



Dwight Worker

The 9 Lives of a B-town Maverick

STUDENT • HERO • ANTI-WAR PROTESTOR • DRUG ADDICT • CONVICT • AUTHOR • ECO-ACTIVIST • EDUCATOR • FARMER

A YOUNG MAN SPENDS TWO AND A HALF YEARS in a brutal Mexican prison, goes on to earn an M.B.A., and winds up teaching at the IU Kelley School of Business.

This is the true story of Bloomington resident Dwight Worker, former Kelley School lecturer, Vietnam protester, alleged environmental outlaw, organic farmer, world traveler, hero, rugged individualist, drug addict, prisoner, fugitive.

Any of these descriptors could justify a magazine story, but I have come to Worker's isolated house off West Vernal Pike for one story in particular: In 1975, this native of Highland, Indiana, successfully escaped from Mexico's infamous Lecumberri prison—the only inmate, other than Pancho Villa, ever to do so.

BY **DEBRA** Kent | PHOTOGRAPHY BY **SHANNON** Zahnle



Worker, these days, has opted for a quiet, independent life as an organic farmer. In the photograph (far left) behind Worker is a poster for the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society, a nonprofit organization that opposes whaling. A member of the society, Worker has been accused in Norway of scuttling the Norwegian whaling vessel *Nybraena*.

Worker was active in the anti-Vietnam War protest movement during his undergraduate years at IU (1964-68). Pictured below, he is being dragged away by Bloomington police after protesting the presence of Dow Chemical Co. representatives (makers of napalm) on the IU campus to conduct job interviews.



(left, above) Students wait in front of IU Auditorium to catch a bus to Washington, D.C., to demonstrate against the Vietnam War. Worker is at the center holding a lunch bag. (left, below) Worker at a Washington, D.C. march helping to carry an IU banner.

As a junior at IU, Worker saved the life of a toddler who had fallen into Griffy Lake. Courtesy photos



DWIGHT WORKER TODAY

I am sitting at a wood table in Worker's jumbled kitchen sipping green tea as he darts around the room tending to three big pots simmering fragrantly on gas burners. The modest ranch house on Loesch Road is about function, not style, much like the man himself, who is dressed today in old gray sweatpants and a plain dark shirt. A few pictures hang randomly on walls, and the place smells organic, like compost, but not in a bad way. Much of his furniture, like the bed with its massive headboard and Paul Bunyan-size posts, are rough-hewn pieces he made himself from fallen trees.

Worker frequently jumps up from his chair, talking as he cooks, often sounding like a Connecticut WASP, cultured and refined and (he'd hate me for saying this) effete. And then he is a brash, cussing country boy, an identity he proudly embraces.

Worker has insisted on feeding me, promising a meal composed almost entirely of homegrown ingredients, including collard greens, Jerusalem artichokes, corn, and squash. "Seventy percent of the food I eat, I grow myself," he says. "I don't buy any commercial meat, no factory food, nothing like that, and I don't do dairy but I do have chickens and ducks for eggs. Maybe you want some today?" He gets most

of his meat by shooting whatever four-legged interloper he finds raiding his crops—rabbits, squirrels, deer, the occasional groundhog.

At 65, Worker is handsome and robust. "I don't need a gym membership, because I will move many tons of firewood a year," he says. "But it's not work to me, because I enjoy it." I want to tell him he looks like Colin Firth, but why bother? Worker lives happily outside the pop-culture loop and in all his adult life has never owned a television, which he says is like "the dumb, loud guest at the party who never leaves." Besides, who needs TV when there is so much to keep him busy, as he has made clear many times over the course of the long day we spend together. "I have never used a dishwasher in my life," he says. "As for a clothes dryer, I already have one. It's called the sun." A solar water heater and alternate wiring system are all he still needs to achieve his ultimate dream of living completely off the grid.

Worker talks fast and authoritatively; it's easy to picture him avidly imparting his wisdom in front of a lecture hall full of Kelley School students. What is not so easy, however, is imagining someone this naturally revved up under the influence of stimulants. Yet in 1973, at age 27, Worker was so ferociously addicted to cocaine that he thought it made sense to fly to Peru and buy it directly from the source. He intended to fly back to the States from Mexico

City, sell half the cocaine when he returned home, and keep the rest for his own snorting pleasure.

Instead he got busted.

What happened after that—the brutal abuse at the hands of guards and fellow inmates in the notorious Lecumberri prison and a breathtaking escape—is the stuff of Hollywood movies. Indeed, the film adaptation of his autobiographical book, *Escape*, appeared in 1980, starring Timothy Bottoms and Kay Lenz. "I like to say I play Timothy Bottoms in real life," Worker jokes, then his smile turns wan, and he adds, "Actually, I can't watch the movie anymore. It's too painful."

But it isn't the abuse he suffered that Worker finds hard to watch now—it's being reminded of Barbara, his ex-wife and coauthor, the one who devised the plan to disguise Worker as a woman so he could slip out of prison unnoticed among the wives and girlfriends who came to Lecumberri to visit their loved ones.

Before Worker will talk about all that, he wants to show me how he lives. In the basement, he points out the wood-burning stove that warms his house and the piles of squash that will sustain him through the winter. He opens a freezer to reveal his stores when I spy what looks like a package of ribs. He admits, almost sheepishly, that some of his meat is

supplied by his friend, local restaurateur Jeff Mease, who lives on the sprawling acreage nearby.

Among his gear in the basement is a cardboard box of international road maps; Worker is passionate about travel, setting aside months at a time to explore—on bicycle—Central Europe and Southeast Asia.

THE CAPER

By 4 pm, we have harvested Jerusalem artichokes, visited the chickens and pulled eggs from the coop, traipsed through several outbuildings, learned about his system for recycling, examined the bright-red vintage truck he restored himself, admired his arc welder and biodiesel fuel-making contraption, pawed through a box of playful props he employed when he taught at the Kelley School, and devoured a tasty supper. Finally, I will get what I have come for. My fingers are poised over the laptop keyboard. I ask him to tell me his story.

"What story?"

"You know, *the story*. About how you were put in prison?"

"Let's make one thing clear," he says. "I was never put in prison. I put *myself* in prison. I was a common criminal and I did this to myself. The last thing I'd want is for anyone to think I was a hero." Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, the

Russian writer and gulag survivor, was a hero, he tells me. "I was a criminal and a coke addict and I brought a lot of heartache to my parents." "Okay." Fingers still poised.

"As for the story, you can read about it in my book. It's just too painful for me to discuss." He hands me his very last copy, a moldy, deteriorating volume whose pages crack off the binding as I turn them. He explains that the book was damaged when his basement flooded and asks me to be careful with it. I glance out the kitchen window. It is getting dark and I want to drive home while I can still find my way off the farm. Exhausted and laden with

He intended to fly back to the States from Mexico City, sell half the cocaine when he returned home, and keep the rest for his own snorting pleasure.

squash, I take the book home and read it. This is what I learn.

On December 9, 1973, Dwight Worker taped three polyethylene bags of pure Peruvian cocaine to his chest and had a friend wrap him with a plaster cast from his left arm and shoulder up to his neck and down to his lower abdomen. He covered the cast with phony signatures in different colored pens and pencils. If anyone asked, he would explain that he broke his shoulder in a mountain climbing accident. To bolster his ruse, Worker manufactured a fake doctor's letter and an

equally fake newspaper article about his accident, and he carried a suitcase full of mountain climbing gear. Once inside the U.S., Worker planned to sell half the 800 grams of cocaine and keep the rest for himself.

He is nearly through Mexican customs when a sharp-eyed and determined agent named Valdez pulls him out of line and takes him to a small room in the back of the airport customs area. There, Valdez punches Worker, sticks his hand under the cast, then uses pliers to yank out one of the bags, victoriously shouting, "Tienes cocaina! Tienes cocaina!" ("You have cocaine!")

A doctor is called to remove the cast. Mexican agents and even the photographer who snaps his mug shot attack him. A bucket of cold water is poured over his head and someone puts an electric cattle prod to his genitals. "I sat there, bare-chested, too shocked to say anything, with my worst horror fantasy—getting caught in Mexico—coming true," he writes in *Escape*. Valdez sticks his finger into one of the plastic bags and sniffs some of the cocaine. "He grinned like a shark and the whole room burst into laughter, except for me."



The entrance to the notorious Lecumberri detention center in Mexico City where Worker spent two and a half years. The prison was shut down in 1976. Photo by Richard Ross

LIFE IN THE BLACK PALACE

Worker was sentenced to six years and nine months in Lecumberri, the sinister detention center in Mexico City nicknamed The Black Palace. Until it was shut down in 1976, Lecumberri was known as a place where inmates were subject to hunger, filth, routine torture, and extortion. Many of its inhabitants were left-wing political prisoners, rounded up during Mexico's "la guerra sucia," the "dirty war" that began in 1968, just before the Olympics in Mexico City, when soldiers stormed a student demonstration, killing hundreds. Many other inmates, like Worker, were in Lecumberri for drugs.

Worker would quickly discover that Lecumberri had nothing in common with

even the worst American prisons. One regular activity was "fajina," a punishment performed while the commandos (prison guards) screamed, stomped, and swung clubs at the inmates.

I was immediately thrown into chochos. Doing chochos means that you must rub a rock across the cement floor of the urinal nonstop for as long as they tell you. They gave me the heaviest stone—a 50-pound piece of black basalt that had one side worn completely smooth from millions of chocho rubbings.... Along with 20 other prisoners doing chochos, I had to rub my rock on the floor of the urinal. The moment anyone lagged in the slightest, the commando in charge beat him with a hose until he got



moving again. By now I was in deep pain. My body was becoming one purple bruise; the slightest movement was excruciating. The stench of urine and feces was so overwhelming that I was sure I would pass out; but the moment the commando hit me with the hose, I screamed and pushed and pulled the boulder faster. This continued nonstop for four hours, until the 10 pm horn signaled sleeping hours.

"Welcome to the Communist Plot" reads a sign in Worker's community garden. The "plot" refers to the land. The community gardeners give away their excess produce.

To avoid fajinas, Worker was told that he must pay off a Mexican prisoner who happened to have an American name—Gardner—and who was a kind of leader among the convicts. In the utterly corrupt Lecumberri prison, "Gardner's word was law," Worker writes, and his say-so could make the difference between complete misery and a (relatively) livable existence. Toilet paper, baths, bed, food, electricity, water—all required money. Two thousand dollars would buy him those essentials, along with a reprieve from fajinas. Gardner told Worker, "You don't pay it, you work six months or even a year, eighteen hours a day, and I bust your ass hard. But with \$2,000 I set you up good. I get you women, anything, everything."

Worker had no money and refused to pay. The response came quickly and it was relentless. He was sent to the kitchen where he endured a beating by the cook and two assistants and was forced to clean. He writes, "All that afternoon, while making me work in the midst of food, they refused to let me eat. I had to grab what I could off of the returning food trays and eat furtively when no one was looking—like some wretched street urchin going through the garbage. If they caught me chewing they

would punch me hard, telling me no food until I paid Gardner." When he asked for food, the commando in charge broke a broomstick over his spine. Worker hit him back and marched to Gardner's cell, demanding an end to the brutality. He was thrown into a walk-in freezer and viciously beaten by five men, including Gardner himself. His injuries were serious enough to warrant a two-week stay in the prison hospital.

Worker finally managed to produce some cash when his brother Kenny sold some of Worker's assets in the States, flew to Mexico, and gave Gardner 10,000 pesos, the equivalent of about \$800, freeing his brother from fajinas. (Later, his parents would send more money.) Once released from the hospital, Worker was upgraded to a new cell, luxurious by Lecumberri standards.

It was filthy and bare and measured ten by seven feet. Three of its walls were of thick metal and the fourth of brick. The brick wall had a barred window about nine feet up, through which I could see a tree growing in the patio. By prison standards, this cell had a view.... I slept on the floor my first night and was trampled by mice. There were ten of them running around at any one time, but at least they weren't the rats that flourished at ground level. Cell 39 was also swarming with bedbugs, lice, and other bizarre human bloodsuckers that I had never seen before. It was a case study in parasitology.

A WOMAN TO THE RESCUE

All of Worker's druggy friends back home had abandoned him. But in the spring of 1974 Worker had a visitor, a woman from Brown County, Indiana, named Barbara Chilcoat. She and her young daughter, Gabrielle, had spent the last year traveling through Guatemala; at the urging of a mutual friend named Stephan, she agreed to visit Worker in Lecumberri as she made her way back to Indiana. Stephan had already visited once and was nervous about going back alone. Chilcoat agreed to accompany him.

"From the moment I left Lecumberri I was in a turmoil of emotion," Chilcoat writes in *Escape*. "I had never met such a vital, sensitive, fine-spirited man; he moved me unlike anyone ever before. I knew I had felt an extraordinary affinity between us, and I had to follow my intuition through."

Back in Brown County, Chilcoat began corresponding with Worker, and through their long and heartfelt letters they fell in love. She returned to Mexico for another visit, and as she was leaving Lecumberri—unimpeded by guards—she had an epiphany. "I stopped in my tracks. It had been so easy for me to leave the prison.... Could he, could he possibly.... His smooth-skinned face floated before my eyes—just the faintest beard, his sensuous lips. I had often thought him pretty. Not too tall, slim, and fine-boned—I imagined long hair, a touch of lipstick. The image hit me full force. As a woman, he could do it, he could walk right out."

'I was a criminal and a coke addict and I brought a lot of heartache to my parents.'



THE GREAT ESCAPE

Over the next few weeks, the two came up with a list of everything they would need to make the plan work—things like concealer, foundation, lipstick, nail polish, bra, nylons, women’s clothes, a wig, and padding to create a more feminine shape. Just as vital to the plan, they would need perfectly forged passes, without which Worker would never be permitted through the checkpoints. Serendipitously, Worker found discarded paper passes on the ground as he was squatting to relieve himself in an open area used as a toilet, and these became the basis for the forged version.

The couple meticulously constructed their plan based on a thorough understanding of the prison’s physical structure, personnel, visitor patterns, and protocol. “If I left my cell at exactly 1:42 pm, I could arrive at checkpoint #5 one minute before the bugle sounded at 1:45, and one-and-a-half minutes before the commandos lined up on the inside to examine departing visitors. Then, if I stalled for five minutes between checkpoints #5 and #3, the crowds would catch up to me and provide my cover.” At night, Worker practiced applying makeup, careful to scrub off all traces of it when he was finished.

In preparation for the big day—December 17—Worker also stopped shaving. “I wanted as many whiskers on me as possible, so that people would forget what my face looked like clean-shaven,” he writes. “The plan was to shave immediately before the escape. I told the guards that it was an American tradition to grow a beard for Christmas, ‘como Santa Claus.’ They didn’t go for it, so I had to shave.”

Worker eventually managed to convince the chief guard that he needed to grow a beard before his wedding—by then he and Chilcoate had decided to marry—and bribed the guard with the promise of 100 pesos a week. He was allowed to stop shaving. “Every day after that I felt better knowing that my beard and nails were growing longer and longer.”

‘It’s not as if the job application asked, “Check here if you’ve ever spent time in a Mexican prison.”’

A copy in Spanish of the book Worker wrote with his then-wife Barbara who assisted in and masterminded his escape. The book, entitled *Escape*, was made into a 1980 movie of the same name starring Timothy Bottoms and Kay Lenz.

During two years at Lecumberri, Worker survived beatings and stabbings, 41 days of solitary confinement in a 5-by-5-foot cell, brutal courtyard fights, a 17-day hunger strike, and a stint in the psychiatric ward. He had also witnessed the murder of another inmate. Finally, on December 17, 1975, at exactly 2:06 pm, Worker stepped through a narrow metal door surrounded by a dozen armed guards and onto a busy, bright Mexican street where Chilcoate waited in an idling taxi. He had successfully escaped Lecumberri, an accomplishment he now shared with only one other person: Mexican revolutionary Pancho Villa.

THE BAD OLD DAYS

Maybe Worker didn’t want to talk about his experience in Lecumberri because he is bored with it. Or maybe, as he insisted that day sitting at his kitchen table, it hurts too much to think about the heartbreak of losing Barbara Chilcoate, who made his escape possible, who married him, and who divorced him in 1988. “I married the woman who broke me out of prison. I owe her one for life,” he says. “I didn’t want to get divorced. But some things don’t work out as you want. She is a good person. She lives in France and is not coming back.”

After some gentle urging, Worker finally shared a bit about the bad old days. He explained that he started using cocaine in 1968, when the war in Vietnam was raging, the same year he received his draft card in the mail. He ignored the card. Selective service declared him “1-A delinquent” and inducted him in 1968. He ran out of the induction center. (Only much later did he discover that he had been classified “1-Y,” unfit for military service. He still doesn’t know why.) After fleeing the induction center, Worker grew to regard himself as a renegade.

“I became countercultural. I was twenty-one years old and I didn’t support our government. That made me a God-damned communist.” Worker pronounces it as “goddamcommist,” one word, the way his father did. “My dad threatened to punch me out good, and it wouldn’t have been the first time. Suddenly I was all alone. Everyone you know, all your old friends from high school, calling you a communist. You can get pretty isolated. Alienated.”

Cocaine was the antidote. Jacked up on coke and convinced he was “immune to mortal problems,” the idea of buying his own ample supply seemed like a great idea. It was the first and only time he would attempt to smuggle drugs into the United States. He was certain his body-cast ruse would work.

Worker says he will always regret what he put his parents through, and not merely the reality of having a drug-addicted son, or one that was imprisoned for smuggling cocaine. The worst was that they got “phone calls at three in the morning begging for more money to avoid torture,” he says. Worker paid his parents back the money he borrowed with his earnings from the book and movie rights. But he says he will always feel “terribly guilty and ashamed for doing this to them.”

BACK IN THE U.S.A.

When Worker crossed the border back into the United States on Christmas Eve 1975, he had about as bad a resume as anyone could possibly have. “So I lied about my past and managed to get minimum-wage jobs,” he says. He wrote his autobiography by day and by night worked as a reconciliation clerk at Bank of America in San Francisco, recording the day’s deposits. He had a knack for computers and found a job in Indianapolis, where his boss urged him to get an M.B.A. He earned his degree at IU in 1985, worked in Chicago as a systems engineer for IBM, and returned to Bloomington where he taught information systems and security from 1999 to 2008, garnering several teaching awards.

How did he get hired, given his history? Says Worker, “It’s not as if the job application asked, ‘Check here if you’ve ever spent time in a Mexican prison.’ If it had asked, I would have checked ‘yes.’ But no one ever asked.”

There is one more rather mysterious period in Worker’s life that occurred before he landed back at IU. In 1991 he joined the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society, a nonprofit organization that opposes whaling. On its website, Sea Shepherd claims responsibility over the past 30 years for scuttling (sinking unoccupied ships by opening pipes to let in seawater) half of the Icelandic whaling fleet, disabling half of the Spanish whaling fleet, protesting Japan’s illegal whaling in Antarctica, and scuttling the Norwegian whaling vessels *Senet* and *Nybraena*. Worker says he was indicted for scuttling the *Nybraena*, but will not say more. “I was indicted. That’s public knowledge. But I will not acknowledge more than that.” If Worker did confess, he would risk extradition to Norway and imprisonment.

THE UNENCUMBERED LIFE

These days Dwight Worker lives an unencumbered life, and not just because he can travel abroad on a whim but because he needs so little to live happily. Social Security, retirement funds, and the occasional consulting fee easily cover his expenses. And when he’s not riding his bicycle around Krakow, Poland, or Chiang Mai, Thailand, he can be found somewhere on his 17 acres, planting or harvesting or chopping or welding or engaged in some other hardy activity, usually accompanied by a rangy black lab named Zambo.

He is, in the grand tradition of Ralph Waldo Emerson, self-reliant. While some of us could not find a working flashlight in a blackout, this is a man who hopes for storms because he so relishes the opportunity to survive by his wits. “You’d think I’d have reason not to be optimistic, but I am. And why shouldn’t I be? After all,” he says, suddenly sounding every bit a child of the ‘60s, “life’s a gas.” ✨

Worker and Zambo go about their business on the farm.

