

Young, Poor, Black, Male (Potentially Dangerous), and Irrelevant

If you can imagine being 19, innocent, yet found guilty by a jury of any and everything but your peers, and subsequently sentenced to a 120 years in prison; then perhaps you can understand the deep seated place of pain this essay comes from. However if you are incapable of such an imaginative leap, which most people are, then I fear that what I write will only be connected lines of text that our brains recognize as sentences.

Shackled with the circumstances above I entered the behemoth of modern day social control known as the Texas prison system feeling emotions that I would only find words to describe when I read Victor Frankl's "Man Search For Meaning", about his experience in a Nazi concentration camp. If you are thinking "can modern day American prisons really be that bad?" The answer is yes. Although this is something you will never know unless you have the unfortunate luck of becoming a resident, as the gates, guard towers and razor wire are not only meant to keep the inmates in, but the public out.

After stepping off a converted white school bus I arrive at what the state calls diagnostics to be classified, basically the equivalent of a human filing system. Here supposedly veteran administrators try to separate big crazy, from moderate crazy, and just a little crazy to determine which of the states', one hundred and eleven prisons they will warehouse you at. For me it was determined that I should be housed at the Coffield Unit, a red brick 4,500 man 1960's era prison three hundred miles from my nearest family member that had once been described by Time magazine as the worst in Texas. So even though this was my first time in prison, or first rodeo as the inmates call it when those veteran administrators in the classification looked at me, I can only assume they felt, "Big crazy", and classified me as such.

What I discovered at Coffield was the sad truth that human beings require very little to physically survive, which is what we were provided the bare minimum in space and necessities.

After pushing the very real fear of assault or bodily injury out of my mind as much as possible. I focused my attention on dealing with the callousness and gruffness of the guards and the hostility of the inmates. Inmates who feel it's their duty to make your induction into prison life as harsh and hard as it was for them.

A part of the new arrival ritual consist of having men with harden eyes and cold stares looking you up and down for any signs of weakness. After enduring anywhere from a few days to a week of silence from your fellow inmates someone will eventually approach you with the two most important questions in prison. Number one, "where you from", and two, "who you with?" Translated are you in a family, what gangs are called in prison.

To the first question my answer was, "Houston," and to the second, "I'm solo," meaning no gang ties. Usually you only shared this information with one or two dudes and they would take it upon themselves to spread it to who ever they felt needed to know. If you are African American the person that approached you would be another African American, the same for whites and hispanics. American prisons are extremely racialized and hotbeds of racism, perpetrated by the inmates and guards.

Once my initial interrogation ended the waiting began. The other inmates will wait and watch you to see what type of person they feel you are, which will inturn determine what social class you will be grouped into. They are watching for things like if you try to make friends too soon (if so you probably scared), do you get up everyday to take a shower, (a test to see if you are a clean person who probably had some type of life in society, as opposed to a drug addict or bum who generally could care a less about good hygiene), if you make commissary (a measure of family support), visits and so forth.

Durning this time I began to learn the universal convict rules; mind your own business,do your own time,don't accept things from people you don't know,on the cell blocks don't look into anyone's cell,if someone challenges you for whatever reason you have to rise to the occassion regardless of the consquences,don't pop off at the mouth if you can't or won't back it up.Overall I learned prison is a completely different world unlike anywhere out in society.In here the guards have absolute power and their word is the gospel.

These were the rules I learned doing time.I also discovered that the prisons in Texas,Louisiana,Georgia etc still operate under a slavery type system and mentality.Majority of the workforce is white,while the bulk of the inmates are black,and it's not uncommon to hear many inmates still refer to correctional officers as,"Boss".Another glaring example of this southern slave mentality is the field labor system.

Field labor consist of work crews of between 40 and 75 inmates called "Hoe Squads"that go out into the countryside with hoes shovels and ax's to work the land.The men in these hoe squads line up in pairs of twos and walk out to the fields in long lines with a garden hoe on their right shoulders.Once they arrive in the fields at the work site they line up in a long straight line and work in tandem in a process called,"four stepping".The inmate at the front of the line is called the lead row,while the one at the end of the line is called the tail row.These inmates sing work songs and count in cadence.While all this is happening correctional officer called,"Cowboys"are mounted on horseback with pistols and shotguns supervising these work crews.Really this is something that most people have to see to believe.

The field squad was my first job in the penitentiary and it was the most degrading experience I ever had in my life.I just couldn't believe that in the 21st century in the richest,supposedly most humane country in the world a system harkening back to the pre-antebellum south is being allowed to exist.

In the 16 years of my unjust detention I've witnessed one hardship and constitutional violation after another. From mental health patients left untreated until they lash out and hurt themselves, or someone else to healthy guys dying from minor illnesses. Staff assaults and the inevitable cover-ups, all the way down to seeing men giving up and beginning to live and act like the animals that society says we all are.

And though my journey through his house of horrors is far from over as I continue to fight for a semblance of justice. Sometimes I often wonder how have I been able to make it? How I've been able to to earn my GED, 3 college degrees, write 12 books, blog, and stay out of AD-Seg, and keep from being hurt or having to physically hurt some to protect myself? Because if you had been the places I've been, or witnessed the things I've within this penal institution then I'm quite certain that you would agree with me when I say, "but for the grace of God, there I go."

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