

Mr. R [REDACTED] Hughes [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

A More Perfect Union!

When you make an observation, you have an obligation. These are words that I try to live by. It's what encouraged this article and hopefully what will inspire the commissioners' on the parole board to open their hearts, minds, and understand that people are capable of changing. In preparation for my December 2010 parole interview, I found myself questioning whether or not an equitable hearing can be conducted when the commissioners are only reviewing an inmate's personal file the morning of the hearing. An impartial discussion regarding my release should include several factors; the severity of my transgressions against society, risk assessment and probability of success in returning to the community. Without this context, the victims, as well as society would be left with answers that don't answer, explanations that don't explain, and conclusions that don't conclude. This ultimately opens the door for far-ranging criticism and controversial practices that many believe perpetuate a reign of error. The fundamental question therefore becomes whether or not the parole commissioners are able to determine which inmates serving indeterminate sentences of imprisonment should be released.

A parole board hearing may last somewhere between ten and twenty minutes. It is within this time frame that an inmate must state his or her case as to why they should be released. The pressure is immense and the stakes are way too high for us to have a flawed system. So if parole is truly about rehabilitation then there should be no problem analyzing the structure that currently exist.

Both supporters and skeptics on the state of parole must understand that the parole process should not be looked at in a vacuum. Inmates cannot afford to be narrow minded about the process. They must find a way to move beyond the naïve idea that the process of parole is simply about politics. If they are able to step out that box and understand the difficulty involved in being a parole commissioner, they will enhance their chances of receiving a favorable decision. If just for a second, imagine having the responsibility of determining whether or not an individual is ready to return to society. It is both a complicated and convoluted task. Yet, if inmates are somehow able to shift their perception of the commissioners and empathize with them, they may be able to better understand how to prepare for the most important moment of their lives.

When preparing for parole, inmates stand at a moment of great challenge and great opportunity. In order to do this, they must shift their attitude, and understand that commissioners have the tremendous responsibility of protecting our families, our community, and society. In all walks of life people are the instruments of their own destiny, for incarcerated individuals this rings more true. Inmates must figure out how they can redefine the relationship that exist between parole commissioners and themselves. That dangerous “us” against “them” attitude will come across in your parole hearing no matter how hard you try to mask it. For most inmates, this temperament has caused many to drift into the shallowest pool of expectation and anticipate a *hit*. If you truly want to stand on the side of responsibility, human dignity and freedom then you must do some dying. You must alter those old ideals and values that shape your current situation. If not, you will remain in the current crisis that you are in—a crisis in which you give parole commissioners total control of your future.

Yes, many inmates contain within themselves the contradictions of a troubled life—the good and bad of the community. However, your goal, from the moment you were convicted, should have been about making shifts in your behaviors and attitudes. Inmates must be determined to rise above their poor choices, and beyond the mentality that they will be hit just because of the politics. That self-defeatist attitude will only further normalize two-year hits—something we cannot afford.

On the other side of the coin, if we are to put parole in its proper context, it requires of us to not only understand the inextricable link between an individual who claims to have repositioned himself far away from the attitude which landed him in prison, but also, we must look at the principles and values of the parole commissioners who have been entrusted to make such crucial decisions. It must be remembered that parole commissioners are bound together within the same society; in many cases, they share the same beliefs and they both depend on the same reality. So the irony of this is that they should be held to the same criteria.

A parole decision should be premised on the idea of impartiality. It should entail the evidence of an inmate's remorse, things done to address the causes of a crime, the future plans of an inmate, and most importantly the likelihood of that person committing another criminal act. However, we all should be alarmed when Robert Dennison, a current New York State Parole Commissioner, states:

It is an easy job if you don't have the courage and you don't have compassion, because then you don't really care. And then it is easy to make whatever decision you want without feeling guilty, without feeling, 'Gee, maybe I made the wrong decision.'"¹

Mr. Dennison pushes the bar even further when he states:

¹ The New York Times, Convicted of Murder as Teenager and Paroled at 41, www.nytreprint.com, June 4, 2010

Many times, the parole commissioners' feel differently from the judge and probably say to themselves or say to one another, 'I don't really care what the judge gave the person, I don't feel comfortable letting this person out. And I am going to hold him for two more years.' And that can go on and on forever.²

This kind of practice, which some claim has been unfolding for years, is indeed problematic. As citizens, we would like to believe that the reasons we have parole hearings, is because the law, in its wisdom, knows that there are redeemable qualities in people who at one time committed unimaginable acts. It was Fyodor Dostoyevsky, the Russian novelist, who once said something to the fact that, 'if you want to know the true worth of a nation, all you have to do is look at how they treat the worst of their society—their prisoners.' Hence, if the prisoner represents, or is symbolic of, something in and about the nature of our society, we need to be more critical of those we entrust with making crucial decisions about the future of our incarcerated.

We need commissioners' who are not only principled, but are willing to seize the opportunity to devise new methods of rendering parole decisions. Ralph Waldo Emerson speaks directly to the importance of such when he states, "As to methods there may be a million and then some, but principles are few. The man [commissioner] who grasps principles can successfully select his own methods, [but] the man [commissioner] who tries methods, ignoring principles, is sure to have trouble." By our nature as rational, conscious creatures, the one thing both parole commissioners and inmates can control is the mind-set with which they respond to each other. For if we dare to see our society as a body politic, where all parts of our society are working together for the common good, then our ideas of an enlightened form of rehabilitation demands that we enforce a kind of parole process that restores rather than destroys. We cannot

² The New York Times, *Convicted of Murder as Teenager and Paroled at 41*, www.nytreprint.com, June 4, 2010

strengthen one segment of the population and ignore the other. The prisoner must be considered as a potential citizen in order to strengthen the quality of our society as a whole and to form a more perfect union.