

"A Single Unheard Voice"

I truly have nothing but pity for the citizens of this State. The reason being... they are being duped for their tax dollars to fund the horrendously unconstitutional prison system. However ignorance and silence is no excuse.

The exasperating taste of my world, devoid of any emotional nourishment, is gradually overpowering. Bleak and colorless walls; insipid, disgusting meals and phlegmatic, time-worn daily routines stacked upon unacceptable overcrowding, which creates senseless haphazard violence over unadulterated trivia issues and, of course, the irrational guardian harassment all collaborate to numb my faculties. In tiny surreptitious doses anesthesia is dripped into my heart ~ a formerly complacent heart that is slowly beginning to resemble my dreadful surroundings.

An ache settles somewhere deep inside of me, pain linked to the realization that something once deeply cherished has been stolen from me during my outrageous two plus decades of incarceration. Years of sensory deprivation has withered my ability to respond with anything resembling an emotional reaction. Like an ancient tree, gnarled

and wizened by time and nature's elements, my heart has grown rugged and callused. A hard price extracted by the dehumanizing environment I am forced to survive in.

Grossly overcrowded dormitories, cinder block walls, steel barred cages, encircling concrete walls are barricades surrounded by double, sometimes triple, chain-link fences, which are topped by glistening razor-wire enclose gray stone human warehouses. The allotted window space for light and air is minimal. Powered ventilation seemingly always in need of repair. This describes the housing for thousands of convicted men and women. Far from rehabilitating or "Correcting" past errors, it constitutes a setting that helps drive people to anger, frustration and despair.

The crimes for which prisoners are sentenced range from petty marijuana possession to violent homicide and, unfortunately, an occasional innocent victim of good-ol'-boy authority abuse. Many of the accused are the products of a seriously flawed social fabric. Some have been hopelessly disadvantaged from birth. Mingled with the ever present sophisticated career criminals are the psychologically damaged or mentally impaired, as well as those whom were just in the wrong place at the wrong time. However, All, without exception, suffer discrimination. The fierce impact of the

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current criminal justice policy of being "Tough On Crime", which can be summed up in one word - Retribution...

And what form does this retribution take? For all it is the loss of freedom and the liberty to make one's own decisions. Subsistences on inadequate, often inedible food. Constant exposure to demeaning and disrespectful treatment, both verbally and physically. Lackluster security, which allows for brutal violence to be commonplace. Enforced and interminable idleness, or, if one is "fortunate", poorly compensated menial or manual labor. And, of course, there is the ever present threat of solitary confinement, ("THE DOG HOUSE"), for the commission of even slight infractions of ever changing and arbitrary rules and regulations.

Certain fragile conduits of outside information do exist. Letters, though always censored. Phone calls, though outrageously expensive and always monitored. Family and friend visits, though strictly discouraged and always rushed. Attorney visits, though oftentimes resulting in retaliation by prison personnel are all subject to varying degrees of circumscription. The system is designed to isolate prisoners from free world contact, which, of course, has no rehabilitative value yet it allows the system to mostly do as they wish

to prisoners.

Another segment of the prison world is the misnamed "Correction Officers," or guards, who slowly but surely become cogs in the machinery of the system. Like policemen or firemen, they enlist to obtain steady pay with accompanying benefits; They don a uniform and patch badge; they acquire power over prisoners and assume the role of public servants, but at a personal cost. While participating, tacitly or actively, in the daily dehumanizing of prisoners, they themselves betray and barter their own humane instincts away. The code of retribution imposes its effects and brings about a personal transformation, perhaps better described as a deformation.

Finally, there is the taxpaying public, who by their silence, consent to the perpetuation of the system. And in exchange for security, or what has become known popularly as "public safety", that same taxpaying public has delegated to act on their behalf the so-called Department of Corrections. It is a security purchased by a system that pits inmate against inmate, inmates against guards, guards against inmates, and even guards seething at times against administration. The administration is ultimately allowed to act in a kind of eerie isolation, almost entirely free from public accountability. You can only imagine where that leads ~ human abuses. And all the while, the system steadily screams for more

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taxpayer money.

It is this very isolation throughout the system that allows it to endure. From those who levy the initial charge, to those who ~~bargain~~ bargain the fate of the defendant, to the one who pronounces the sentence, and, finally, to the executioners of the unending punishment there is scant contact of one participant with the other, much less with the victim or the accused. Through silence, isolation, ignorance and indifference society has allowed and even promoted the steady growth of this criminal justice bureaucracy. The prison industrial complex. While society is bewildered by the high recidivism of prisoners they fail to look where their tax dollars are spent, thus assuring the ongoing implementation of the systems primeval concept of "Correction". Chain gangs! Southern mentality at its best. Seeing weeds or picking trash from ditches in the place of education, counselling, job placement and general genuine concern. Recidivism will remain high as long as the focus is retribution instead of true rehabilitation.

I often wonder where the criminologists, reformists, Senators or Representatives are ever going to admit this current model of massive incarceration is not working. The streets are no safer. In fact it's worse. When will those whom

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have the power become courageous enough to offer re-constructive alternatives? How many out in society are guilty, albeit in varying degrees, of this draconian concept of vengeance being the justified means to the end? How long will society continue to turn a blind eye to the abuses of prisoners lives and rights, while being duped of their tax dollars? Are any ready to respond to this one prisoners anguished cry? To hear this single unheard voice...

Wearry and Worn
Donald D. Fairgrove