

## **DOES PRISON MAKE PEOPLE WORSE? (The Education Question)**

What my 20+ years of imprisonment has taught me is that prison is a cruel, neurotic tiger that is bent on destroying you. This animal, this beast that I live in, thrives on the illogical and irrational impulses of its wavering political objectives. For one election cycle it's Let's-Get-Tough-On-Crime, with the end result being prison overcrowding and shortages on basic resources (such as education and rehabilitative programs). The next election cycle, it's We-Need-To-Build-More-Prisons, with more prisons being built and even more of a shortage on basic resources for prisoners. Eventually, prisons become these vast warehouses where guys just sit around all day, waiting, sometimes 5 or 8 or 10 years, until they become eligible to participate in a vocation or a rehabilitative program that may be a prerequisite to their re-integration into society. And while confined to these crowded warehouses, guys are suffering from the deterioration of close family ties and subjected to the systematic decay of the Social and Intellectual self.

But what are prisoners doing while waiting to participate in a program that is supposed to help with their rehabilitation and transition back into the outside world?... Nothing. They are attempting to outrun or wrestle with this cruel, neurotic tiger.

Some of us are "self-starters"— meaning that we find ways to better ourselves beyond what prison resources will offer us. About ten years ago, I requested to take the Barbering vocational class that was available at the prison I was previously housed in. I was told that I was "ineligible" to take the class because of my sentence structure— I'm serving a Life sentence (where I won't see parole until I'm 101 years old). I had already completed my HSED (High School Equivalency Diploma), so what else was left for me for to do in prison, in terms of education? There was nothing. Being the stubborn self-starter that I am, I found someone (a female CEO of a national communications conglomerate) who was willing to pay for me take college correspondence courses through the Ohio University. So for two years, while working at the prison's textile shop, I spent my free time studying and completing my college correspondence courses, learning basic Psychology, Sociology, Economics and English Comprehension.

With all the studies and scientific data that show strong correlations between education and low recidivism (re-offending) rates, why didn't the prison pay for my correspondence courses? There is very little government funding for continued education for prisoners. Besides offering basic education (High School Diploma), most of a prison's education budget is extremely limited. If a guy has a Life sentence, or even a lengthy sentence of 20 years or so, then we are shut out of all educational opportunities. We are told to get a job (usually, something menial) and shut up and sit down.

If education gives people Life, Perspective, Self-Confidence, Enlightenment, A-Reason-Not-To-Do-Stupid-Shit, then why isn't continued education in prison a hardlined requirement?

Funding can't be the only reason why more educational opportunities aren't offered. It may be that society does not want prisoners to actually become "smarter" while serving time. I've actually heard civilian prison staff express concern about prisoners being allowed to get college degrees. *"We shouldn't be using tax-payer dollars to reward them for committing crimes!"* a civilian prison staff once said. When I heard this, it didn't surprise me at all because I'm sure, as backwards as the logic is, most people in the outside world feel this way about educating prisoners. Why should a murderer or a violent thief go to prison and get a "free" education (college degree) while a person in the outside world has to bust their butt and work hard to pay for a college tuition? The problem with framing the question of education in this manner is that it isn't about giving a prisoner an "advantage" or a *reward*, in terms of making them smarter through continued education; it's about putting prisoners on a level playing field. It's about breaking the cycle where a convict believes that his or her only recourse, once released back <sup>in</sup> your neighborhood, is to rob you or steal from you or to be a reckless hazard to your children and your community.

Who would you rather live across the street from? Ex-Con #1, who was just released after 20 years and has only a certificate in Janitorial Services and completed an 8-week Anger Management class (both of which were accomplished in the final 18 months of his sentence)? Or Ex-Con #2, who was just released after 20 years and has a Bachelor's Degree in the Social Sciences, plus a boatload of college credits which he accumulated over the span of his entire prison sentence?

Ex-Con #1 does have a vocation at least. He could become a janitor at a school... wait, no, he likely won't be hired at a school or a hotel or any established business because he is an ex-con. With a criminal history, it will be difficult to overcome that stigma and actually get a decent job utilizing his janitorial skills. How will Ex-Con #1 adjust out in the world? What has he been doing while serving his 20-year sentence? The last 18 months of his sentence he was crammed with the rehabilitative programs offered by the prison. But what was he doing in the 18 years that preceded the "benefits package"? More than likely, if he wasn't a self-starter, he was busy either trying to outrun or wrestle with the cruel, neurotic tiger that prison is. He has 18 years experience of being dehumanized and dragged about and devoured by the tiger. With his severe career limitations and the psychological toll he may have suffered, would you be okay with this guy living across the street from you?

Ex-Con #2 definitely has more options, career-wise, once he is released. He has an established college degree. And he likely has experienced far less psychological trauma during his 20-year bid because *he* has maintained a more consistent and redeeming routine where education was a mainstay. He hasn't had as much time to get tangled into the machinations of the cruel, neurotic tiger. He has spent his time building, day-by-day, a way to actually succeed once he's outside of those walls. With more options to choose from, what reason does he have to return to a life of crime? Not only that, but what benefit does *society* gain by having someone like Ex-Con #2 back into the community?— His experience and knowledge can be utilized to help other troubled youth from taking the dreaded detour to prison. His education could actually curtail crime within his community.

So how does society pay for the continued education of prisoners? Well, the Warden at the prison I'm currently housed in currently makes \$99,000 per year. So if the tax-payers of Wisconsin are okay with prison Wardens making close to six-figures a year, then we should be able to sit down and figure out how to create more positions for teachers and educators within these environments.

First, the entire culture of the criminal justice system has to shift from Punishment-Is-The-Goal to Education-While-Being-Punished-Is-The-Goal. When judges are sentencing the convicted, a term of education should be linked to the sentence: "*I hereby sentence you to*

*serve 20 years in prison, concurrent with a term of 10 years of continued education."* And prisons, the facilities that enclose us, must become places of learning and treatment rather than bastions of cruel and extreme discipline. The tiger should be a firm and loving beast that only bares its fangs when we are misbehaving or not taking our education seriously.

One suggestion I have is to create a hybrid position where teachers are hired as prison guards, or young prison guards are given the option to further their education (as educators), on the state's dime, with a commitment to then work in a position as prison guard/teacher. I don't know if such an idea would cross some type of union line (with the Teacher's Union), but something new and pioneering has to be done to tie in education with our imprisonment. If a prison guard, who maybe makes \$30K a year, is given an opportunity to receive their own free higher education and make an additional \$7K/year while working in the hybrid position, then more staff would be incentivized to help educate prisoners. A hybrid position would eliminate the need of having additional security staff in the school departments of the prisons. No extra security staff needed because the educators are also the security staff.

A more feasible and cost-saving suggestion is to allow us to utilize the benefits of current technology (iPads, tablets, laptops, etc...) where prisoners can access online college correspondence courses, or to participate in virtual classrooms. We are, particularly in the prisons in Wisconsin, completely shut out of these forms of technology. Even with companies out there that screen and limit which sites and what specific content we can access, the prison administration is still deathly afraid of allowing us to learn in this manner.

The social dialogue needs to begin now, about continuing to educate prisoners (beyond just a basic education) and how education must trump discipline. This is what is needed to effectively curtail crime and to begin to eliminate the cold and heartless brutality that occurs in prisons everyday.