightlifter type? Suddenly I would realize myself surrounded by two hundred men who in other circumstances might have slit my throat. It was the luxury of my protected surroundings, guards everywhere, that enabled me to feel disdain for the guards and open my heart to killers. I was artificially safe. So artificially compassionate.

As I had my mental blank spots, so did the prisoners. They often seemed to minimize their crimes. I wondered why and came up with several theories. Perhaps acts of violence appeared inevitable within their world. After all, people sometimes refer to the inner city as a “war zone.” And as Tolstoy writes,

The aim of war is murder, the methods of war are spying, treachery, and their encouragement, the ruin of a country’s inhabitants, robbing them or stealing to provision the army, and fraud and falsehood termed military craft. The military life is characterized by absence of freedom, that is, discipline, idleness, ignorance, cruelty, debauchery and drunkenness. And in spite of all this it is the highest class, respected by everyone . . . and he who kills most people receives the highest rewards. (*War and Peace*, Book 3, Part 2, Chapter 25, p. 831)

Such is the power of war’s field of force, whether in the *Iliad* or the inner city. Good and evil become ambiguous or reversed.

Then too, I think many of the prisoners experienced what could be called the “fallacy of intention.” They looked inside themselves and did not find some kind of malicious, hateful intent we’ve all come to associate with the *bad man*. “I was just doing what I had to. I didn’t want to hurt anybody.” But there’s no limit to the evil that men can perpetrate with a sense of justification in their hearts. You can’t judge the act by reference to how you *feel*.

I think a time factor also comes into play. You blow someone away in an instant, only to receive a life sentence. Fifty years behind stone walls for one flick of the trigger finger? It seems wrong that something so evanescent should be punished in such an enduring way. Sure, one can intellectually grasp the logic. One can point out the equal years of life, and more, the murderer rips away from the victim. But perhaps it will always feel to the perpetrator that this argument rests on a sleight of hand. How can you weigh what *doesn’t* exist (the dead man’s might-have-been future) against what certainly *does* exist (my life wasting away in prison)?

Yet, truly, these men were victimizers. They had willingly engaged in violent crime. But just as truly, I believe, many of these men were victims, subject to injurious forces throughout their lives. What happens when you try to hold both perspectives at once? Like the optical illusion created by a Necker cube, you see first one cube-face, then the other, leaping out of the page. It's almost impossible to view both together.

But unless we do, our sight remains partial. Just see the *victim* and you arrive at what might be called the "liberal fallacy." Taken to the limit, this is the notion that a human being has no free will, bears no responsibility for choices, but is simply a victim of external forces. We've seen this defense in some well-publicized trials. Abuse, or TV violence, or Twinkies, or racism *made me do it*. We want to say, "No, own your own acts."

But on the other hand, to see just the *victimizer* is to arrive at what might be called a "conservative fallacy." This is the notion that we as individuals are wholly responsible for the course of our life. If you ended up a criminal and I became an upstanding Loyola College professor, it is because of your depravity and my moral superiority. The more I spoke with the prisoners, the more this contrast seemed simplistic. I shared the same human drives and dreams as did the inmates. If I had been subject to the same web of forces they were caught in, I was doubtful that I, myself, would have escaped.

If I saw these men only as victimizers, I could not understand or feel compassion for their lives. But if I see them only as helpless victims, I was robbing them of responsibility. Either view reduces a human being to something less.

The truth, I believe, is that humans can be victim/victimizers; that we often abuse in precisely the areas and ways we have ourselves been abused. A large proportion of sex crimes are perpetrated by those who were sexually violated. Most child abusers were abused as children. How to loathe the victimizer and feel compassion for the victim when we discover they are one and the same? For violence, finally, is circular. A man grows up in violent circumstances. He adopts violent measures to survive and escape. He is caught and subjected to violent punishment. Embittered, he leaves with violence in his heart. Shall the circle ever go unbroken? What power is capable of setting us free?

## Hooked on Power

*Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) is considered one of the most significant and controversial philosophers of the modern era. Recognized early for his genius, he was awarded a professorship at the University of Basel when just twenty-four. Ten years later he resigned for reasons of poor health (he suffered from horrendous migraines and digestive problems), and to pursue his writing. During the next decade, in a fit of productivity interrupted by constant illness, he wrote a number of famous works including Thus Spake Zarathustra and Beyond Good and Evil. In 1889 he suffered a mental collapse, possibly from syphilitic infection. He was thereafter cared for by his family, remaining an insane invalid until his death.*

*Nietzsche fiercely criticized Judeo-Christian morality and religion, regarding its values as sickly and hypocritical. In his later work, he develops the hypothesis that, although it takes many forms, there is a single basic drive dominating all human beings, even all life—the will to power. Using this notion, I explore with the inmates the complex ways power plays out in the world of drugs and prisons.*

### Dealers and Addicts

Not necessity, not desire—no, the love of power is the demon of men. Let them have everything—health, food, a place to live, entertainment—they are and remain unhappy and low-spirited: for the demon waits and waits and will be satisfied. Take everything from them and satisfy this, and they are almost happy—as happy as men and demons can be.

The striving for distinction keeps a constant eye on the next man and wants to know what his feelings are: but the empathy which this drive requires for its gratification is far from being harmless or sympathetic or kind. We want, rather, to perceive or divine how the next man outwardly or inwardly *suffers* from us, how he loses control over himself and surrenders to the impressions our hand or even merely the sight of us makes upon him; and even when he who strives after distinction makes and wants to make a joyful, elevating or cheerful impression, he nonetheless enjoys this success not inasmuch as he has given joy to the next man or elevated or cheered him, but inasmuch as he has *impressed* himself on the

soul of the other, changed its shape and rules over it at his own sweet will. (Friedrich Nietzsche, *A Nietzsche Reader*, 221, 217-18; aphorisms from *Day-break*, sections 262 and 113)

**Drew:** Nietzsche is presenting a thesis here that's sometimes called "the will to power." Among other things, it's a philosophical or a psychological doctrine that all human activities are really motivated by a drive to gain and experience *power*—not just survival, wealth, sexual pleasure, or whatever else you might consider most important. Let's explore and test Nietzsche's theory a bit; see if we agree or disagree with it and whether we can gain insight from it about our behavior.

Were the criminal activities that you personally engaged in motivated by the will to power?

**H.B.:** I suppose in all cultures we have what's called crimes of attraction. So in the African American culture, dope dealing became the crime of attraction—years ago it was, perhaps, chicken stealing, then bootlegging, now drug dealing. The money's good. The money is *extremely* good. Then you can tell yourself, "Well, I'm not making anybody take it. If I don't sell it somebody else will." All these little trapdoors where one thinks one can find some escape from responsibility.

Then people can take the drug and live a wonderful illusion that says everything's alright. I know personally from using cocaine that when you inject it you feel like a king. Everything is fine in the whole universe. I don't care what you going through, I don't care how bad it is, when that drug hits your system you're a winner.

I don't think anyone who has ever sold drugs, who has turned people on with the intent to get them hooked, was not in a quest for power. And I don't think that anybody who's ever used drugs was not on a quest for power too—the power of independence, self-realization, joy. So there's so many different power plays all twisted up in there.

**Tray:** When you're a dealer, nobody gives you more power than the dope fiend. But my pride and power also came from my family. I come from a household where the finances wasn't there, especially when the primary caregiver in my household, who was my aunt, was strung out on narcotics. She eventually died from an overdose in '89. When my father passed away, I went to live with her and her two daughters who was like my sisters. And when Christmas came around, or birthdays, I was able to make them feel happy. With the money from drugs I got them extravagant gifts, and I felt so much pride and power from being able to pay all the bills in the house. Okay, I'm not doing good in school—but here I'm a giant, I'm a king.

**John:** I think, for most people, the initial involvement in crime has more to do with economics than the will to power. You're poor. You can't meet

your bills. You don't see anyone concerned about your plight so you decide, "Hey, I don't owe these people *anything*. If I have to get on top by stepping on a couple of them then I'm going to do it, because people are stepping on *me*." You're just trying to get some money.

But once you see the power you have, it becomes addictive. You can't see yourself anymore just being the everyday person, the *powerless* person. You become addicted to people looking for you, seeing if you have drugs, and recognizing you 'cause of the clothes you wear, the car you drive. Then the will to power keeps you involved.

But I don't think the dealer's really got the power: the power is the *drug*. 'Cause whatever direction it goes, that's where the power goes. They can like me today because I got something that's smoking, but tomorrow it might fall off and the other guy's got the power 'cause he has the drug.

**Tony:** When I started into drugs I was basically doing a favor for my father. He had just got out of the federal penitentiary and had a rap sheet. I'd just got out of the service, clean as a whistle, so he wanted me to sell drugs for him. I was his front. But like the guys say, after a while the money gets so good, and when you see some of the things people'll do for drugs, you get hooked yourself.

Like I remember there was a young lady came to my house about three in the morning for Quaaludes. In Texas they sold for fifteen dollars a piece. And she had fifteen dollars' worth of change. So I joked, "Damn, girl, what'd you do? Rob your little boy's piggy bank?" And she said, "Yes." She was serious. I was like, "Damn, you taking your own kid's money for dope?" I kicked her out of the house. I wouldn't even sell to her. But, see, that's the power. I could do that. I could afford to do it. Because I knew as soon as she walked out the door. . . .

After I got out of jail in Texas I came back to Maryland, and for the first six months all I did was work. I had three jobs and made about three, four hundred dollars a week. When I was selling drugs I made that in an hour! So it wasn't long before I was selling a little dope here, doing a little robbery there. 'Cause you do, you get hooked on that prestige, that money, and that power the fast money brings.

**H.B.:** Thinking about the will to power of the criminal, something very significant popped out in me: there's a difference between a *criminal* and a *fool*. I sit up here wondering why I just don't feel that some of the younger guys in here are criminals. They weren't criminals, man, they were fools. Some older guy grabbed the kid when he was about twelve and groomed him, right? Used him, had him running around breaking the law. You know, he's only a juvenile: "Get caught, all they'd do is take you down to the station and call your mother to come and pick you up. But if they catch me doing this same act they'd lock me up and throw the key away." The older guy is the criminal. But this kid is just out there *playing*.



**Tray:** I can respect what H.B. says. I'm the quintessential youngster he spoke about. But even before I started doing what I was doing, I knew the consequences. I knew that if I killed people I'd get life in prison. Being a youngster don't make you a fool.

**John:** These kids are being used—they have no concept of the total picture. But we counsel a lot of kids, and we see that once they're involved they get the will to power. At the Narcotics Anonymous program, older drug addicts tell us how different it is now with these young kids. They're completely on a power trip, the way they talk to you, the way they carry their guns. But when they finally run into the justice system, they turn up little kids again. Wanting protection, wanting comfort, wanting their mommy! For the last year or so you been out there acting like Adolf Hitler or Attila the Hun, now all of a sudden you want your mommy? Naw. *You're going to prison.*

**Tony:** I agree. Look at the way the new breed of drug dealers handle their business. Like these drive-by shootings. You got a beef with someone about his corner and instead of walking up there like in the old days to fight him or stab him, you gonna stand thirty feet across the street with a semi-automatic rifle and just Derrrrrr! Don't care what you hit. There's a baby sitting on the front porch trying to play jacks, and this fool across the street with an AK-47 spravin'. If that ain't a power trip I don't know what it is.

**O'Donald:** I'll be in defense of the young 'uns. We learned this from you older guys. We want to be noticed, we want people to see us and say, "I know him." So if the older guys did it a certain way, we say, "Well, damn, if we do it *this way*, we can get even more noticed."

**Tony:** You got that!

### Prison Power

The first effect of happiness is the *feeling of power*: this wants to *express itself*, either to us ourselves, or to other men, or to ideas or imaginary beings. The most common modes of expression are: to bestow, to mock, to destroy—all three out of a common basic drive. (Nietzsche, *A Nietzsche Reader*, 222; aphorism from *Daybreak*, section 356)

**Drew:** To bestow, to give somebody something, how does that exercise the will to power?

**Charles:** When you're able to help someone who's not able to help themselves, that gives you power. In this country and a lot of places, that's how you make a person dependent upon you. Every time they need assistance you're the person they come to, and then you have the ability to put con-

ditions and set rules for being so benevolent, and that's how you start to control.

**Drew:** Maybe I'm doing something like that. On the surface, I'm volunteering my time and that's really nice. But from Nietzsche's point of view I'm doing this because I get to feel so important—I'm fantasizing about taking murderers and rapists and converting them to philosophers, getting off on the power trip. [*laughs*]

**Tray:** It's coming out ain't it?!

**Drew:** And how about "to mock," how is that the will to power?

**Mark:** I can think of an example: when the courts sentence someone to multiple life sentences without parole, all running consecutive. To satisfy the government's requirement you'd have to die and then be resurrected to serve another sentence. I think that's a mockery of the concept of God. The government doesn't have the power to resurrect you.

**Tray:** In the drug game I was able to fulfill all the elements that Nietzsche talked about. If my little sister wanted a pair of new shoes for school I could get it for her and it made me feel powerful. And then I was able to destroy people if I didn't like them. Don't want you selling dope in my neighborhood?—knock you all out, burn the house up. And I could mock people, like "Man, you're looking rough, I don't want to see you around here, you're nothing but an old dope fiend." After the first week I was able to buy what I wanted, so it was no longer the money. It was being able to bestow, mock, and destroy.

**Drew:** How about within a prison? It's a setting where, at least in the eyes of society, people are in a relatively powerless position. But if Nietzsche's correct, that drive for power will still be very much alive.

**Tray:** I don't think no group of people could validate Nietzsche's philosophy as much as in a prison setting. We convicts are always striving for distinction. For example, I try to distinguish myself—I'm an *honorable* criminal, you know. There's different degrees of murderers—we're all not the same kind. *He* hit the old lady in the head just to take ten bucks out of her wallet so I'll look down on him. At least I tried to run a corporation. It was a criminal one, but a corporation nonetheless.

Most of the time, to be considered important in a prison situation, you had to have been notorious on the street. You sold a lot of drugs, had a few people murdered. And when you come in here a red carpet is laid out.

**Donald:** I think power in a community is whatever the community accepts as being power. I'm going to give an example. A young guy came in here from my neighborhood. He got his high school equivalency GED in here and *scored the highest of anybody in the state*. And very few people in

this prison knew that. This person had a problem with another guy who was playing with him too much, and he came to me and said, "I'm going to hurt this guy, man." I recommended he take the guy in the gym and they do fisticuffs. He said, "No. I want people to respect me in this prison. I'm going to stab him, and once I stab this dude everybody will look up to me." And he did. He stabbed the guy up, almost killed him.

He didn't get any recognition for having the type of mind that could score three hundred plus on the GED. But he got recognition for the stabbing and it's held up to this day, ten years later. Young guys like O'Donald that don't know him, somebody might pull them aside and say, "He stabbed a few people." And most of the young guys will hold him in high esteem.

If he felt he could be accepted as powerful for scoring real high on the GED, then maybe he would have gone another route.

**H.B.:** I think that in a prison, power is an illusion that's passed around among the prisoners for the sole reason of helping them hold each other up. But there is the *reality* of power in prison, and over these past twenty years I've seen that power always in the hands of somebody who didn't want it. Because it had nothing to do with material possession, it had nothing to do with how violent the person could be. Believe it or not, it always seemed to radiate from a person who *cared* about those prisoners, and those prisoners *knew* it. That person wielded more power than any dope dealer I ever seen.

**Drew:** Can you give an example?

**H.B.:** Okay. It's usually a prisoner. But it's the type of person who the prisoners knew would give his life for them, would be carted off in chains trying to protect them. I saw Ben Chavis with that in North Carolina. George Jackson had it out in California. That's power. But a little ole guy dope dealer? He's always going to have some flunkies around. But he's in here for doping up a whole community and wiping out half a generation. Now he's doing the same with the young men in the penitentiary who are trapped in confusion. This cat wears an *illusory* badge of power. But when you get an individual who cares about the prisoners and they know it . . . now that's power.

**Drew:** This might also suggest that Nietzsche's analysis is incomplete or flawed. He's asserting that pretty much all behavior falls under the will to power, but maybe what you're talking about can't be reduced to that drive. I think a lot of people who are Christians, Muslims, Jews, whatever, would think and hope that there's certain forms of behavior—giving behavior, spiritual behavior, moral behavior—that are not simply based on the will to power.

**Donald:** Yeah, you could go crazy thinking that everything you were doing—like you teaching in prison—is just for the power.

**Drew:** When I was reading Nietzsche I was getting really depressed. I thought, "Man, this guy is right. The only reason I'm volunteering in this penitentiary is because I'm on an ego trip! I'm getting off on pretending to help these guys. Maybe I should just quit." I finally decided, "Wait a second, Nietzsche's probably right about *part* of my motivation. And I need to watch that part because it could turn destructive. But there's some other stuff going on too that's real positive. So let's not throw the baby out with the bath water."

**Donald:** It could be the other way around, couldn't it, Doc? Did you think about that?

**Drew:** What do you mean?

**Donald:** *We* could be on a power trip and you could be the victim. [laughter]

**Drew:** That's true. . . .

**Donald:** Just joking, Doc.

## Kind Power

We'd been talking about power in its many forms: the power of dealer over addict, of the drug itself, of guns and knives in the hands of insecure men seeking reputation. In one form or another this is *violent power*. Then H.B. gave it a flip—the truer power emanates from a person who cares. Is there, then, *kind power*? And are the two powers at root the same, as Nietzsche claims, or opposed in nature?

Violent power refers to the superior strength that enables one to *violate*. That is, to break, infringe, trespass, destroy. The Maryland Penitentiary was filled with violators. Men who had murdered, robbed, and raped, gathered here like worshippers of a common god in their holy temple.

The penitentiary as a temple to violence? Isn't it quite the opposite, built to punish and eradicate violence? On the surface, yes. But underneath, I sensed another message. If the thug had more power than the victim he stabbed, then the state must exert its *even greater power* over the transgressor. The penitentiary's tall walls and barbed wire bore eloquent testimony to superior force. When John Thanos was executed on the premises, it merely brought this point home with a flourish. This was surely not a matter of eradicating violence, but of redirecting it in ways "protective to the community." And such is one purpose of any temple. Turn the god's dangerous energies to use.

In fact, our country is in the midst of an orgiastic celebration of violent power turned on the criminal. The numbers of executions are soaring. So too, and perhaps more significantly, are our incarceration rates. In 1970 the United States had fewer than two hundred thousand inmates. As I write this, there are now *about 1.8 million*. This is the highest rate in the Western world, with the exception of Russia, which we should soon surpass, and is some six to ten times greater than that of most industrialized nations. The state of California alone holds more inmates than France, Germany, Great Britain, Japan, Singapore, and the Netherlands combined. What accounts for our massive and anomalous drive to incarcerate our citizens? It's not simply a response to rising crime. As I write this, the crime rate has now declined for six straight years. Murder rates are

lower today than twenty years ago. Still, our prison population increases. In the words of a *New York Times* report, "The imprisonment boom has developed a built-in growth dynamic independent of the crime rate," the result of longer sentences, mandatory jail terms for drug offenders, reduced use of parole, and other factors. We're engaged in a bizarre social experiment, as we imprison ever more of the population. And the more we pour resources into this violent power, the less is available for "kind power" endeavors. We're spending some forty billion dollars a year on housing and feeding inmates (more than three times what is spent on the much vilified welfare program, Aid to Families with Dependent Children). What if you took the twenty thousand dollars a year or more it takes to incarcerate a person, and used that instead for education, drug treatment, family counseling, and job training? Instead we worship the violent god of the prison-temple.

The inner sanctuary of this particular temple was ringed by many walls. It's extremely hard to get out of a maximum security prison, but it's not much easier, I found, to get in. Of course not. You don't want people smuggling things to the prisoners. But beyond that, to seek entry was to be put in your place. If this was a temple to violent power, everything conspired to illustrate to me that I was but a lowly sycophant in its precincts.

This was demonstrated through frustrations and delays. I was a prison school instructor with proper ID, yet it wasn't unusual for me to be turned away at the door. The paperwork wasn't prepared. Or classes were canceled today. Or something. In fact, I write these words having just been turned away the second week in a row from my scheduled class.

Guard: "We don't have your count-out."

Me: "But I called the principal yesterday to confirm it would be prepared."

Guard: "We never got it."

Me: "But in the past I haven't even needed a count-out, since I have a state ID."

Guard: "On this shift, the shift commander says no one gets in without a count-out."

Me: "Oh."

Most class days I would be admitted, but at their own sweet time. I might wait at the front gate; then wait at the middle gate; then wait to be frisked; then wait at the inner gate that finally led to the yard. The guards, to their credit, were never cruel. It's just that, despite all the concern with count-outs, I just didn't count. My time, my educational mission, was of little import in this temple. And being made to wait is one way we clarify to one another who holds power and who doesn't. The same ritual is enacted in government offices, corporate headquarters, doctors waiting rooms, the world over. So, too, in prison. What is a prison, after all, but a

place where we drop all frills and *just make people wait*? Imagine being sentenced to thirty years in a waiting room run by a callous bureaucracy and overcrowded with other angry and unwilling customers. That's the prison.

The prisoners were subject not only to the power of the institution, but that of the other inmates as well. If you showed weakness, you were liable to suffer violation. Someone might steal your commissary stuff. Lend out cigarettes—forget about getting them back. Or you're taking a shower and a strange guy cozies up from behind. Soon you're a "fuck-boy."

The only way to counter this violent power is to grab some yourself. Tray talks about the prisoner who wins respect because he "had a few people murdered. And when you come in here a red carpet is laid out." The mark of a king. Or we see this in Donald's story about the young guy who excelled on the GED and found out it meant nothing. It wasn't coin of the realm. When he stabbed someone he acquired hard currency that was still paying interest a decade later.

But here's where H.B. put his spin on things. "[Real power] had nothing to do with how violent the person could be. Believe it or not, it always seemed to radiate from a person who *cared* about those prisoners, and those prisoners *knew* it." Believe it or not—I did. I had witnessed a lot of kindness in the penitentiary, and its profound effects upon men.

I had been told, "You don't make many friends in prison. You watch your back." That may be true, but I also witnessed tight friendships within our class. Just about everyone seemed to count Charley their main man; this Muslim imam had a generosity that John had been working for years to restrain. "It gets you into trouble here. You can't keep giving people the shirt off your back. They'll use you like a chump." Charley had learned to keep his shirt on, but he kept giving away the buttons. And his generosity was a force-field of its own, protecting him and lightening other's burdens.

People looked out for one another. If someone from the class was on solitary lock-up they sneaked in food, letters, readings. "Was it legit?" I asked. Yeah. Well, sort of. Just don't do it in front of a guard. I watched people help each other out as they might have in my great grandparents' Russian shtetl. Tight times, and the "us versus them" mind, breeds community. The prisoners knew they would be together for a long, long time in a closed-in place and they had only each other to make it habitable. Observing rules of politeness was far more crucial here than in elite society.

Then too, people seemed bound by an empathy born of common home and fate. Most of the world doesn't care, but the prisoners all knew what it's like serving time—that noise always blasting through the cell block—the guards' contempt, and how they don't do what they're supposed to do even when they say they do, and there's nothing you can do about it—the long nights with a bad case of *thinks*—the poor excuse of a dead carcass they serve up as chicken. They all knew and it linked them for life.

But even before prison, these people were woven together. So many came from the same places, East Baltimore, West Baltimore, that you met schoolmates, cousins, friends from down the street. It was like a twisted-up reunion in Hades: "Hey, I didn't know you were in here too—so how ya doin'?" If you were lucky there were homies smoothing your way from the moment you arrived, offering protection and the inside scoop. In Hades, but embraced. Simone Weil has written of the *Iliad's* grim world, "Justice and love, for which there can hardly be a place in this picture of extremes and unjust violence, yet shed their light over the whole without ever being discerned otherwise than by the accent" (p. 177). I discerned justice and love between prisoners despite the brutality of their crimes and surroundings.

And I, too, was the recipient of love. I was made welcome, praised for my teaching, given useful tips, and in every way looked after. H.B. would call sometimes on the prison phone. He was serving a thirty-five-year sentence, twenty-five nonparolable, and was sick from AIDS. This meant skin blotches, throat thrush, night sweats, times when it was a chore to breathe or his lower body went all limp. "You gotta take better care of yourself," he told me. "Don't work so hard. Enjoy life!" My Jewish mother. And I would receive kind letters in the mail. A sample of one from Donald:

First of all I must say *I love you and your wife*. You wouldn't be the person you are without a supportive wife. Dr. never mind the fact that you exposed me to Western Philosophy on master level. And that you also went out your way to expose me to Black Philosophy. But it is the fact that you treated all of us like Human Beings. You accepted us unconditionally.

Such comments suggest that the prisoners experienced their kindness as a response to mine. But the reverse was true as well: I felt well treated, and responded in turn. Just as violent power circulates and multiplies, so, seemingly, does the power of kindness.

But we again approach the Nietzschean challenge. Aren't these two powers, at root, the same? Wasn't my own kindness just a way "to bestow," to "impress myself on the soul of the other"? After all, what greater power than to transform the heart of a murderer, exerting a force greater than that of his crime, or even that of his punishment?

If we can give a Nietzschean reading of my behavior, so, too, that of the inmates. I can imagine a voice saying: "Don't be fooled by their kindness. It's just one way of surviving in the joint. They've got to be civil with their cellmate or maybe they'll wake up dead. They've got to stay out of trouble or they'll never make parole. And they see in you a way to increase their chances: you offer the power of knowledge, credentials, maybe a letter to the parole board. Naturally, they're going to stay on your good side."

True, all true, but only up to a point. I can't help but believe there's an element in kindness that is *different*, irreducible to Nietzsche's will to power. Weil identifies this power with the Divine. In addition to "gravity," the downward pull of the world's cruel mechanics, she refers to "grace"—another kind of energy that lightens and liberates.

My own introduction to this grace came through the Twelve Step program first pioneered in Alcoholics Anonymous. Some fourteen years ago I started using that approach for a slew of obsessive problems; compulsive eating, co-dependency (as it's now fashionably called), and compulsive fear and guilt. For years this thinking had kept me trapped in a prison of misery and self-destructiveness. How to escape? As it says in the book *Alcoholics Anonymous*,

Our human resources, as marshalled by the will, were not sufficient; they failed utterly. Lack of power, that was our dilemma. We had to find a power by which we could live, and it had to be a *Power greater than ourselves*. (p. 45)

Thus the notion of God is introduced in that book. Not as Truth. Not even as Love. But as *Power*.

And so God came to me. As I worked the Twelve Step program I began to experience power over my obsessions. My life gradually, but immeasurably, improved. Today I'm proud to declare myself kind of sane. Each Passover, it's this liberation that comes to mind. "*We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt, and God freed us from Egypt with a mighty hand.*" The compulsive illness I suffered had been a violent Pharaoh, countering every attempt to escape with a new load of bricks. But I experienced God as a *greater* power, liberating the prisoner with kindness.

And I'm not the only one. The other day I received a letter from Charles Baxter that began:

In the Name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful, In Control of all affairs

As-Alaama-Aliakum,

Greeting my dearly beloved Teacher, doctor, brother and friend. I must first give praise to (Allah-God ) he is the provider for us all; then I must give honor to you and those in the class.

Enclosed was a copy of his college diploma in management science, just completed after several hard years.

And what, I puzzled, did he mean by (Allah-God )? Then I realized. He knew that many Jews believed the sacred name of God couldn't and shouldn't ever be written. Charley had left a blank space to honor my God, and in kindness to me.

There, too, is a power.