



## ***Butterflies, Prison and T'ai Chi Chih®***

***By Sheila Leonard, PBVM, St. John's NL, Canada***

***“Don't ask yourself what the world needs.  
Ask yourself what makes you come alive. And go do that.  
Because what the world needs is people who have come alive.”  
- Howard Thurman***

In the fall of 2003, after 30 years as a teacher/administrator, and more “rewired” than “retired”, I became accredited as a T'ai Chi Chih Joy Thru Movement teacher and thus began a new exhilarating chapter in my life, taking me unexpected places, both within and without.

The fall of 2014 found me again dreaming of teaching T'ai Chi Chih classes to groups of inmates at Her Majesty's Penitentiary, an all-male corrections facility, here in St. John's where I live. In a heartbeat, Heather, my Prison Program contact person, (surprisingly a former Grade One student of mine!) was sold and had secured funding and arranged to tour the Penitentiary and meet with the group whom she saw as likely benefitting most. It had long been tugging at my heart, each time with a little more momentum and passion.

This past fall I knew it was time! Somehow the ever-Mysterious unfolding of the Universe brought our energies together in the prison setting where we have just completed a 10-week session. Other inmates have since been asking about doing it ... though class numbers are limited by the availability of time and space as well as by security issues. Feedback from all sides has been wonderfully positive, with another class ready to begin in January.

I continue to be totally awed by the response of the inmates for whom I had offered the introductory session in September 2014, and I had been just as awed each week with the group's engagement and enthusiasm. They themselves clearly entered in wholeheartedly and enJOYed the sessions. The men's own amazement and their delighting in themselves grew from week to week and they let it show. Their individual thanks and handshakes every time as they left a session were heartwarming and humbling.

My introductory session was with the full set of inmates on one particular Range. I had done a silent demo, had engaged them in some of the 20 moves and we had some conversation about what T'ai Chi Chih is, “how it works” and how they might benefit. I had presented T'ai Chi Chih to them initially as “A way to help yourselves feel better on all kinds of levels using your own natural inner resources ... while opening to the possibility of finding a new freedom though in prison.” All were quite amazed and many nodded as one person, considered a leader in the group, commented after the silent demo, “I sure feel a lot more peaceful than when I came in here 5 minutes ago!” Another wondered, “Where did you get the nerve to come here?!”

By an unexpected turn of events, I had worn my orange “butterfly” shirt to that initial class “by accident”, instead of my usual T'ai Chi Chih shirt. No “accident” at all! Fitted beautifully and the butterfly image actually triggered conversation around how T'ai Chi Chih can change us, from the inside out, and even begin to transform our lives. They were enthralled when I shared

James Hecker's story of becoming accredited and teaching T'ai Chi Chih, all while he himself was serving time, and its amazing impact on the return rates of prisoners. A "Chi" moment, a "God" moment! Amazing, however you look at it. Before I left, the sign-up sheet was full!

Staff had been observing our sessions on security cameras throughout the building and experiencing their own awe and amazement at what they saw as well at the particular individuals in the class. The students also mused aloud about some guards' surprised reactions, sitting a little taller as they spoke!

Many staff have expressed a keen interest in doing T'ai Chi Chih themselves, some just from their "on camera" experience of it. From the start we have been exploring the possibility of a lunch hour session for staff only. That initiative is being very well received by administration at this stage, partly as a morale booster for staff after a particularly difficult spring experience. They themselves are among those keenest about the idea and want to be part of it. Heather is very encouraging about our getting an OK to move it forward.

Awe and gratitude say it all for me ... clearly a joy and a privilege. Justin Stone, the originator of T'ai Chi Chih, calls the Chi a Divine Intelligent Energy. Ours only to get out of the way - and allow the rest to happen. Indeed, God is "doing something new" here, as always.

Open to where it may lead ... one small step at a time ...



P.S. Looking back from September 2022 ...



The Spring of 2015, a family illness prompted the putting of my classes on hold until the fall. By the fall the Penitentiary's program restructuring as well as some on-site restructuring of the housing side of things to temporarily accommodate the overflow of female inmates from the Clarendville Correctional Centre for Women, just outside St, John's, meant T'ai Chi Chih sessions were on hold indefinitely.

It was perhaps 2 years later that I met a young man from the prison. We were at The Lantern where I teach my classes. He was reading my current flyer on the bulletin board. When he turned around, he looked my way and said, "I remember you. You taught us this when I was on the 'inside'. I really liked it." I remembered him as well and invited him to join us at The Lantern. The invitation to them all still holds!

I have since inquired about maybe resuming classes there as a volunteer. Now Covid has brought its own intervening factors. I would happily go back as life and time might allow. It was a life-changing experience for me, and I sense it may have been for some of them as well even in some small way. The experience opened my eyes as well as my heart, and I still feel its tug.