

original

Dorotile CA

A lot has been written about the prison system lately -- why we as a nation incarcerate so many, why the bureaucratic and unweildy system is only expected to make minimal cuts to its 11 billion dollar budget while education and social supports are slashed to the very core, why California's prison system has the highest recidivism rate of any state in the nation?

But little is written of the individual suffering that occurs in devastating ways on the inside of prison walls. That's because the system does not want you to know. It's easier for all of us to compartmentalize our thinking and believe all of those behind bars are monsters of one kind or another -- undeserving of kindness or consideration.

I'm going to tell you one story of suffering -- so you can know, really know, what it is like to be incarcerated. And also know how your 11 billion in tax dollars are being spent.

Doris has been locked away now for more than 28 years. She is 70 years old, stands 5' 1½" (that ½" is important to Doris), and weighs less than 100 lbs. She's a very gregarious little lady, talks with her hands a lot and always has a smile for anyone, guards and prisoners alike.

I don't know what sent Doris to prison; whatever happened 28 years ago doesn't matter now. I only know Doris is a lifer and as a lifer her hope of ever being released from prison is kept alive by a very tenuous thread. I know her from her demeanor and interactions now, today in this prison. I know she has never had a serious disciplinary write-up...until now.

You'll probably find it hard to believe these events occurred -- but I assure you it is all 100% documented. You can look

it up on the court's pacer website in the Writ Doris now files to try and clear herself. The really unbelievable part, beyond the personal pain and grief Doris suffered, is the cost to society all of this inflicts. As taxpayers and members of a-so-called civilized society, we all pay for it in so many ways greater than the tax-dollars.

Doris is very expressive, effusive in her speech, with her ready smile and her silver blunt-cut hair falling over her eyes in a youthful style. She reminds me a little of Yenta from Fiddler on the Roof, only more petite. On this particular day she was sitting in her cell chatting with a friend. The housing CO (guard) was conducting a cell-to-cell search for "excessive toilet paper."

Searching cells for these personal hygiene "excesses" is a phenomenon peculiar to the prison system. Why any woman would hoard, in the tiny cell space available, a necessary item like toilet paper if it were consistently available, is a question that is never asked. It is a prison rule and that makes it inviolate.

So the CO asked how many rolls of toilet paper were in Doris' cell. Doris answered "I see three." Well it turns out there were more than three rolls stacked beside the toilet and this angered the CO. The CO is now yelling at Doris.

"DO YOU KNOW WHY I AM CONFISCATING YOUR TOILET PAPER?
BECAUSE YOU LIED AND THAT MAKES YOU A LIAR."

As the CO pulls out the toilet paper rolls and confiscates them in the plastic bag she carries, Doris gets up from her bunk and goes to look. From the anger emanating from the guard, Doris thought something must be terribly wrong.

"I'm so sorry, I didn't know" Doris says as she leans over to look at the stack of toilet paper. In leaning over, she may have

inadvertantly touched or brushed against the CO's uniform. After all, Doris is 70 and balance can be a problem.

Now the CO is angrier than ever and yells at Doris.

"YOU COULD BE CHARGED WITH ASSAULT."

Doris is stunned and asks "what?" unclear about what the CO is intimating. Every prisoner knows when faced with an angry cop, the safest demeanor is to shut up and grovel if necessary.

Finally, after the requisite tongue-lashing, the CO leaves and continues on down the hall collecting and confiscating more and more "excessive toilet paper" from another 15 cells...and this should have been the end of the unpleasant interaction. But it wasn't.

Thirty minutes later Doris is summoned to the program office and handcuffed by toilet paper cop and her partner. The Sgt. is notified, comes in, takes one look at the frightened Doris, and asks toilet paper cop if she feels threatened by Doris. The CO answers "no" and so the Sgt. orders Doris unhandcuffed and tells her to go back to her cell. Sgt. also tells toilet paper cop that "there is no need for a 115" (disciplinary write-up) as "it will not fly."

Now this really should have been the end of the issue. But it wasn't.

Enter new, more aggressive Sgt. spoiling for a show of dominance. He was overheard to say:

"I'll make sure she gets arrested."

"I'll body slam that old bitch."

The previous more humane Sgt. was not to be seen for the rest of the night, and the new Sgt. sends the goon squad to escort Doris back up to the program office. There she is spread-eagle against a

7-11-71
wall, feet kicked out to a wider and wider stance by aggressive Sgt., pat searched, handcuffed and escorted for a medical evaluation. She was then sent to Ad-Seg ("the hole") for 60+ days. She was charged with "Assault on a Peace Officer." The toilet paper cop substantiated the charge by her own trip to the medical evaluation clinic (more than 2 hours after the alleged incident according to the time on the form). The evaluation form stated "slightly reddened forearm."

Now this same CO has a habit of taking her pepper spray gun out of it's holster and twirling it or shaking it...perhaps she bumped her own arm with pepper spray and that's how the "redness" occurred... wouldn't be the first time!

The prisoner witnesses who saw the whole exchange in the cell wrote statements that no assault occurred but they were not allowed to testify at Doris' hearing. And so, of course, Doris was found guilty.

Doris spends 60+ days in Ad-Seg, has a serious disciplinary on her records (her first serious in 28+ years of incarceration) -- all over the presumption of what constitutes "excessive toilet paper."

Does this sequence of events make anyone wonder how the prison system's 11 billion dollar budget is being utilized?

Does anyone wonder how Doris may fare with the parole board (if she ever is even allowed in front of them) with this kind of charge on her record?

Does anyone even care about what goes on behind prison walls?

The sequel to all of this -- now 6 months after it all happened -- is Doris' seriously deteriorating health. She has now

suffered a perforated bowel requiring emergency surgery secondary to debilitating ulcerative colitis (a disease closely related to psychological stressors). She's lost more weight than she can afford to lose and looks more waif-like than ever.

AS Dostoyevsky writes "The degree of civilization a society exhibits is best determined by how it treats it's prisoners."

by Jane Dorotik, CIW