

THE RHETORIC OF IMPRISONMENT AND THE REALITY OF THE CAGE

The below segment is one of several speeches I give to college students studying criminal justice who visit the prison I'm incarcerated at.

Coming into California prison system a native of Oklahoma, I hadn't lived in the state but two years prior to being wrongfully convicted of first-degree murder and sentenced to life without the possibility of parole. To say this has been both a disappointment and adjustment is to say the least. However, prison was nothing new to me. I had done time back home. I recall that first bid as if yesterday. It was a learning experience. Though, not the kind one immediately warms up to. My first lesson was to learn to repress that general sense of claustrophobia one experiences when feelings of being trapped begin to settle in. Despite my attempts, often the panic of this acquired madness would get out to rattle the cage.

Fortunately, there were friends and family who would occasionally pass through the jail as I awaited trial. They had had the misfortunate experience of doing time at the Big House. Through them, I quickly learned that prison was called the *Twilight Zone*, or the "Zo" for short, due to all the weird shit that plays out behind these walls. Without question, my prison experience has exposed me to the fact that the rhetoric of imprisonment and the reality of the cage are often in stark contrast. To the inexperienced, it's all titles appropriately fixed with expectations—warden, guard and prisoner. Situated as such, their character is not. By a show of hands how many of you are familiar with the Stanford Prison experiment?¹ Monsters were created. They became almost impossible to identify despite titles and garb because where god-like authority over life is given, physical and mental abuse lingers. Here our keepers can become just as criminal as the commitments.

Case in point, guards become sex offenders. Women prisoners get it the worst. They're frequently forced into a sex trade for the little extras. Need I say the insanity that comes of this place makes for a good circus act?

Often, I find myself on the yard posted as if a birdwatcher with my binoculars focused on my fellow prisoners and staff. Because we go to great lengths to be conscious of those around us, I study with detail their beliefs, habits, responses, defenses, egos and other complexes. At times, many times, it's as if I'm at a circus being entertained by clowns and freaks. Some cats are funny clowns, gangsta clowns, sensitive clowns, girly clowns, militant clowns and of course there are the power freaks.

¹ In 1971 Stanford University conducted an experiment where students were divided into two groups. One group posed as prisoners and the other as guards, both in a makeshift prison setting. The six-day experiment resulted in a barbaric transformation in attitude among those students role-playing as prison guards, resulting in termination of the experiment. This was a scaled-down version of the full-blown madness behind these walls where some of the most sadomasochistic minds belong to guards. Some of the people working in prison undergo a Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde metamorphosis. Their family members and friends would be appalled to discover how odious, conniving, mendacious, perverted, insidious, and animalistic they can be at work. Or perhaps they would not.

Here, young and old alike are driven insane when attempts to psychologically manage this cage fail. To cope and control us, a significant number of prisoners at this facility are given psych meds as if Halloween candies. Every day, I see cats line up at the pill-line to get that “gunpowder” as we call it, which fries their brain like rabies. Needless to say, drug addiction in prison is most terrible. The prescriptions prescribed by the prison’s doctors are better than the dope on the street. Real talk! The *trap-stars* on the yard cannot get their *work* off because the administration’s dope is A1. The pharmaceutical companies (gangs) got the yard on lock. It’s a multi-billion dollar racket!

As for the remaining population? We become drugged with “negativity” ever seeking conflict to vent. For prison is an extremely manipulative environment fueled with the negative and most miserable elements of society—and I’m not just talking about the convicts. A sense of numbness and hatred seems to invade the soul of every woman, child, and man connected to it.

If only these walls could talk, the real they would tell. For this cage breaks the weak and builds the strong—their hearts, their minds and souls. There’s no doubt about it, it will make you more of what you were before you came in, which brings us to the question of rehabilitation. Please! Prison only teaches us to become better thieves, swindlers and predators. Why so?

Take for example, prison labor. The California Department of Corrections and “Rehabilitation” (CDCR, hereafter), as well as other Department of Corrections across the nation, doesn’t pay but 7-90 cents per hour, if that! After restitution and court fees are deducted, we barely have enough to buy a case of Top Ramen noodles. Most of us don’t have family and friends to support us. Therefore the only way we can obtain the things we want and need is by stealing, conning, and preying on other inmates and staff. I need not say that these anti-social behaviors will follow that 90% of us back into society that is to be released.

In a nutshell this is what prison amounts to:

- Isolation
- Severing of family and community ties
- Promotion of racism
- Deprivation of genuine social interaction
- Transformation of positive attributes such as trust, honesty, and kindness into points of vulnerability
- Exposure to diseases such as Hepatitis C, HIV, and many others
- Enslavement
- Psychological torture
- Fostering dependence upon others and state welfare programs
- And most noteworthy, stripping one of his dignity

To our detriment, a significant number of officers misconstrue what they are here for. Generally, they have this attitude to deprive us of something that sustains us even as all else seems to be lost without freedom—DIGNITY. This self-respect and sense of self-worth is the innermost armament of the soul. It lies at the heart of our attempts to maintain our humanness. To be deprived of it is to be dehumanized, to be cleaved from,

and cast below, mankind. Dignity, needless to say, is as essential to human life as water, food, and oxygen. As this suggests, the loss of a man's dignity can carry him off as surely as thirst, hunger, exposure, and asphyxiation, and with greater cruelty. Let me be clear ladies and gentlemen, in prison degradation can be as lethal as a bullet. Too often I have witnessed how it has driven men to commit suicide.

Trapped from being less than perfect, we are kenneled onto a minefield (the yard). Here, we self-destruct due to mounting frustrations derived from being pronged and irritated by an inescapable trauma and displaced aggressions. This inevitably prompts us to be at each other's throat. Boom! Next thing you know there's 200 plus prisoners in the yard rioting. Shanks are out. Someone is stabbed. If not two or three.... Rubber bullets and canisters of tear gas are indiscriminately hitting everybody. Backs are stinging, eyes are burning, coughing, and some fool's teeth are lying on the ground. A warning shot is fired! Then someone dies. He's carted out on a gurney gasping for his last breath. Yet another reality I have witnessed. Sadly, the longer we remain in these war zones, the more battle hardened and extreme we become in our violent tendencies and racist ideologies.

Can a man find his lost moral compass in such a place? Most cannot, some do. Guess it goes without saying much of what I have said up until this point is the sort of hype many of you marvel at with amusement. Yet, it involves a deception kept locked away behind these walls; locked away in the volumes of criminal jurisprudence—60% of murders and rapes go unsolved as well as 90% of property crimes. And that's not to mention the fact that 90% or better of Americans have committed crimes that, had they been caught, would have landed them a stiff prison sentence.

That said, hopefully these statistics along everything else I have spoken to you about today, will prompt you to question: Do prisons ensure or pose a greater threat to public safety? In answering this question, keep in mind the words of the late British philosopher and reformer Bertrand Russell:

Most of the greatest evils that man has inflicted upon man have come through people feeling quite certain about something which, in fact, was false.

—Ivan Kilgore (2014)

Google Ivan and find out more about his wrongful conviction, books, radio interviews, articles, music, and the *United Black Family Scholarship Foundation* to which he has recently founded. See his blog at: <http://www.willisraised.wordpress.com>.

Enjoy the read. Sincerely,

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***DOMESTIC GENOCIDE: THE INSTITUTIONALIZATION
OF SOCIETY***

BY IVAN KILGORE

In what has become a highly controversial topic, American institutions have come under fire as a growing number of committed scholars and advocates for social justice have caught the vapors and awoke to the fact that these institutions have been designed with the sole intent of organizing American social and economic life to the advantage of its predominately white ruling class. In the case of many Black Americans and other people of color this often means that their communities and lives will be exploited to the fullest, if not destroyed.

In his highly critical analysis of these institutions, Ivan Kilgore unapologetically explains in his book—*Domestic Genocide: The Institutionalization of Society*—the various cultural and institutional forces that have operated to preserve this agenda. Here, the backdrop of this thesis centers around 39 years of Ivan's short life where the day-to-day struggle to rise above the mire of poverty, injustice, racism, miseducation, and violence in American society have taken him on a journey throughout American ghettos, college hallways, and prison dwellings. Consequently, the circumstances that came of these events would hurl him onto the nation's highways and into the bowels of Mexico to traffic illicit drugs and other forms of destruction that resulted in his being placed before a jury on two separate occasions for capital murder prior to his 26th birthday.

In response to Ivan's story the *San Francisco Chronicle Newspaper* would receive sweeping reviews that prompted countless individuals in the Bay Area to join mentoring organizations. (Google Ivan Kilgore and find out more about his wrongful conviction, radio interviews, articles, blogs and music) Joining the fervor would be renowned Professor Alvin F. Poussaint of Harvard University and the late Professor John Irwin of San Francisco State University, who would greatly assist to inspire Ivan to bring this project to life.

Domestic Genocide is constructed around nine chapters that at first reading seem to stand independent of each other. Part autobiography, part semi-academic, poetry, prose, spoken word, urban non-fiction, it captures the voice of those afflicted by the blowback of capitalism. It, undoubtedly, makes for an incredible case study of how the various institutional forces impact many poor, Black and oppressed Americans.

Excerpts to *Domestic Genocide* are available at <http://www.willisraised.wordpress.com>.

Enjoy the read,

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