

## The Psychology of Prison

There is a prevailing thought in our society that we have gone to great lengths to ensure the humane treatment of prisoners, and fair/just measures of incarceration. However, incarceration as a form of punishment is, by definition, inhumane. The intent to inflict pain, loss, and suffering as reparation for transgressing the law by depriving man of liberty is cruel and malicious, regardless of the absence of physical brutality (which there is, in reality, not an absence of despite the aforementioned public perception). Patrick Henry, of course alluded to the necessity of liberty when he so boldly stated: "Give me liberty or give me death." And Thomas Jefferson's proclamation that "[all men] are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights" made no exception for the purpose of penalizing such men. Yet those rights, the most fundamental of Human Rights, are precisely the ones stripped from those immured in prison.

The means by which one becomes incarcerated and subsequent "adjustment" (a terrible misnomer) are indicative of the transition that is underway but in all honesty will be a perpetual adaptation. The savagery of removing individuals from society for their transgressions lies not in the physical conditions of such imprisonment, but in the inherent psychological destruction/devastation that results from such deprivation. The outward (cosmetic) circumstances are of little consequence and carry little weight as to the humanity of such a practice. The fundamental underlying psychologies of those imprisoned, and those who enforce the terms of imprisonment are, by necessity, diametrically opposed, creating a dualistic environment whereby the keepers are human and those kept are "other". This attitude is not only prevalent, but all-pervasive. And so begins the dehumanization process.

The ability with which individuals are able to endure the merciless and grueling torture and mental anguish inflicted upon them is as much a testament to the tenacity of the human spirit as the recidivism rate is to the ineffectiveness of the present system.

To those fortunate enough to not have been subjected to the severe experience of incarceration, and forfeiture of their civil and human rights, understanding exists only at a level of comprehension infinitesimal in relation to reality. It is unequivocally the harshest and most unforgiving circumstance to which man can be subjected in this life, and as the limited scope of one's vision makes impossible the seeing of infrared and ultraviolet light, the limited scope of human language makes impossible the articulation of the emptiness and suffering endured behind prison walls. To the degree that this horror can be expressed effectively by someone who has lived through it, I will do my best.

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The "adjustment" from freedom as we know it, to a state where one's rights are arbitrarily and capriciously dismissed is unfathomable; ironically the words that come to mind are the very same words used by our government in its latest campaign to annihilate Saddam Hussein and his reign of terror: *shock* and *awe*. Even the traumatic experience of such a transition does little to prepare you for the overwhelming sense of loss, betrayal, and heartache that will follow. And that is to say nothing of the intrinsic guilt and shame that is borne out of the transgression itself.

Prison is a world within a world, existing seemingly on two levels, but functioning on neither. The rules and standards of society no longer apply, and those who thrive in prison would, at best,

by society's standards, be considered dysfunctional. The environment is based on deceit and ruled by fear at both ends of the spectrum. The fear of repercussion for violating the written (as well as capricious and unwritten) rules and regulations imposed by the powers that be, in addition to the often contradictory rules of conduct upheld through tradition by the inmate population. To survive, you must adopt both sets of rules, and discern when to adhere to which, usually based on the severity of the penalty for violating one or the other. It is rare that an individual is able to co-exist in this disparate environment without incurring punishment or indignation at the hands of either the administration or fellow prisoners.

Among the first feelings to be adopted is the pervasive "us against them" dichotomy, which is impossible to dissociate from the minds of those imprisoned. This results in contempt and resentment, leading to tension and hostility. Add to this volatile mix the preexisting conditions, attitudes, and beliefs of the men whom the inmate population is comprised of, and the blueprint for what now exists begins to take shape.

Consider for a moment the backgrounds of these men. Though many may have come from religious families, none are choirboys to say the least. The majority, regardless of age, do not have a high school diploma or its equivalent. Over 85% are drug or alcohol abusers. Many have been abused physically, emotionally, or mentally. A large percentage have murdered, raped, or attempted to murder someone. Most are violent. Those who aren't learn to keep quiet. All understand Darwin's law: only the strong survive.

These men come into this situation carrying their pasts with them. They are being punished through the most vicious form of punishment man could conceive. They are treated like children, and like punished children, they become bitter. And the bitterness grows like a weed, suffocating every other thought and emotion. Surely that bitterness will be among the items taken back to the street with them—tell me, how does that benefit society?

Imagine the environment that exists in prison. Imagine what men are subjected to, not occasionally, but daily. Imagine your privacy, gone. Imagine everyone you love, gone. Now replace those things with concrete cells, steel bars, bad food that's poorly prepared, lots of attitude, guilt, and resentment. You live and breathe deceit and dishonesty because that's what you're taught. Every conversation, a chess match of duplicity: move, countermove. Nothing is what it seems.

People do not live in prison, they die... slowly.