

Love Me Into Helping Myself:

THE VIRTUES OF EXTRA-PENAL SUPPORT

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I'm in prison. I don't mean this figuratively either. I'm literally in prison. I'm wearing a prison uniform, I'm surrounded by convicted criminals, I'm monitored by badge-heavy correctional officers, and the words "Lumberton Correctional Institution" have to be included in the return address of every letter that I mail out.

I'm locked up and locked out of society, and I've been this way for a while now. Actually, I've been living in this human kennel for almost eight years now. I'm sort of like Tim Robbins' character in the movie *Shawshank Redemption* – except I'm black, I haven't escaped, there's no dreary voice that randomly narrates my life, and... well... I actually exist. Other than that, you can't tell the difference.

Needless to say, because of my current situation I'm very abreast of prison mechanisms. I've been incarcerated since the age of nineteen, and I've become quite aware of how prison functions, especially here in the state of North Carolina. I'm also aware of inmates themselves – more specifically, what it takes to keep inmates from becoming inmates again after they've been released.

No, I'm not talking about swimming through a sewage pipe during a thunderstorm, Tim Robbins - style. Nor am I referring to the traditional route of inmate reform – enrollment in a bunch of classes that fall under the "rehabilitative programs" umbrella. This route simply sucks. The huge holes in this umbrella have decreased its effectiveness tremendously; at the very best it's akin to putting a Dora the Explorer Band-Aid on the fresh limb amputation known as criminality.

In other words, you don't prevent inmates from becoming inmates over and over again by simply enrolling them in brick masonry, electrical wiring, GED, or watered down narcotics anonymous and anger management classes. It doesn't work. It rarely has, and it rarely will. These sorts of classes are necessary, not sufficient, components of reforming people like me. (Most recidivists took these classes THE LAST TIME that they were in prison, so obviously these classes alone won't suffice.)

When I say that I know what it takes to keep inmates from becoming inmates again after they've been released, I'm referring to one factor in particular. This one factor serves as the foundation of rehabilitation. Better yet, it serves as the foundation of *habilitation* (you can't *RE*habilitate people that have never been habilitated to begin with). The effectiveness of the traditional route – rehabilitative programs – depends entirely on the availability of this one factor, and sometimes this factor alone is enough to keep inmates from embracing criminality once they get out.

This one factor is the sugar of the habilitation cake, the crust of the prison reform pie, and the chocolate of the anti-crime chocolate chip cookie (I REALLY like chocolate chip cookies, by the way), and it's known as *extra-penal support*. In my first book, *A Convict's Perspective: Critiquing Penology and Inmate Rehabilitation*, I define extra-penal support in two parts: 1) care and support that an inmate receives from non-incarcerated people, and 2) the inmate's interpretation of this care and support as love.

This latter part is very important. Many inmates receive care and support, but sometimes it doesn't qualify as extra-penal support because the inmates who are receiving it are too socially and emotionally underdeveloped to realize that it is love. Many of them interpret it as something else entirely. They often believe that the people who provide such care and support are doing so because they're supposed to, and these

inmates frequently get angry when provisions aren't done to their liking. These guys still have a few personal demons to conquer and a few lessons to learn, and focusing solely on their habilitation is like trying to catch a stray dog by yourself with no tools; you'll try and try and try, but you won't be successful and sometimes you'll step in dog crap.

However, the inmates that are developed enough to interpret care and support as love are the ones who are on the verge of being reformed. In their eyes, this care and support is often the first time that they've received love and knew that it was love they were receiving. This conscious reception of love serves as a self-fertilizing, positive-living "seed" which gets planted in the fertile intellectual land that's between these inmates' ears.

The seed grows and flourishes, eventually becoming an extra-penal support "tree" that shades the inmates' minds and hearts from prison's harsh rays of criminality. This tree enables the inmates to see clearly. It enables them to observe and feel the gravity of their situation and the importance of making a change in their lives; and by "change" I mean abandoning the crime life and embracing a positive and legal lifestyle. The act of receiving love while at their least lovable makes these guys want to reciprocate. This act makes them want to show love to those that have loved them. It makes these inmates want to fulfill their loved ones' expectations and not let them down. I've seen this play out exactly in this manner every time that all of the right extra-penal support "pieces" were in their proper places. Extra-penal support makes inmates believe that people are investing in them and counting on them for a return, and knowing that people have this kind of faith in them makes inmates have faith in themselves.

Unfortunately, North Carolina prison's administrative procedures act as chain saws, primed and ready to cut down these extra-penal support trees. These common procedures consist of a variety of techniques that are deployed to demolish this fruitful flora, yet they're the standard operating procedure for every facet of this prison system. As a result, these facets actively hinder the transmission of the extra-penal support that is a prerequisite for an inmate's personal evolution and is the cornerstone of reforming incarcerated criminals, according to concrete empirical evidence.

For example, the Division of Adult Correction has completely banned conjugal visits. Studies across the nation have shown that conjugal visits for prisoners lessen forced homosexual acts, help maintain a more civilized prison environment, curtail harmful isolation from the outside community, lower tension levels, diminish attacks on correctional officers, reinforce gender-appropriate roles, and preserve meaningful marriages. They are by far the most impactful vehicles for transporting extra-penal support, yet this state is expending tremendous energy and resources to ensure that these "vehicles" are nonoperational.

On top of this travesty of habilitation, the Division of Adult Correction has shortened the duration of *home passes* from forty-eight hours to twenty-four hours (home passes are exactly what their name implies, and they are meant to help well-behaved inmates who are close to being released get readjusted to the free world). It has also applied tremendous upward pressure to the price of one fifteen-minute phone call – five years ago these calls were less than ninety cents, but today they're over three dollars. (Note that inmates have been getting paid just forty cents a day for janitorial work since the 1950s.) This prison system has sought to restrict every avenue that our loves ones use to show us love. It has blocked the transmission of extra-penal support at

every turn, as if this support is a basketball that our loved ones are trying to shoot and the penal system is a seven-foot tall NBA player.

I won't even go into the long, drawn-out, and intrusive applications that visitors now have to fill out and get approved (they used to simply sign their names and show their identifications to come see us), the visitors who are denied visiting privileges if their drivers licenses expire, the skyrocketing price of postage (admittedly not the prison system's fault, but still a factor restricting extra-penal support nonetheless), the privatization and over-complication of the means used to send inmates money, and all of the other ways that the Division of Adult Correction discourages free people from loving us in the most productive way.

It's as if they don't realize that inmates turn to gangs in the absence of extra-penal support. It's like prison system officials in Raleigh don't understand that prisoners gamble in card games to win money when their families don't send it to them (you can only imagine what happens when an inmate can't pay his gambling debts). These administrators act as if they don't know that convicts are more susceptible to criminal dispositions when they're deserted by their loved ones, and that detainees without love get sucked into the black hole-like prison vortex when they don't have love to keep them deeply rooted and firmly anchored.

I really don't get this. I'm not a nut job. I'm not a radical anarchist nor am I a dramatic conspiracy theorist obsessed with proving stuff that isn't real. Yet I can't help but feel like this system's architects and orchestrators are against me -- I'm referring to people like Nicole Sullivan, George Soloman, Frank Perry, W. David Guice, and an array of prison superintendents, just to be clear. I can't shake the very palpable and intense feeling that these people (amongst many others)

don't want people like me to become decent citizens who live lawful and productive lives. I've tried to shake this feeling, but I just can't.

The only thing that I can do to combat this feeling is to share my concerns with you. Rather than fight the non-winnable fight against this powerful feeling and wage a non-winnable war against this prison system's anti-extra-penal support inclination, I would prefer to do something more logical and impactful: reach out to you. This is my only reasonable route of action in the face of these seemingly hopeless circumstances. (My situation is so hopeless right now that I even needed help asking you for help; isn't that pathetic!?!)

I hate crime, I hate prison, and I hate hurting people or seeing people get hurt unnecessarily, so please help me avoid this path. I don't want to be bad or cause fruitless trouble, nor do I want to get "prisonized," so please help me avoid this fate; I'm begging you. Help me avoid the dark cloak of mindless criminality that this place is constantly trying to drape over my shoulders. I feel like I'm in the 1980s movie *The Blob*, except I don't have a mullet or stonewashed jeans, and instead of a massive ball of slime trying to engulf me, it's an equally dangerous ball of illegality.

I can't fight this huge ball alone. I need help. I need you to love me until I know that I'm worth the fight, and that I have potential. I'm on the verge of getting drafted into "gladiator school," and this is not what I want (nor is it what future crime victims want). I need someone to constantly remind me that self-actualization, success, and social productivity are all possibilities for me. Basically, I need support – *extra-penal support*.

I know I'm considered a bad person because I'm locked up. I know I've been convicted of a crime, and so has everyone else in here with me. I hear the negative

rhetoric surrounding people like me. I know what the media says. (We're scum, we should be locked up forever, we're evil, and so on and so on...) I understand this, trust me I do. People often respond to pain by demonizing the source of the pain, which too often has been people like me. I get it, I really do.

However, I also understand the effects of injecting the "prison poison" into inmates' veins. I see the addictions to heroin-like forms of crime and I see the angry episodes of withdrawal when crime-addicts try to go clean. I see the needles, infected with toxicity, being shared amongst convicts, spreading the disease of lawlessness – which makes going clean so much harder. I know that infected crime-addicts have victimized more than one person and they will victimize more people upon their release if extra-penal support is withheld from them. I implore you to help inmates stay out of this category.

If you are a humanitarian, act on the words that you are reading. Do what you can do to prevent the North Carolina Department of Public Safety/Division of Adult Correction from creating more hoodlums, crime-addicts, and thugs. Write to an inmate; comment on his work; exchange ideas with him; send him pictures; go visit him. Invest in his emotional and intellectual future and then wait to be impressed by the return.

Everyone who calls this societal waste-basket(~~prison~~)home needs extra-penal support, especially Incarcerated Thinkers with broken spirits, sore "emotional legs," heavy hearts, and hungry minds. So allow my writings to motivate you to show an inmate the love that his spirit craves. Do so for the sake of society, for the sake of promoting a sense of safety in our nation, and for the souls who are currently straddling the fence that separates legal living from lawlessness.