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Essay No. 2

The focus of this essay concerns the devaluation of human life in a prison setting. Human beings have a penchant for division, creating endless us versus them scenarios in the mind to justify any conduct or decision that would be otherwise unacceptable.

In the United States the demonization of "the criminals" is longstanding. But we forget that criminals are human beings too. Human beings who broke the law but also who still feel pain, sadness and despair. Who still dare to dream, hope and aspire to better things in life. We are a country that teaches our children never to intentionally harm fellow humans, but who also take great pleasure in tormenting "criminals" and openly relish in executions of condemned persons. Particularly prolonged executions.

Over time our courts have endorsed this hypocrisy by providing immunity to law enforcement officials or erecting insurmountable challenges before any relief can be obtained. Our legal system is awash with decisions where cruelty, abuse,



and yes even murder have been excused so long as the victim was a "criminal".

On May 1, 2010 at the federal supermax in Florence, Colorado where I am housed Mr. Jose Martin Vega wrapped a sheet around his neck and committed suicide. In the months preceding his death, Mr. Vega exhibited a litany of bizarre behaviors. He filed a lawsuit claiming physical and sexual abuse, contamination of his food, and encouragement to commit suicide. He was placed into restraints for days, threatened suicide and eventually became emaciated losing over 50 pounds from not eating. Through it all he was kept alone in his solitary confinement cell.

In 2012 the family of Mr. Vega sued the ADX prison's warden for failing to act to prevent the suicide. The warden sought to dismiss the case claiming immunity and feigning ignorance of Vega's distress despite numerous suicides that preceded Vega's. The presiding federal judge was not moved by the ruling argument and refused to dismiss the case. The warden appealed.

On July 22, 2014 three federal appellate judges reversed and ordered the case dismissed on a technicality. Inherent in this ruling is the principle in prisoner rights law that any awful thing that



occurs in a prison is not subject to the same rules and standards of any other type of case. This is because courts have endorsed secrecy in the operation of prisons, enshrined protection of law enforcement no matter the circumstances, and eviscerated the basic decency afforded humans who venture into our prisons by virtue of poor decisions or unfortunate mistakes.

The Vega family will receive nothing but a dead body. No just compensation for their loss, not even an apology. Nothing will change because of how he lived or how he died. Because our society had taken the value of his life long before he took his life.

As the world copes with a rash of police shootings in Ferguson, Mo; New York, and Los Angeles society must understand not just the facts of these tragic events but the history of law enforcement's evolving immunity from any responsibility for harm done those human beings who are labeled criminals. As long as our society gives greater value to the lives of some over that of others, and renders permissible conduct for some that is unlawful for others we will continue to devolve into an inequitable country. None of us should forget that every life is precious and noone is above the law not even



and especially not the police whose sole responsibility is to enforce the law not to be exempt from its provisions.

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