

The Psychology of Prison Revisited

I sat down to write about what it's actually like to live in prison, and the barrage of thoughts that came overwhelmed me, and the pen and story got away from me. Each thought was unfinished, interrupted by the next, impatient and crying out for recognition. I also realized how much of the suffering that takes place in prison is simply inexpressible resulting in the absolute futility of trying to verbalize such anguish and its causes.

The difficulties that arise in prison are the often unintended but unavoidable consequences resulting from the nature of imprisonment itself. Freedom is as fundamental an element of life as is oxygen, and the desire for which is all that sustains a man until it is returned to him. This means that those who are held against their will must, by definition, be at odds with those who hold them there. In this process, your identity as a human being is lost. You do *what* you're told, *when* you're told, *how* you're told, and have no choice besides that. Your thought process becomes distorted and corrupted because the psychological effect of being treated like an animal is that you become one.

Imagine an environment where any conversation you engage in, it would be out of the ordinary if at least one of the participants hadn't killed or tried to kill someone. A fraternal organization where your fellow brethren are rapists, drug dealers, armed robbers, and thieves. Now imagine Darwinism at its finest, survival of the fittest. Envision the deceit, manipulation, and duplicity. Day in. Day out. Learn to sleep with one eye open, or perhaps never sleep. Watch your back. Don't let your guard down. Become the cliché of your choice. Or become a victim.

In the wild, animals learn to hunt and forage from their loved ones—in here you fend for yourself from the moment you hear the infamous Miranda warning. Fend for yourself means exactly that. No one shows you the ropes, or explains to you the rules—and that's only fitting since they're arbitrary at best. But, you may be thinking, at least the living conditions are humane, right? In fact, they're probably far better than we deserve, right?

Spend sixteen hours a day in your bathroom, leaving only to go to your yard for three hours, and your living room for the other five. Not for one day, or one week, but for *years*. But at least we're fed well, right? Remember as a kid, those foods you just couldn't stomach and haven't eaten since? Well now that's your diet, three times a day. Don't forget to overcook it, and don't bother with the salt, spices, or condiments—just choke it down. There you go, that wasn't so bad, was it? See you again tomorrow, and the next day, and....

You figure you'll spend half of that cell time sleeping, what will you do with the other half? Assuming you spend all three hours of recreation time engaged in physical activity or entertainment, and a half-hour out of the other five for showering, you're still left with twelve-and-a-half hours of "free time". Have you decide how you'll spend it? Can you really read and write that much? There's nothing on TV, nothing worth watching. Surely you'll put down the book, the notepad, turn off the TV, and wonder where it all went wrong.

Surely as you reminisce you'll be reminded of the family you left behind. Those bright smiles you remember always turn to frowns, and those sparkling eyes fill with tears. You feel like

George Bailey in *It's a Wonderful Life*, seeing how much everyone suffers without you there, but you are powerless to change it. The rent money is short, your little sister is struggling in school, and your nieces and nephews wonder when you're coming home. You cry because any answer you give is wrong. Maybe tomorrow will be better. But tomorrow brings more of the same. Months pass and you haven't seen your family. You can't sleep because the emptiness of your bed reminds you that you're alone. Your mattress is thin and your bed is hard, and what sleep does come is fitful. You wake up alone and beg God to give you strength. Your waking hours are nightmares of what could have been. More hardships for your family and loved ones. If only you could help. So you count the days, but they pass in slow motion. Sometimes not at all.

Finally, a night of sleep does come and you greet the day with a smile, determined to be productive. You write some letters and do some reading, but something's wrong. Something gnawing at the pit of your stomach, and like the bile that creeps up your throat, you can taste it. It's guilt. You see the woman you robbed, the man you beat, or the boy you killed. You see someone doing that to your mother, your brother, your son. You cry, you sweat, you pant, you moan, and you begin to loathe yourself. All the suffering in the world is your fault. You own it. Tomorrow gets worse. And so does the next day. You're fresh out of tears, but plenty stocked in pain. Everyone thinks you have it too good, and you can't even force a half-hearted smile at the irony of that. Raw. One great big festering sore. And each day it hurts more.

Fifty-two weeks, twelve months, one year, three-hundred and sixty-five days done; Five-thousand nine-hundred and sixty-four left. Go ahead, imagine it.