

Eyes wide in a field of Haze

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My ear was ringing. I was off balance as I turned; the side and back of my head on fire. My target momentarily forgotten, I repositioned myself and swung my fists fiercely at the faceless opponent who had managed to attack from my blind spot. I make contact, and down he goes. Almost immediately, a mace grenade detonates two feet away from me, and I'm half blind and unable to breathe. I'm overwhelmed by two incoming attackers, but only momentarily; two more *Southsiders* have now engaged with my opponents. We regain the upper hand, but not before I go down twice and the mace mixed with the blood running from the gash above my eye causes me to stumble. I look around, and all I can see through the grenade smoke haze and burn are the shapes and silhouettes of scores of men in full hand-to-hand combat. Some are no longer standing; just being pounded on the ground. This short recollection accounts for roughly 10 seconds of a prison race riot. I can close my eyes, or stare at a fixed point for a moment, and I can easily raise this memory and recall countless others on impulse. I remember thinking to myself: Wow, this really is a part of my life now. This wasn't a horrible dream, it was real. Had I been asked when I was in my teens or early twenties if I could picture myself in prison, I would have laughed and reassured the person asking the question, that I would never put myself in that situation- so, simply put: no, I couldn't imagine myself in such a predicament. The cliché: "never- say-never", would have clearly applied to such a conversation. Such a scenario would have been unthinkable, but as my life and fate is testimony to, it was not just absolutely a possibility, it's my reality.

I was 27 years old when my troubles began. I could've easily been described as an intelligent, driven, caring, and loving father. At 34, I still am. My daughter still rules my heart and means the world to me; I would take the shirt off of my back for a friend in need; I do not give up easily; and I still believe that knowledge is power and education is the only true means to a successful future. These virtues perhaps may mean little to nothing to the next man in here, but they are an unchanging part of me. Things I manage to hold on to, and will continue to hold on to throughout my journey. These, among others, are the things that make me a good man, despite my mistakes. I refuse to succumb or exemplify the theory of secondary deviance; where the deviant label and role given to me is internalized. Rather, I am one of many who fit the description and definition of primary deviance; we did violate a norm, but reject the deviant label and maintain the concept of who we really are. We are men who are simply trying to amend and pay our debt to society, with the hope of one day taking that second chance given to us, and build a new life. For many, that second chance is years and sometimes decades away. This is an unfortunate reality in many cases.

The place I'm forced to call home is a crowded one. It is no wonder, since more seem to arrive and stay, than leave. I remember a conversation I had with another inmate a few years back, through the grate of the ventilation shaft that fed my cell. I was attempting to gauge my new neighbor through small talk, when I asked him what he was incarcerated for. I had tactfully timed my inquiry in the middle of our conversation, when I asked: "Hey neighbor, I'm sure you'll slide me your paperwork later, but if you don't mind me asking, what are you busted for?" To which he replied: "Theft", and after a short pause, "well, actually burglary. That's what the court said anyways." It sounded just about right to me. I had seen him come in- and pegged him for an addict. What I didn't expect was what he said next, when I asked: "How much time did they give you?" To which, with dejection in his voice, he replied: "Life. They gave me 25 to life. I'm washed up." I turned around toward my cellmate, who was also listening attentively, with a perplexed and inquisitive frown on my face; I had to ask: "What on Earth did you steal, or who did you steal it from?" I could sense the embarrassment in his voice when he told me: "I was walking down the street; I saw a garage door that was left open, and I took one of those gardening machines- the one with the propeller that cuts the grass." It was exactly what you're thinking. He had stolen a weed whacker from a garage. His paperwork confirmed it later, and it's the cruelest joke I've ever heard or seen since. I could not help but laugh, although I truly pitied him. I can only hope that his sentence has been modified since. He'd be a shoe in for one of the recent sentencing laws passed here in California. These laws have only emerged because of the overcrowding crisis and federal mandates to reduce the prison population. However, it's very common to see someone come in on a first term with 13-15 year sentences for crimes in which no one was actually hurt, or 6 year sentences for receiving stolen property, like one of my current neighbors.

The young convicts are perhaps the most tragic. They are mostly minorities, and come from the bottom of the social class ladder. There will be no rehabilitation for these young minds. There is no true rehabilitation for most in general. Based on my observations and personal experiences, I can honestly assert the opinion that excessive prison term sentences are more detrimental to the rehabilitation of an offender, than more moderate and reasonable ones. The tricky question becomes: What is reasonable? Surely the crucial factor is the type of offense committed, and the harm (if any) actually inflicted. However, I wonder: Should the act of punishment for a deviance outweigh the effort to rehabilitate on our scales of justice? Which is more important and serves a greater good? Which will actually benefit society as a whole in the long run? I can only state with certainty what I witness firsthand. I have seen patterns of behavior that show that terms of more than 5-7 years produce more negative, rather than positive results. Even the most determined person can become "institutionalized" after 5 years. Once institutionalization has set in, the role of deviant is fully internalized, and a prisoner's primary concerns revolve around the prison culture. This is especially true for those who are incarcerated at an early age; lack even the most basic education when they come in, and fail to receive one while incarcerated. A lengthy term of incarceration effectively alienates a prisoner from society- the real world; where we are expected to one day return and succeed or perform accordingly. Once the prisoner's socialization is complete, the criminal norms are fully assimilated. I can assure the reader, that the mental change is not in a positive direction. There is a fundamental change in a person's perspectives. When eventually

released many return, it seems, from another planet into a world that has moved on without them, and they come to realize that the real world is actually now the alien planet. Important social ties are severed, relationships are stressed or ruptured and lost; real world experiences are no longer relevant and/or outdated; and what use to be modern is now obsolete. Not to mention that the now "alien" walks around with a sign around his/her neck that reads: "ALIEN!" In truth, that sign is a criminal record; the identifying mark and label of a convict. That label is the stigma that an ex-offender must carry for the rest of his/her life.

For the most part, I don't think society in general understands that a lot of us prisoners are not criminal masterminds, or inherently evil people. We are not a different species. Some of us were ordinary- typical citizens. We come from all walks of life, and despite the initial natural reluctance to accept that such a thing is possible in modern America; some prisoners are in fact innocent. My neighbor is one of these people, and throughout my "prison career", I have met others. But for the most part, the prison population does consist of those who were convicted for crimes they definitely committed. These crimes have two extremes: some that are petty or absurd, and those that are absolutely bizarre and simply awful. Some could've avoided prison with just a little help, while others without a doubt need to be kept away from society; but in between these two, you can always and easily find those who one day simply succumbed to difficulties or vices, erred in judgment and chose poorly, and as a result lost their freedom. One difficulty was exchanged for a greater and harsher one. The errant was removed from society, and placed on that other planet; where violence reigns supreme, and is not only accepted, but encouraged. It is in this environment of absolute criminality that a person who made a mistake is expected to be rehabilitated. The settings and conditions become a perfect arena for differential association to set in almost immediately. You must adapt, so it is a matter of survival to modify and simulate behavior in order to conform to your new environment. Some find from the very beginning, that in fact, this will not end well. The fact that you're automatically a part of a racial faction or gang upon arrival- providing automatic adversaries; your cellmate is twice a murderer; and the only interaction with the "rehabilitating" authorities consist of degradation and humiliating strip searches are only the first indicators. Inmates are herded in, and left to fend for themselves without any clear guidance or direction. It is the beginning of a long road ahead.

The actual journey through the enormous American prison-industrial complex is perhaps the least researched human experience. I form this opinion, from witnessing the failures of this colossal enterprise firsthand; especially here in California. If thorough research existed, especially firsthand experience from those affected, the failures would not be so significant. Implementing counter-productive sentencing guidelines, enacting policies that restrict or prevent access to programs, and the extreme indifference of prison authorities would not be so easily accepted. I have taken issue with educational opportunities, for instance. It is a widely accepted fact, that education significantly reduces the chance of recidivism. I have not yet distinguished the degree of illiteracy found in individual race groups, but illiteracy or lack of education is a predominant characteristic among the prison population. It

is a real problem. People who come from poor backgrounds, unstable households, and lack education are being thrown into an even more defeating environment than the one they already came from. It simply astounds me that policies that limit access to higher education are still in place today, despite the overwhelming evidence that contradicts them. For example: the Violent Crime Control Law Enforcement Act of 1994, made prisoners ineligible to receive Pell Grants for college education. The argument can be made that the Pell Grant was created for people precisely in our circumstances. This is a means-tested entitlement program, available to anyone who qualifies; we are not taking away or diminishing funding for other students. If taxpayer money is the concern; I'm sure a simple calculation would show that the cost to incarcerate an individual, especially in the context of the recidivism rates, far exceeds the cost to educate and give an individual the tools to be a successful member of society. These restrictions are simply illogical, and serve only one purpose: to keep the revolving door spinning. A 43.3% nationwide recidivism rate vs. a 5.6% rate for those who earn a degree cannot be a more compelling argument for greater access to education.

I can understand the concept, that society needs the "bad" to define the "good"; but if too much emphasis is placed on the "bad", I think any functionalist would agree that an imbalance is bound to occur. The term: "Prison Nation" should trouble society. The burgeoning growth of the prison-industrial complex here in the U.S. should not go unnoticed. I've heard rumors and read articles of other states that are now changing the visitation process and methods. They are introducing technologies to replace contact visits. Web monitors will replace physical face-to-face interaction with visitors. The benefit, they say, is efficiency. Benefit for whom? A web feed used as a supplement to the current and traditional visitation options is a great idea, especially for those imprisoned far from home, and whose family is unable to afford the travel; but as the only means or total substitution, it would only benefit the institutions and the companies that charge fees to connect the feeds. It would benefit the well-oiled machine, while further alienating those incarcerated. The end result sought: efficiency, in this instance, does more harm than good. It almost seems like the framers of these ideas forget that we are human beings. Their business is the business of keeping humans captive, not penitence and rehabilitation. Penitence and rehabilitation I understand. A revolving door of captivity, I do not.

I have never truly voiced my frustrations. I have sought answers for myself. I wanted and felt the need to understand the world I currently live in. Not just assimilate it, but truly understand it; and those I cohabit with. Without being prompted by my "rehabilitators", I picked up a book, and then another, and then another. I spent my days peering through windows of other worlds; peering into the minds of others; and peering into other times. It wasn't enough. I wrote a community college, and was fortunate enough to be enrolled. I found that the Board of Governors Waiver still applies to me here in California. It waives the basic enrollment fees. That is the extent of the assistance for a prisoner. I have had to find the means to pay for all textbooks and materials; in addition to tuition costs, in the pursuit of my Business Bachelor's Degree. I began pursuing a degree in the social sciences, naturally, and expanded on that, with the goal of succeeding in society as an "ex-con" when my day finally comes. My

studies continue, and I'm actively enrolled in 3 different colleges/universities through the Voluntary Educational Program in my institution. Of course: voluntary, is the key word, and everyday I'm closer to reaching my self-imposed goals. I hope to get half of my Masters requirement before I go home. There are those who work within the institution who believe in change and their mission to make a difference in those who have erred in society. But in seven years, I can count those I've met on one hand; a handful out of thousands of correctional employees. I have said in the past, that when the gate opens for me, I would not look back. But as time passed, and I've not only seen but can understand the deficiencies that exist in this "planet", that would truly be a crime. There are people behind these electrified barb-wire fences that deserve a second chance; those that are not yet beyond redemption. These are the individuals that realize, the only direction after you've hit bottom, should be up. Someday, I hope to help a valid cause that gives these men and women a voice; that will give them opportunity. That is all many wish and wait for: an opportunity.

I have struggled, I have suffered, and I have lost much of what was precious to me. Along the way I have regrouped several times and tumbled over obstacles. I am stronger for it. I may have to wear that "Alien!" sign around my neck some day; but without a doubt, I'm a far better person today than I was yesterday. I will not allow a mistake to define the rest of my life. I have resolved to be the difference. I have found this resolve through will and a little bit of insight early on. I am one of few who have not allowed the institution's deficiencies to define my future thus far. The institution has and will continue to fail me and the rest, if it continues on the same path. If I can find the light at the end of the tunnel, and make it out; I feel an obligation to show others the way. We are human; we make mistakes. No matter how lost we may think we are, sometimes we just have to endure the burn and look beyond the haze to make sense of it all. There is life beyond the fence. We just need the chance to reach that other side, and live it.