



Conversations with Staughton and Alice Lynd

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Alice and Staughton Lynd met each other at Harvard Summer School in 1950.

They married in 1951 and moved to a utopian community in Georgia in 1954. From 1961 to 1964 the Lynds lived on the campus of Spelman College, a college for African American women in Atlanta. There Staughton taught history in a department headed by Howard Zinn, who became a close friend. In summer 1964, Staughton coordinated “freedom schools” in Mississippi Summer. Beginning in 1965, Alice took up the practice of counseling young men who faced difficult decisions when called for military service. She published accounts of war objecters in a book entitled *We Won't Go* (Beacon Press). Husband and wife both went to law school and became lawyers. They worked together at Northeast Ohio Legal Services until their retirement in 1996, specializing in employment law.

Staughton taught at Yale in the 1960s and thereafter, although blacklisted for academic employment because of his energetic opposition to the Vietnam War, wrote a series of books with Alice that drew heavily on their interviews and representation of workers and prisoners. These books included *Nonviolence in America* (third edition, Orbis Books); *Rank and File: Personal Histories by Working-Class Organizers* (First edition, Beacon Press, Expanded edition, Haymarket Books); *Stepping Stones: Memoir of a Life Together* (Lexington Books); *Moral Injury*



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and Nonviolent Resistance: Breaking the Cycle of Violence in the Military and Behind Bars (PM Press).

Staughton with Andrej Grubačić has also published *Wobblies and Zapatistas: Conversations on Anarchism, Marxism and Radical History* (PM Press). In addition Staughton published *Class Conflict, Slavery, and the United States Constitution* and *Intellectual Origins of American Radicalism* (both Second edition, Cambridge University Press), and *Lucasville: The Untold Story of a Prison Uprising* (Second edition, PM Press).

Down and Out in Youngstown, Ohio

Staughton Lynd

Youngstown, Ohio used to be one of the three or four leading steel-producing communities in the United States. In the decades immediately following World War II, the city housed between 150,000 and 200,000 residents, many if not most of whom were employed in steel mills in Youngstown and nearby Warren, Ohio. Major producers of engine parts for General Motors (GM), metal desks, and trucking and other ancillary products and services filled out the picture of a medium sized town or small city with a radical local labor movement.

All that is gone now. Youngstown has lost two-thirds of its residents. In 2018, the complex that assembled automobiles for General Motors in adjacent Lordstown also closed. This complex had provided tangible and emotional assurance after the steel mills shut down. Parents sought to implement family strategies that would allow children, not to go on to college as previously planned, at least to complete high school. GM offered to transfer laid off workers to distant locations. Donald Trump told GM workers not to sell their homes and flee because he would bring manufacturing back to the Mahoning Valley. Family breadwinners took job openings elsewhere but drove the long miles home every third or fourth weekend to see their families. Needless to say, Trump's promises never materialized.

Related shutdowns included closure of Youngstown's only daily newspaper, the *Youngstown Vindicator*.

Alice and I moved to this area in 1976 because we too had a family plan, which was to accompany and assist rank-and-file workers who were seeking a more militant labor movement and a better world. We had found a remarkable protagonist in the Chicago area named John Sargent, who, as local union president for workers at Inland Steel, had explored the possibilities of seeking a comprehensive contract with the employer but had come to rely instead on wildcat strikes and other forms of direct action. John's crucial insight was that if you do not have a contract you are not bound by a no-strike clause. I have carried this observation with me for fifty years and have found it to be a more reliable analysis than any academic or governmental perspective.

John Sargent, however, was on the verge of retirement and had not been able to leave behind a rank-and-group that shared his analysis. Over a period of years during which first I and then Alice attended law school, Alice and I became acquainted with a group based in Youngstown that called itself the Rank And File Team (RAFT). Through showing up at picket lines, adjourning to

a coffee shop to get to know each other better, and beginning to visit in each others' homes, we came to perceive ourselves not as fellow steel workers but as persons with professional skills that might be helpful.

By 1976, we had become pretty good friends with leaders of RAFT named Ed Mann and John Barbero. Each had served in World War II. John had visited the site of the Hiroshima bombing and married a Japanese woman. Ed had been conscripted for the Korean War and come home full of questions. Both men strongly opposed the war in Vietnam. They were in good communication with the local unions of the new CIO rubber workers union headquartered in Akron, an hour's drive away. They had combated racism both in the mill and in the community, which until shortly before our arrival had segregated its public bathing facilities. We and these two men had also taken part in the activities of the Mahoning Valley chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union. In hope of working more closely with members of RAFT, we moved to Youngstown.

Aspects of Youngstown's Decline

The decline of a community or a labor movement is unlikely to be understandable as a single straight line imposed by a particular set of persons. In the Mahoning Valley, that decline has had at least the following five aspects.

1.) The decline of steel production took place in successive years from 1977 to 1980. For approximately a decade, the Chamber of Commerce and kindred entities, including Youngstown State University, sought manufacturing alternatives. Congressman James Traficant promoted a plant to build computer aircraft, withdrawn when the Congressman was imprisoned. A plan to buy the chassis of vehicles from Lordstown, surround it with a shell resembling that of higher-priced vehicles, and sell the resulting vehicles for \$50,000 apiece under the name of Avanti Motors, all to be done by non-union labor, also collapsed. Even a plant to manufacture dirigibles somehow was floated and failed.

This was the context in which three large prisons were constructed and opened in the 1990s.

The most controversial of the three was a prison in which, later on, half of the prison would be operated by the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction (ODRC) and half by the federal government's agency to supervise Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). The prison, known as the Northeast Ohio Correctional Center (NEOCC), is actually owned by one of the largest private prison chains in the United States, Corrections Corporation of America, which later changed its name to Core Civic.

The eagerness which Youngstown displayed in entering into this relation with Corrections Corporation of America (CCA) is shown by the facts that CCA acquired the 103 acres on which the prison was constructed for one dollar and received a complete tax exemption for the first three or five years of operation (sources differ as to the length of time). NEOCC opened in 1997.

A report to the Attorney General of the United States in 1998 found that there had been "deficiencies, errors and mismanagement" in this prison's first year of operation. Two prisoners had been murdered by other inmates and six prisoners had escaped in broad daylight by cutting their way through a fence when a crowd of civilian visitors were nearby. Nonetheless, the report

found that prisons have come to be viewed in the Mahoning Valley as “friendly, economically viable projects.”

As of 2018, NEOCC provided jobs for 443 persons.

The Trumbull Correctional Institution, a second large prison, provided 353 new jobs.

A third prison, the Ohio State Penitentiary, or “supermax,” provided 337 new jobs. When it was announced that Youngstown had been awarded the opportunity to build the state’s first prison at which prisoners would remain alone in their cells for at least 23 hours a day, Mayor Patrick Ungaro declared that Youngstown had “hit a home run.”

The number of jobs created in the three big new prisons—1,133—falls far short of the number of jobs lost through factory shutdowns. When production ended at Lordstown in March 2018, 1,500 people lost their jobs in addition to the 3,000 who had been laid off earlier.

In addition to the large new prisons, local jails have been constructed during the same period. They include the Trumbull County Adult Justice Center in Warren, the Mahoning County Justice Center in Youngstown, a minimum security jail in Youngstown, and a new county jail in Salem.

2.) Youngstown State University is a particularly harsh employer. Until recently, part-time teachers who provided more than half the instructional hours had not had an increase in pay for 29 years.

3.) Youngstown’s students perform less well than all others in the State of Ohio.

4.) The City of Youngstown failed to enforce amendments to its Charter that sought to protect part-time workers. The amendments concern procedural issues such as how many days before a change in schedule the worker must be given notice.

5.) The wages paid at five of the ten most common jobs in the Youngstown area are too little to feed a family of three.¹

Accompanying Prisoners

Alice Lynd

How We Began

When we were lawyers at Northeast Ohio Legal Services, several men came to us who told us they had become “chemically disabled” by fumes where they had been working for General Motors (GM) at the truck and auto assembly plants in Lordstown, Ohio. We assisted them as they formed a group called Workers Against Toxic Chemical Hazards (WATCH). One of those men was Lessley Harmon who lived in Youngstown.

Other workers at Lordstown feared that if employees protested working conditions at Lordstown, GM might decide to make its next model cars somewhere else. Lessley became embroiled in controversy and was harassed by some such workers. At a certain point Lessley, who was usually very mild-mannered, pulled a gun and fired a shot. The bullet hit no one, but Lessley

¹ Policy Matters Ohio, “Working for less: Many common Youngstown jobs pay too little,” citing data released by the U.S. Department of Labor in 2017.

had previously served a few years in prison and he was not allowed to possess a firearm. Lessley was sentenced to many years in prison this time.

In 1993, there was a rebellion at the Southern Ohio Correctional Facility (SOCF) in Lucasville, Ohio, commonly known as the Lucasville riot.² There was urgent need for at least 129 cells in another prison for prisoners who were to be removed from Lucasville; those men were moved to the Mansfield Correctional Institution (ManCI). And to make room for the men who were coming in from SOCF, Lessley and some others were transferred from ManCI to the Trumbull Correctional Institution (TCI), only a half hour from where we lived in Trumbull County.

When Lessley arrived at TCI, he wrote to us and asked us to get on his visiting list. We did. We went to see Lessley approximately once a month for the six years he was at TCI, until he was transferred to a lower security prison in Southern Ohio. Lessley was very thoughtful and very observant. He would say something like this: “You know, they’re building that new private prison in Youngstown. They’re planning to bring prisoners from Lorton, Virginia. There is a lot of tuberculosis in the Lorton prison. I wonder whether they are going to test the men before they bring them to Youngstown.” So I would check with the Department of Health in Youngstown. Answer: No. In fact, when the Northeast Ohio Correctional Center opened, the first 300 men were sent there without their medical records (presumably including men who had diabetes or high blood pressure and who needed medication on a continuing basis).

Lessley got us started. We began to attend conferences on issues affecting prisoners. So when it was announced that Ohio would build its supermaximum security (“supermax”) prison in Youngstown, we were contacted and told, in effect: “Bad things happen in supermax prisons. We need someone to monitor what goes on in that place.”³

We knew nothing about monitoring prisons. We had never practiced criminal law. Furthermore, we knew nothing about supermax prisons. But I had monitored a consent decree involving participation by minorities and females in a union for heavy machine operating engineers.

My first step was to read everything I could lay my hands on about supermax prisons. I wrote an article called, “What Is a Supermax Prison?” Typically, in supermax prisons, prisoners are kept in solitary confinement with very little out-of-cell time, very little by way of possessions or anything to do, and very limited opportunity to go outdoors or to engage in physical exercise. Supermax confinement promotes or aggravates mental illness and increases the likelihood of suicides. Those who work in supermax prisons, especially those who have daily contact with the prisoners, also suffer: guards give prisoners a hard time, and prisoners give guards a hard time.

So what should we do? I read my paper on supermax prisons to a joint meeting of the Workers Solidarity Club and the Youngstown Peace Council. We decided to hold a community forum that

² See Staughton Lynd, *Lucasville: The Untold Story of a Prison Uprising* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2d ed. 2011); and Staughton Lynd, “Napue Nightmares: Perjured Testimony in Trials Following the 1993 Lucasville, Ohio Prison Uprising,” *Capital University Law Review*, Vol. 36, No. 3 (Spring 2008), 559-634.

³ See Alice Lynd and Staughton Lynd, *Stepping Stones: Memoir of a Life Together* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2009), 143-146.

would have speakers both about the private prison that had not yet opened in Youngstown, and the supermax prison that was being built within sight of the chapel where we held the forum.

I wanted speakers who had experienced prolonged solitary confinement to speak about it from personal experience. We found such a man; and we also found a woman whose brother had spent nearly three years in solitary confinement before being sentenced to death for complicity in the deaths of two prisoners during the Lucasville uprising. That man was George Skatzes (pronounced “skates”).

Knowing that we would be retiring within a few months, with no plans as to what we would do after retirement, we asked George’s attorneys whether they needed any help that we might provide. We were told that they had the appeal covered, but they needed attorneys to work on “post-conviction review.” What’s that? Look for what was not in the court record that should have been in the record. George’s attorney arranged for us to have a copy of the trial transcript: over 6,000 pages plus exhibits, and a vast number of transcripts of interviews. That was for starters. Then we had to find out what of significance existed that had been overlooked or neglected. And there was a lot of that!

We visited George once a month for years, beginning when he was housed with other death-sentenced prisoners at the Mansfield Correctional Institution. Other men who had been sentenced for the same or similar offenses began to send us records from their cases that they thought would be helpful to George.

Ohio’s new supermax prison, the Ohio State Penitentiary (OSP), received its first prisoners in May 1998. During the first week, four of the five men sentenced to death for their alleged roles in the Lucasville uprising were transferred to OSP. During the second week, George was transferred to OSP. Instead of housing those men in cells close enough for them to communicate as they had been at ManCI, they were put in separate “pods.” So George and the others would give our address to prisoners within communication distance, and they would write to us about their conditions and difficulties.

Before the end of 1998, nearly all of the men who were convicted of riot-related offenses were housed at OSP. This made it possible for us to interview dozens of men who told us what they had observed or done, and what they thought in answer to our questions. We also made trips to other prisons in Ohio to interview participants in the uprising who, for one reason or another, were not sent to OSP. We took affidavits and acquired transcripts and other valuable documents from numerous prisoners. We were able to assemble information that lawyers for other Lucasville convicts did not know. (Lawyers would not take more than one case where a conflict of interest might arise.)

Learning from Prisoners

When prisoners were identified and sent to OSP, existing regulations were not followed. Prisoners at OSP were not given notice of their right to object to their transfers. One particular prisoner was a superb jailhouse lawyer who knew what the regulations said, and how to read them in conjunction with one another. By mail, he guided me through the regulations and explained how they interacted

with one another. I devised an appeal form and sent it to him for comment before sending it to any other prisoner; he replied that the form was good but I should add “. . . ,” and I did.

I became familiar with the grievance procedure and how it was supposed to work. When prisoners would send me the written “disposition of grievance” forms that they received, I learned from one prisoner’s papers what I needed to know to answer questions raised by the next prisoner. More than twenty years later, I still learn from prisoners, such as the subtle difference between the criteria used by the Rules Infraction Board to convict, and the criteria used by a Serious Misconduct Panel to place a prisoner in Extended Restrictive Housing (solitary confinement for years) for the same offense.

If a prisoner was dragged by the feet down a flight of stairs with his head bouncing on each step, I would hear from other prisoners who saw what happened. I would contact the prison authorities about it. This was not monitoring, but it did give prison authorities a sense that someone was looking over their shoulder. I think there was less violence at OSP than in many other supermax prisons.

The Second Suicide

No one anticipated the first suicide. But prior to the second suicide, in the summer of 1999, prisoners had written to me about one man who had been on suicide watch, had been returned to his cell, and the guards were taunting him: “When are you going to do it?” I contacted the prison. A few days later, the warden’s assistant called us and told us, “He’s dead.” The warden’s assistant asked us what we thought the prison could do to give prisoners more of a sense that life was worth living. Staughton and I talked with the warden’s assistant for perhaps an hour. As soon as we hung up the phone, I said to Staughton, “They should ask the prisoners rather than us.”

By that time we had a mailing list of a hundred prisoners at OSP. So I sent a hundred letters into the prison asking what they would say if someone asked them, “WHAT COULD OSP DO TO MAKE YOU FEEL LIFE IS MORE WORTH LIVING?” We got 110 responses!⁴

Now That We No Longer Go to Court

Through litigation, we won very significant changes in the conditions at OSP and in the provisions for placement and retention in solitary confinement. But none of the prison officials who held positions as Director, Chief Counsel, Regional Director, or Warden were around during the litigation and they are apparently unaware of court orders. So the rock of Sisyphus has been rolling down the hill.

At the ages of 91 and almost 91, we can no longer go to court. We still correspond with prisoners. I tell them what I think could be useful to them, and I also tell them what I think the drawbacks might be or warn them of pitfalls to avoid. But I make it clear: “You decide what you are going to do. You are the person who will take the consequences, for better or for worse.”

⁴ For any reader who is interested in reading more, see *Stepping Stones*, 145-149; and Alice Lynd and Staughton Lynd, *Moral Injury and Nonviolent Resistance: Breaking the Cycle of Violence in the Military and Behind Bars* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2017), 119-121.

The “Honor’s Seminar” at TCI

For four years, August 2012 to September 2016, we met weekly with prisoners at the Trumbull Correctional Institution, together with Thomas Sabatini, an adjunct professor of history at Youngstown State University and the Trumbull branch of Kent State University. The class, known as the “Honor’s Seminar,” was open to most of the prisoners at TCI regardless of their educational background, but it carried no high school or college credit.

We started with pre-historic times and the migration of human beings from Africa into Europe. When one prisoner asked whether we thought Black people had migrated up the Danube River into Europe, I responded: “That’s a hypothesis. What would you need to do to find out whether that hypothesis is true?”

We read about the remains of a boat that was found in the Sea of Galilee. It seemed to have been repaired in various parts at various times. What could we infer? The people who used that boat were not wealthy; they patched it with whatever they had at hand so that they could keep on fishing.

At one point we discussed “respect.” What do we mean by “respect”? One man suggested it can mean two things: admiration or fear. Another man refuted that: respect is not fear! Respect is a verb as well as a noun.

We read the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. When I asked whether they knew what the term “collective punishment” meant, one guy said: “Yeah. It’s when there is an act of violence in the gym and they close down the entire prison!”

We read excerpts from Desmond Tutu about the Truth and Reconciliation process in South Africa, forgiveness and remorse.

We discussed the concept of “moral injury,” particularly with reference to members of the military who saw, did, or failed to prevent injuries to others that offended their sense of what is right and wrong; they suffered from symptoms similar to those of persons with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and in too many instances committed suicide.

A couple of the men in our class said they had killed someone. One man said, “I know in my mind that I have to forgive myself but, in my heart, I’m not there yet.”⁵

Prisoners who attended 75% or more of the class sessions were periodically eligible to receive a certificate. We modeled the occasion on a presentation of certificates that Staughton and I had experienced at a labor school in Mexico. Members of the class were paired, and presented certificates to each other along with a few comments as to what they appreciated about the other person’s contributions to the class. (How often in a prison does someone express words of appreciation for your contributions?)

These were men who were serving long sentences. Several of them had found ways to do their time by assisting other prisoners. One led a group doing creative writing. Some of them

⁵ See *Moral Injury*, 106.

tutored prisoners who were preparing to take the GED test. Several of them organized musical groups, played instruments and sang together.

When Lessley died of cancer in 2013, we took a couple of pictures of Lessley to class and talked about Lessley's life and his importance in our lives. A couple of the prisoners borrowed the pictures long enough to photocopy them. The next week when we came to class, two men (one Black and one White), gave us a memorial poster they had made with a drawing of Lessley, his date of birth and date of death, and a line from a spiritual that Lessley loved, "Every time I feel the spirit moving in my heart, I will pray." And, when we could no longer go to TCI on a regular basis, members of the class put on a special occasion with art work to thank us!