

When rituals leave us full—and then empty

Leaving the jailhouse graduation, I wondered, *Where have I felt like this before?*

by [Julian DeShazier](#) in the [November 2023](#) issue



(Illustration by Jamiel Law)

My introduction to York Alternative High School came rather unexpectedly a few weeks ago. Someone sent me a Facebook message, and after a brief phone call to verify the request, I was set to be the school's commencement speaker. This made me both excited and nervous. The school—named after Consuella B. York, a prison chaplain and one of Chicago's lesser-known saint mothers—is located inside Cook County Jail. Yes, inside.

Few people even know that York exists, much less that its students earn a diploma with the same standing as one from any of Chicago's top magnet schools. Or that we should call them "students" (for all the ways language around incarceration is changing, this one is easy). And if you're wondering: yes, they go to class on a nearly year-round basis, and then go "home" to a cell.

As you can imagine, this is a complex space. After being cleared to enter, I go into a gymnasium that has been decorated to resemble a "normal graduation." The staff tells me as much, and it's clear they've done a good job. The place is colorful, loud, and full of the energy of anticipation as people run around making last-minute adjustments. It is altogether familiar and unremarkable, save a few details: staples are not allowed, anywhere, so the error someone has made is being quickly corrected with freshly glued programs. And the teachers I'm sitting with—fully licensed, real teachers—are joined in the room by another, more authoritative presence: correctional officers. I recognize one of the officers as someone I went to school with, and we shake hands. After the officers give the thumbs up, the students enter, resplendent in caps and gowns, all 60 of them, with the same khaki pants and white shoes showing underneath.

Will they get to keep the cap and gown? Was I supposed to shake the officer's hand? Questions abound.

Families are present; they are even allowed to hug their graduate after their name is called. It's a powerful and spirit-filled space, equal parts uplifting and heartbreaking. The young men and two women—all either Black or Latinx—laugh together like children. They recite William Henley's poem "Invictus" together, a poem written for them if ever there was one. It is easy for these couple of hours to forget where I am.

But soon the pomp ends, the students remove their caps and gowns, and they are students no more. They are graduates, yes—but officers return to prominence as families begin to exit, and if the feeling in the air had a voice, it would say, *Alright, we got that out of the way. Let's get back to real life.* I feel the tragedy within this transition, and I feel a slew of intense emotions—joy, anger, sadness—all at the same time.

Yet despite how new and revelatory the experience is to me, it also feels familiar. On the way home I try to place it: *Where have I felt this before?* When I finally realize, I feel it in the pit of my stomach. *Oh no. Church.*

I've been in other rooms where great catharsis was needed and achieved, where we sang, where someone spoke profoundly for five minutes too long, where we hugged and then left. We handed out communion rather than diplomas, but the rituals were much the same. And by Wednesday I could remember and apply almost nothing from that profoundly spiritual moment to the confounding reality that was my teenage years. *That was church; this is real life*, I would tell myself, making no connection to the things happening in my world as matters of the spirit. As amazing as church always felt, the return to "real life" always felt a bit violent.

The absence of clocks is another thing sanctuaries and carceral spaces share. Have you ever noticed that? No clocks anywhere. Of course, in one space we are meant to transcend time with respect to the sabbath, while in the other, time is taken away as a measure of control: your time, like your life, no longer belongs to you.

Does this happen in church too? Was the students' processional like a prelude? Did I just preach a sermon? Questions abound.

My point is not that being in church is like being in prison. What I have realized, though, is that spiritual experiences often get put inside tight boundaries—ceremonies—and the people we love and serve often return to harsh realities afterward, where ephemeral experiences feel inaccessible. It's a shame—that a student would not get a chance to make immediate use of his hard-earned diploma, that church members would not quickly be able to make use of the stuff of God during the regular week. Why do we return to church needing to "refuel"? Why do we so often emphasize Sunday itself more than how we might feel on Wednesday because of Sunday?

It is a question of how rituals, properly shaped, can become the stuff of everyday life. This feels like what the prophets meant when warning against clinging too tight to burnt offerings. I will gladly speak at a jailhouse graduation, but what I really want to do is close the jail.

A final observation: churches and jails are both centrally focused on people in need of grace. Much has been said about how poor prisons are at rehabilitation; churches, too, can be depots for punishment and shame instead of healing. Like jails, sanctuaries often operate outside their purpose, with tragic consequences. What can our churches learn? How can they do better? Questions abound.