



The Art of Freedom: Teaching the Humanities to the Poor

Earl Shorris

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A conversation in a prison cell sparks an ambitious undertaking to attack the roots of long-term poverty.

Seeking answers to the toughest questions about poverty in the United States, Earl Shorris had looked everywhere. At last, one resounding answer came from a conversation with a woman in a maximum-security prison: the difference between rich and poor is the humanities. Shorris took that idea and started a course at the Clemente Family Guidance Center in New York. With a faculty of friends, he began teaching the great works of literature and philosophy—from Plato to Kant, from Cervantes to Garcia Marquez—at the college level to dropouts, immigrants, and ex-prisoners. From that first class came two dentists, a nurse, two PhDs, a fashion designer, a drug counselor, and other successes.

Over the course of seventeen years the course expanded to many U.S. cities and foreign countries. Now Earl Shorris has written the stories of those who teach and those who study the humanities—a tribute to the courage of people rising from unspeakable poverty to engage in dialogue with professors from great universities around the world.

This year, in a high school on the South Side of Chicago, a Clemente Course has begun that may change the character of public education in America and perhaps the world.

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