

March 2014

HAPPY HOUR
IN
SHIRLEY WORLD

A View from the Massachusetts correctional institute at Shirley is typical of the view of most medium security prisons across the country. There's deadly razor wire gleaming in bright sunlight, several low prefabricated buildings housing various programs like library, industry, a barbershop and chapel. Six massive state-of-the-art cell blocks look like Hollywood soundstages painted a rusty clay.

It had been a long gray winter, a gray day, another gray year here in Shirley World, and men have grown callous marching to chow in their loose gray uniforms. Overcrowded and distressed, inmates are sick and tired of another brutal winter. Complaints about food and waiting lists for programs are just a few disputations causing inmate angst.

Just in front of the messhall, perhaps the largest of the single story prefabricated structures, is a cold line of men waiting for Happy Hour. Happy hour is this facilities steam-release valve. Inmates of Shirley medium know every Tuesday and Thursday afternoon is that time superintendents and supervisors meet and address grievances and concerns.

Convicts wait as long as it takes during lunchtime to question medical staff, property officers and the superintendent herself.

Inmates here in Shirley, a cookie cutter McJail built in the 1990's, use happy hour to get answers to questions directly impacting their confinement. Communication between prisoner and staff remain the most cost effective method of gathering essential information about conditions affecting general population. Answers often come from the source, including the superintendent herself. Kelly Ryan is often the first official to arrive. She leads a conga line of administrators that include her deputy superintendent for programs Karen Dinardo and captain

of the guard, among others.

No jailor wants a return of conditions that led to discontent and uprisings like Attica during the turbulent 1970's, so this facility takes happy hour very seriously. Each administrator understands communication is essential for the peaceful operation of their facility.

Medium security prisons, like Shirley, may be home to nearly two-thousand prisoners. These guarded facilities represent business as usual for a public safety policy embracing little more than warehousing bodies until release. Correctional facilities have evolved dramatically over the years, although not always for the better.

Superintendent Ryan and her deputies bring to Shirley progressive incarceration. Gone is any pretense of rehabilitation. These are labor intensive businesses located in far away communities representing a sort of redistribution of wealth and resources during a period when this nation desperately needs income equality for the middle class.

Once committed to Shirley, men are sent to the new man unit designated A-1. A-1 holds nearly 100 souls in cells that may be single or double occupancy. Each new man meets a caseworker upon his arrival. I met with Aura, a diligent woman in her thirties with remarkable energy who speaks her mind while managing inmate concerns such as time computation, job assignment requests, and liason with prison administrators. Aura helped photocopy several drafts of this article, and helps men check funds in their trust accounts, among many other needful things. For many men she's a shoulder to cry on. A woman overwhelmed making a difficult job look easy.

The science of caring for inmates, while ancient, has evolved. There's greater emphasis on trying to effect positive behavior in order to eliminate

violence, victimization and recidivism. Although, these goals may not always be mirrored by similar institutions elsewhere. A glance from a prison window onto many modern American detention centers today is a look into crisis and despair.

There is less solidarity among general population inmates today. Gone is collective righteousness which fueled prison uprisings of the past. Instead, there's a tacit acceptance of conditions. Prisoner's have grown temperamental consuming each other instead of attacking problems of overcrowding, appalling food, loss of privileges and general decrepitude.

Recently, a piece of the facade of A-block's new man unit fell off revealing exposed cinderblock and water damage. This camp is showing its age. Will it even be a viable prison in the next 20 years?

Gone is the burning urge to escape. Prisoner's seem to no longer hunger for escape; that age old yearning found in prison films like Papillon or Cool Hand Luke. Rather, prisoner's today seem to stumble in search of freedom in a nation where freedom itself is fleeting.

Inmates attack one another. Racial division, and gang affiliations are minefields here in these dangerous places. Charges of committment also tend to ostracize many, particularly those with sex based offenses. There is no shortage of judgmental anonymous authority dividing inmate populations.

MCI-Shirley is home to every class of convict. Going along to get along is how most inmates do their time. There are lifer's who will never see the streets living with inmates facing but a few years. This facility must be all things to all people. Running to happy hour to vent or address concerns is a quick and easy alternative to violence.

There is little spirit of resistance, instead, there's pining for parole and hope for work release; others wait for appeal decisions or some other kind of sentence reduction. Cynicism from decades long political policy like mandatory minimum sentencing, zero tolerance enforcement of victimless crime and draconian parole and probation conditions of release fuel ennui and hoplessness.

Prisons have always been little more than islands of social welfare. Public safety make these guarded facilities essential. Many of today's prisoners lived through the beginning of the business of incarceration which exploded during the 1980's.

Arthur Okun, chief economic advisor to president Lyndon Johnson, published a classic book titled *Equality and Efficiency: The Big Tradeoff*. In it, Okun 40 years ago argued that redistributing income from the rich to the poor takes a toll on economic growth. For years liberals argued that the efficiency cost of redistribution was small, while conservatives argued it would be prohibitively large therefore undesirable.

Ronald Reagan's years of economic growth and so called trickle down supply side economics relied heavily on construction jobs, prison industry solved the economic puzzle putting to rest any criticism; depressed communities across the nation grew with money spent constructing and operating our nations jails.

Growth of prison industry, law enforcement, and all other ancillary industry: courts lawyers and supporting labor thrive to this day. The cost beyond tax dollars is human misery and a general loss of cultural zeitgeist.

The business of growing these institutions has its roots, ironically, during the frowzy 1970's where fear and dreams were woven together into a national

neurosis. Fear of crime, of government mingled with dreams of success. America's dream, with all its promise of home ownership, and 2.2 kids living an idealic existence sold by slick Madison Avenue ad agencies and syrupy situation comedies faded. The dream was a nap nudged awake as pluralism met with xenophobia. Race relations, the Vietnam War and drugs ripped America apart.

Watergate and the Arab oil embargo woke America up, just as the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center would do thirty years later. Suddenly, a vivid awareness fueled by crime in the streets augur dire consequences. Politicians turned their attention to social ills. Crime in the streets consumed urban America like the Black Death.

Uprisings of the 1970's rooted in rebellion rocked the nation. Unrest on college campuses, on the streets, exposed social discontent that would be viewed worldwide. And for the first time on network television, America would see first hand a glimpse of the Attica Riot. In 1971, forty three guards and inmates were killed during a four day standoff at Attica, one of this nations penitentiary's just outside of Buffalo, New York.

Here in Massachusetts, only a short drive from MCI-Shirley, men at the state prison in Norfolk began to organize. On November 8th 1971 armed guards and state troopers, in a surprise raid, moved into cells at Norfolk pulling sixteen prisoners out and shipping them to the nearby maximum security prison at Walpole.

What existed during the critical years of the 1970's was a general distrust of government. A distrust founded on arrogance rooted in scandal. These were the Watergate years when rebellion was fueled by an unpopular war, political corruption and class division. America was an economy in transition. Ronald

Reagan saw this transitioning as a danger and labeled the underground economy a threat to national security.

When I began my journey through prison during the 1980's there were cries from holding cells accusing the system itself of being a racket; a big business where detainee's are little more than work product. It's hard, under the circumstances, not to sympathize with such a prisoner dilemma. Convicts languishing in hastily built prisons across the nation, many serving excessive years because of newly legislated mandatory minimum sentencing rules feeling themselves raw material in a money making scheme designed entirely to prop up the middle class; especially a White middle class in economically distressed communities all across rural America.

The 1980's would shift prison demographics. Prison populations would grow furiously. We now live in a nation where millions are held under lock and key. A sobering 3 percent of American adults are under some kind of supervision by department of corrections nationally. Supreme Court Justice Anthony M. Kennedy said recently in the Boston Globe, (April, 2013), "13 million people will pass through our nation's jails each year."

The Massachusetts correctional institute at Shirley illustrates this evolution of culture mirroring prisons coast to coast. It's a facility housing bodies where privileges are diminished, and programs scarce.

Today's prisons represent business as usual for a public safety policy embracing little more than warehousing bodies. These are labor intensive paramilitary businesses guarded from prying eyes representing a politically expedient means of income equality and redistribution of public resources.

Inmates with many years behind them behind bars point to this new generation of inmate and say they're "soft". Mandatory sentencing schemes have flooded medium security institutions with nonviolent offenders. People who previously would have had no business behind bars are today serving double digit stretches in state pens.

Thirty years ago, prisons were reserved for hardened career criminals, who, compared with today's inmates, were much more inclined to turn to organized violence as a problem solving technique.

Modern inmates are not only less prone to violence, but also more likely to employ peaceful means of expressing grievances, or simply avoid making trouble so they can get home sooner.

Since mandatory sentencing became widespread in the 1980's, and prison populations and costs began to climb, opponents have pointed to its disproportionate impact on minorities and the poor. The political right calls the current criminal justice system an expensive government program that produces poor results. Yet, no politician wants to be accused of being soft on crime, therefore, prison populations grow and mandatory minimum sentencing remain strictly enforced.

Long lines and few rehabilitation programs are the result of decisions to pack prisons nationally. Here in MCI-Shirley, trade opportunities are scarce, the wait for barbershop, for example, and sewing shop industry can be years.

Happy hour is becoming less and less happy as inmates find themselves left with little more than empty promises and meaningless hopes.

Recently, during a momentary thaw, I stood with nearly a hundred men waiting for my chance to speak with Karen Dinardo, the assistant superintendent for programs, about being assigned a job in industry.

Shifting foot to foot, watching while corrections officers pat-frisked inmates on line, I looked beyond the gray day, past the blazing concertina wire and beyond to the other facilities which make up Shirley World.

Shirley is but one of three correctional facilities within this hub. Just west across a rural road is a lovely string of colonial buildings that help make up that minimum security institution. To the south looms Souza Baranowski this Commonwealths purported only maximum security penitentiary.

Men jump when an opening is called for an available administrator. Bodies clotting into something resembling a line. Officers announcing medical seem the most busy. A grievance officer looks fitfully occupied, as is the property officer and senior caseworker. Superintendent Ryan stood making notes while her animated speaker waves his hands and seems to point at something unknown. She nodded making notes, and the motley crowd just grows.

I decided my request for a job assignment could wait. It did not seem that important. Rather, than wait, I decided to return to my housing unit and simply write a note. After all, time stands still in these institutions, what difference does one day make.

The End

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