A Place to Stand by Jimmy Santiago Baca
A book review by Kate Edwards, Cohort 2

When I first began to volunteer in a men’s maximum security state prison an hour from my home in Madison, Wisconsin, I read every prison autobiography that I could get my hands on, many of which were passing hand-to-hand amongst the small group of volunteers that gathered to carpool to prison every Friday morning. The first-person accounts in these books were always interesting and often harrowing, but they also often felt rather far away from my own experience in prison, sitting in a rather peaceful talking circle with a group of thoughtful, articulate men, all of us on clean burgundy plastic chairs in a room that could have been a conference room in any reasonably new office building. The only sign that it was a ‘chapel’ was a makeshift altar in one corner, the only signs that we were in prison were the green uniforms on every man and the omnipresent camera eye up near the ceiling, never allowing us to forget that we were always being watched. Still, the accounts of ancient, dripping concrete dungeons, the threat of death from hidden shanks, the need to always be watching your back that were written of in the pages of the books seemed a bit unreal in the light of the ease of Friday’s camaraderie with the men I was getting to know. There were moments when stories of their childhoods would begin to fill the room with stunning memories of terror and abuse, fighting for survival in the urban jungles of Milwaukee and Chicago, but I still had trouble matching up the prison writings with my own experience, as these spoken stories were often told with such disarming candor and even humor that the true reality was often hard to really register in one’s mind. As volunteers, we would notice that the horror of it all sometimes wouldn’t even sink in until we were driving home and would have to ask each other, “Was that really what I heard? Did his siblings really hang themselves to escape their father’s brutal beatings? Did his parents really choose drugs over their own children, leaving him to fend for himself at the age of 10?”

Somehow, reading Jimmy Santiago Baca’s memoir, A Place to Stand, affected me quite differently. Admittedly, over a year and a half has gone by since I first passed through the walls of a state prison, and I’ve spent many, many hours in all kinds of inmate groups, with both men and women, and though I still have so much to learn, I’ve become more savvy at reading between the lines on the faces sitting before me. The struggles behind the scenes have also become at least a bit more transparent to me, and though the prisons that I visit tend to be fairly new and orderly, I am not so blind to the reality of violence that lives and breathes everywhere within these well-tended grounds. The sometimes more subtle violence and abuse of the system is also more apparent on a daily basis, as I’ve become more aware of the insanity of rules that can be used to drive an inmate to untenable bitterness and despair, to explosions of anger that can then be used to confine him to untold days and months of isolation, removed from all hope, human contact, and meaningful activity. As a result of all of this and more, Baca’s words found their way much deeper into my mind and heart than those
other writers had in the past. It also made an enormous difference that I had just been able to see and hear Baca himself, speaking of his life in a Upaya dharma talk. It is far harder to dismiss someone’s story when you’ve felt the truth of the person’s presence, seen the light in their eyes, and understood that the words that you’re reading describe something that truly happened to someone essentially kind and heartfelt, another human being of flesh and blood and longing to be both free and fulfilled in life. As I read his written words, I found that my mind kept reminding me, “This happened to him, to the man sitting in the chair only a few feet from you just a few short days ago. It was his mother who left him, it was his father who beat him, it was his uncle who betrayed him.”

Baca’s story is both stunning and harrowing and also ultimately triumphant, because we understand that he did not die in the bowels of the Florence prison, he did learn to read and write, he did find champions for his writing when he left prison, and he clearly has found his way far beyond the violence and hopelessness that his childhood and young adulthood threatened to confine him to for life. A Place to Stand takes us on a journey through the betrayals and abandonment of a young Chicano boy taken to an orphanage, then a detention center, jail, and eventually to five years in a brutal and corrupt Arizona state prison where his sanity and his life were threatened continually. Baca fluently describes the soul loss resulting from both childhood trauma and structural violence, and we are allowed to travel with him as he finds his way agonizingly letter-by-letter and word-by-word to a literacy that brings him not only joy and connection, but also a sense of himself as a man within a culture, within a language, within an historical tradition, within a people. As he writes, he saved himself with both poetry and music, and finally he even finds a way to an identity that allows him to be a champion for others as oppressed and voiceless as he himself had been. We are allowed to witness ‘his soul (coming) forth’ and ‘a man awakening to the day with a place to stand and ground to defend’ (p. 226).

So, what do Baca’s words have to offer me as an ongoing prison volunteer, sitting with men of color in council and in classes and soon to be in one-on-one pastoral counseling visits? The short answer is......a great deal, though it is perhaps not so easy to articulate both what his in-person presence and his words have given me to go on. It is less an entire body of awareness than it is moments that I encountered of recognition as I read through these pages. Moments where I would find myself remembering another inmate that I have come to know and being able to now mark, with increased understanding, the place in a story they had told in circle or in a few stolen moments before or after class when we were able to talk privately before the guard called them away. As I read Baca’s words of living within his childhood memories as he passed the endless time in segregation (p. 139), I could see my friend, Bob (not his real name), a lifer incarcerated for 26 years thus far, as he talked of falling back through time to memories of his childhood in Jamaica, and I understood so much more about how that is keeping a part of him alive, a part of him that is vital to his humanity. As Jimmy Santiago drew a picture in his cell of a long-lost girlfriend to try to deal
with his loneliness and fear (p. 180), I could see my friend, Joe, as he paints portraits of those remembered from the all-too-brief years that he had on the streets before being imprisoned at seventeen. As I learned more from Baca about the code and repercussions that keep men from ‘snitching’, even to save their own skins, I also understood more about Joe’s decision not to testify against his gang compatriot, even though it left him defenseless in the face of a ‘life plus 150 years’ sentence. A Place to Stand also helped me to understand so much more about the difficulty of crafting a life-affirming identity when all around you is violence and betrayal and soul-destroying pain. Regardless of a person’s longing to make a different choice, souls do break, people do lose hope, and as Baca’s friend, Macaron, puts it, “the hurt in the heart turns to bitterness.....(and you) lose your reason for wanting to be a human being”.

This book also reminded me of the profound importance of never giving up on throwing out lifelines, even to those whom the system insists are beyond redemption, beyond rehabilitation. Baca allows us to see the difference between who he actually is, who he is trying desperately to become, and how the system wants to see him, how the warden perceives him, how even members of his own family want to define him. Just as there have been so many who have kicked Baca into the dirt by the side of the road, there are also those who reach out and offer a hand: a grandfather who loved him as a child, volunteers who write letters and offer writing groups in prison, inmates who truly see him and take the fall so that he will get out of prison, small presses who offer to publish chapbooks, and employers who give him a job when he does finally make his way back to Albuquerque. As a chaplain, I want to be committed to not giving up on someone regardless of what the system says is true about them, and Baca helps his readers to understand that mailing a letter, sending a dictionary, offering a pencil, taking a chance in really seeing beyond the tattoos and the agony for even a moment of kindness may be the very moment that allows someone the opportunity to take a different path and to begin to pull themselves up out of the dungeons of mind and heart that they have been trapped in for far too many years and even lifetimes. His words also help me to understand that there are those in every walk of life who find themselves imprisoned in fear and desolation at the same time that they want to change, they want to find another way to live, and their souls long for poetry and light even if they cannot spell those words or speak of those realities.

In clawing his way up from desolation, in ‘transmut(ing) the barb-wire thorns’ hostile glint into a linguistic light that illuminated a new (self)’ (p.257), Baca has illuminated a way for all of us to see more clearly those lost souls who surround us, whether they live in prisons or in homeless shelters, in mental wards or in urban ghettos. He has had the courage to write the truth of his journey for his own sons and for the rest of us who want to offer ourselves in service to the possibility of transformation, not only for individuals caught in the system, caught in a world of poverty and racism and despair, but to the possibility of transformation of the systems themselves so that we might illuminate a brighter
world for all of us, for all beings everywhere. I’m honored to have been in his
presence, to have seen the joy that he radiates after having been crucified so
many times in his life, and I’m strengthened by having seen the person that he
has become, forged out of the nightmares he was forced to endure. I will be a
stronger and clearer person as I walk the halls of the prisons that call me, as I do
my utmost to ‘come alongside’ those I am dedicated to serve, including myself.

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* Names of inmates have been changed.