Watching television can change your life. This certainly happened to me in April 2007, when I laid down on the couch to relax in front of “60 Minutes.” The opening segment was about the “Bard College Prison Initiative,” a college-in-prison program started by a socially-conscious and motivated undergraduate over six years ago. The program showed faculty engaged in intense classroom discussions and inmates arguing in the prison yard – about Hegel and Kant. The reporter described how the lives of prison students and their families had changed. Professors seemed utterly transformed. I felt convicted.

I like to think of myself as a Catholic theologian animated by the call to social justice. My parish, Saint Vincent de Paul, near downtown Saint Louis, has many outreach programs and devotes more than half its budget to serving those who are poor and homeless. The Jesuit commitment to justice for those at the margins gives my work at Saint Louis University direction and purpose, even though I am a lay partner in that mission. Yet using my intellectual skills in prisons had never crossed my mind. The next day I spoke with a friend who had spent six years in prison and said, “someone at SLU should do this ... I just don’t have the time.” She fixed me with a stare I could not avoid and said, “No one is too busy to do the right thing once they see it needs to be done.”

I started investigating the issue and was stunned by what I learned. From the mid 1970s to the early 1990s college-in-prison programs had brought hope and facilitated transformation for thousands of incarcerated women and men. The impact for society was statistically impressive. In 1987 the Bureau of Prisons reported a direct correlation between the amount of education a prisoner received while incarcerated and recidivism rates – the more years of education, the lower the likelihood of repeat offenses. Studies that followed bore this out, finding rates of recidivism as low as 15.5% to 0% (when 60% was the national average). One study of 200 inmates, tracked over a 25 year period, found that the only prison programs that had 0% recidivism rates were colleges-in-prison.

Despite the impressive evidence of benefits for offenders and society, Senator Jesse Helms led a campaign in 1994 to eliminate Pell grants for incarcerated individuals. As a result, more than 350 college-in-prison programs in forty-five states closed. Higher education opportunities in prisons came to a halt. Fewer than ten programs have re-emerged since 1995, in a nationwide system of more than 5,000 prisons.

It seemed a no-brainer that Saint Louis University should lead the response to this need in Missouri, where no college-in-prison programs exist. When I brought the idea to my chair, Fr. Wayne Hellmann, he responded with immediate and unequivocal support. At our May 2007 faculty meeting, I received the backing and endorsement of my colleagues in the Department of Theological Studies. By July Bonne Terre Prison, a 2500 inmate facility, became the focus of our efforts. That same month I spoke with the executive director of the Incarnate Word Foundation, Bridget Flood, and received the promise of half the funds needed for the planned pilot project. In August, leading administrators at Bonne Terre received the proposal, approved its goals, and sent it to the Missouri capital for state administrative approval. In September Dean Don Brennan at SLU enthusiastically approved of the project goals and allowed us to proceed with negotiations. By December, we received a green light from Jefferson City to start. The first class began nine months after that evening on my couch. The SLU Prison Initiative was born.

The announcement of the program in the prison generated more than 300 applications in less than five days. Out of that pool we had to select fifteen students. They are an impressive group of men. Most have never attended college. Yet one has taught himself Greek and reads the New Testament daily, and another wrote an award-winning script. There are musicians, self-made teachers, and men with penmanship that rivals any I have ever seen. The first session was intimidating, not because of the prison setting, but because of the intensity of the desire to learn. I already feel changed – transformed – by the experience and look forward to the semester in ways impossible to explain.

At the miracle of the feeding of the multitude Christ commanded his apostles to “gather up the broken pieces so that nothing is wasted.” (John 6:12) As a society, we have allowed our leaders to leave broken lives scattered – cast aside. We bear a collective responsibility for not gathering them up so that they are not wasted. Education is an indispensable component, to ensure that incarcerated persons leave prison with a purpose, able to lead meaning-filled lives for themselves, their families, and everyone they meet.
We can all play a part. Email your elected representatives and tell them that Pell grants for prisoners are a small investment that will reduce our prison population of more than two million (housed at a cost of $40,000/per person annually). Tell them that it is the best way known to ensure that the incarcerated do not leave prison to re-offend. Promote college-in-prison programs on your college and university campuses. Volunteer to tutor in a prison GED program. You will not only change the lives of others – you will change yourself.