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The Correctional Writer's Initiative
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THE PRISON VEIL

An Essay

by

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I am known to the state of South Carolina, as "INMATE #330923", but my given name is Jaime Eduardo Marrero--and I was once known to the Navy as Aviation Machinists Mate Petty Officer Second Class Air Warfare Designee Jaime Marrero --but, I became a "ward" of the South Carolina Department of Corrections at the age of twenty-six, on the 28th day of September, 2008.

I was sentenced to serve 100 percent of a 38 year imprisonment! I can remember my first day at "Kirkland R&E", the processing center for SCDC, Located at the Kirkland Correctional Institution, here in Columbia.

I believe that it would take a truly deranged individual not to go through a SHOCK upon entering a prison (any prison) as a resident elect--knowing that they are being taken to their new "home" for the duration of whatever sentence has been imposed upon them by the judicial officer of the Court. All a new arrival gets to see is: razor-wire barriers, that cascade over tall fences, and reach the very ground on both sides, of each fence, on all sides--there are different levels of prisons, each adherent to different rules, regarding all types of prisoners: A level 3, maximum

security prison, in the state of South Carolina, has (get this) three fences, fences surrounding its perimeter, intended to prevent escape--or, as more recent, entry of outsiders bringing in drugs, or other contraband. Rovers, cheap, low-model Ford Rangers, and Club Car golf carts, circle the perimeter. These facts, and the weight from conviction (and sentencing) can be, and should be, a tremendous shock to a person's life all by itself.

Once inside of the "Reception and Evaluation" center--the process is similar to boot camp, or, at least, that seems to be their intention. Food is one of the first things you notice, when you don't have it, and food in prison is INTENTIONALLY terrible. The prisoners that cook it, usually steal the (already reduced to bare-minimum) seasoning issued to them for the meals, using what they take (e.g., onions, salt, pepper, etc.) to barter for items other prisoners--with money--purchase from the prison store, or, "Canteen" as the prison labels it.

Due to poor culinary etiquette: lack of training, negligent supervision from untrained officers, and pure laziness--the prisoners are not strangers to food poisoning, and other bowel disorders (prisoners call it "rot gut"). Unfortunately, MOST prisoners don't have the privilege to eat real food from the prison store every day--if any day. The prison store offers just about anything that a person could buy at a neighborhood gas station, except gas, alcohol, or tobacco, things like that. It's surprising to see some of the meals that prisoners can create in a microwave. I believe my favorite would have to be Chinese-style fried rice! Although, microwaved "fried" rice takes some ingenuity, patience, and determination to make; and you will surely make the prisoner waiting to use the microwave next after you, a little irked. The prison's store is a Godsend to those that are able to afford it. I have actually seen--a few--prisoners that NEVER eat prison food.

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There are all sorts of stories about the violence, and the rapes, internally throughout prisons; and when I started my own sentence, I was worried that I would have to fight and hurt someone as soon as I arrived at prison. But, to my surprise, I have not fought--except for three times within my decade of incarceration. Two of those happening, not in prison, but during my two-and-a-half years waiting for court at the county jail!

I'm not suggesting that prisons are not violent; because, they are! And extremely so. However, it's the gangs here that are mainly hostile towards each other. I have only heard of one situation at this institution that I am at currently (Broad River Correctional Institution, BRCI), in which a prisoner had been raped. Such violations, within my era of serving time, have been scarce. In my experience--thus far--it's a person's activities (or vices) that dictate the violence he may (or may not) have to endure.

I do not show fear to anyone, and most importantly: I mind my own business! A person that is overly concerned with another prisoner's activities will most certainly draw unwanted attention to himself; attention that often leads to violence.

I see prisoners fight and kill each other, as well as fighting the guards. Prisoners will unify to gain a stronghold on some illegal market; yet, ironically, they don't seem to care about the lack of access to proper education. It is because of this ignorance that this prison lifestyle will be allowed to perpetuate itself. Too many prisoners here are without a basic high school diploma, or GED. Existing at a grade-school level 5-7!

As a kid, I thought that the lifestyles that were depicted through music videos, and in movies, were cool; and I dropped out of school in order to pursue that "lifestyle" that my peers and I thought to be the thing to do.

A proper educational influence would have taught me otherwise.

I remember a sign posted in front of the prison, that revealed to visitors a claim that the South Carolina Department of Corrections, SCDC, believes in "rehabilitating and educating" its prisoners, along with keeping things safe. I will admit that different institutions do offer a limited amount of vocational training/trades, that a prisoner may learn; however, each prison is allotted only two trades (e.g., horticulture, bee keeping, etc.), we are not offered an actual education outside such trade certificates, and a General Education Diploma, GED (from a "school" that has no teachers, or any Education Dept. certified employee, at all, instead--it's run by other prisoners, and spends days, weeks, sometimes months at a time closed down). I have personally received four certificates in the Horticulture field, and I truly enjoy working with nature. I appreciate this Earth, and the opportunity to learn about it.

I am also learning the trade of bee keeping. I only wish that we could earn actual degrees, and continuing educational credits. Prisoners are allowed (pursuant to Federal laws) to earn limited degrees/diplomas through any kind of credible school with a correspondence course, but these have to be paid for by the prisoner, or the prisoner's family. Needless to say, not many prisoners can afford that--maybe five or six out of 1,500. Leaving little (or not) options for the latter. There are not grants--or anything--available to prisoners in my situation, that I know of.

Certain prisoners are allowed to earn wages (usually 0.50¢ per hour, with the state taking the rest of the minimum wage), but due to limited space, only a few can land such a job (40 or so out of 1,500); therefore making self-financed education impossible for most, if not all. And I believe therein lies the problems instigating violence. A lot of people here are indigent, and have quite literally--nothing. In turn, there is a lot of bitterness

and idle time. If prisoners—who are not trouble makers—could be afforded an opportunity to earn wages, I believe that prison violence would drastically decrease. Young and old men alike; they receive so many years of incarceration with no means of supporting themselves (or their family), so they turn to illegal activities, sitting around twiddling their thumbs, and getting high or drunk on homemade wine. I am a prisoner, but I too have a family and desires. All of us do not wish to continue living a life of crime.

Some prisoners never lived a life of crime to start with.

I once was a boy; but now I am a man!

I see bad people every single day, but I also see good ones. How can a person reform and rehabilitate, if he cannot sharpen his mind? How can a person reform without help, or opportunity? I am a prisoner because I have done wrong in my life, and I am reminded of that with each passing day as I awake to cinder-blocked walls, locked steel doors, and painted windows. I also see what idle time will get a person, and it seems like some of the prison system may be counting on that idleness—because recidivism keeps the prison business going. There's no money in rehabilitation; on the contrary, it takes money, and effort, to rehabilitate. Many administrators are still on team "DETENTION/CORRECTIONAL INSTITUTION", while some are now leaving behind that warehousing mindset to join the "REHABILITATION/DECREASE RECIDIVISM" team. There's a struggle going on right now between the two groups, with the former trying desperately to hold on to the warehouse.

In prison I have seen some really good programs for people of different religions. Institutions try their best to accommodate everyone's religious freedoms, to an extent. I have also met many good people that are NOT associated with the prison, but volunteer their time (and money) to bring us knowledge of faith in God and love. Good people that disregard the stereotypical fears of prison in order to share the word of God with us.

There's even a program in which qualifying (and chosen) prisoners enter into a two-year program in which they earn a degree in: theology. It is worth noting, however, that the prisons do not spend any money in this, all of the aspects, and supplies, associated with the degree, and the degree itself, are funded by the volunteers, and donations. Keeping a separation of church and state, after public complaints of tax money being spent to educate prisoners, and give them an associate degree.

I am currently part of a special prison-dormitory known as a Character-Based Unit, CBU; and this unit is funded by donations also. Citizens that have a special interest in changing the hearts of prisoners before they are released to become their neighbors, are able to help the program. This can be in the form of someone coming in to teach something, or simply give a donation of money, or teaching material(s), such as books. It creates a safe environment where prisoners can live civilized.

The Programs Warden, and the CBU Unit Manager that set this all up, fought an uphill battle of red tape and pessimism to get the CBU into a fully functioning programs unit. Team DETENTION/CORRECTIONAL INSTITUTION threw out obstacles at every opportunity; but, here we are. This very essay you now read is a product of a class here, called "CBU Scribe: Creative Writing", a product of "The Correctional Writer's Initiative, CWI"--a nonprofit started in 2009 by a prisoner that worked in the Education Dept., that helps prisoners in CWI, and CBU Scribe: publish essays, poems, short stories, and even books, memoirs, and screenplays. CBU Scribe focuses on introspective narration, as the instructor calls it. The writing is a proven therapeutic way to vent and grow emotionally and intellectually. Before this essay, I had to write about Franz Kafka and his ... "Metamorphosis".

I have no idea where my writing will go next.

It is not surprising to me, but it may be to others, to know that

prisoners are truly anxious to learn from these CBU classes. In my experience, the prisoners that do not strive to enter into these studies are always the ones that continue a criminal mindset. There are some requirements to live in this "Character-Based Unit", such as:

- * A prisoner must remain disciplinary free, no infraction within the last 12 months.

- * A prisoner must be able to get along with his fellow CBU community members; and in the event that any contention arises, the members should be able to talk it out amongst themselves--or, with the help of the community.

- * A member must attend classes, at least two of them.

These are just a few of many expectations, and standards. In some cases, a member, when confronted with a serious issue, that in other units would usually result in violence, will, instead, enlist the help of a CBU resident that has volunteered to be a Coordinator/Mentor to act as an arbitrator in resident disputes. CBU residents are allowed to "govern themselves" to a certain extent, with House Rules in place.

If the world could see these changes taking place, they might be more willing to relax their views of prisoners in order to allow more support for educating prisoners. It's said that 67 percent of prisoners at BRCI do not have a high school diploma, or GED--and for 8 months, this prison didn't even have a GED program in place except for what was going on in the CBU, led by the prisoners.

I have seen men come and go. The people that get out of prison, that that return, are the same ones I see that do not reform while incarcerated. They committed the same crimes that they practiced while free on the streets. It is always a controversy when a person gets released from prison and immediately commits another crime--especially one of the same nature.

Prisoners should be monitored by staff by written reports on their behaviors, and actions. This practice would ensure that all prisoners that get released are fit for society. It would separate who is who. Unfortunately no officers do these things, and some guards don't even like to walk around much for security checks, let alone to do paperwork. Some guards only want to hole their hand out for a paycheck. If there were reports done on a monthly (or bi-monthly) basis, a parole board would know who to really look at, and would not be so timid, and tight fisted, when it came to approving a prisoner to rejoin society early, or at all. With such reports, a board could better discern who is--and is not--eligible.

There are people who are at home in prison, love it in fact, and should never be allowed freedom, in any society; because their hearts are hardened and will never change. True criminals through and through.

At the same time, there are those that don't belong in prison AT ALL, guys that could have just been given probation. Some are innocent. Some are guilty of a lesser crime. Many have changed from who they were: 5, 10, 20 years ago! That's a long time, for anyone. You're not the same.

Prison should truly bring correction--in the form of rehabilitation through education--to a prisoner's behavior. In my experience "freedom" has been given a new meaning in my life. As a child, I felt that everyone owed me something, and I would stop at nothing to ensure that their debt was paid. Correction has worked for me! I did it myself. I believe that during my incarceration, the love that I have for my family has blossomed exponentially.

I see the pain that I have caused them, and it has devastated me. The bitter loneliness that one experiences, will compel a person to see the beauty in freedom. Small things, such as: sitting on your porch and watching the rain fall (our windows are painted over here; no rain, no sun, only dingy paint), or walking in the woods, on the grass, or listening to birds chirping without the view of razor-wire everywhere, or the feeling of satisfaction that you get after paying a bill, and just having free choices available to you. These are simple things that are greatly missed.

In life, we get so caught up in materialism that we end up outside of life, defined by our materials, our things! And when all of those possessions are gone, what does matter, or what should matter--shines like a beacon.

As a prisoner, we are allowed to do whatever the prison sees fit for the current circumstance. I have learned that the important things in life are not the things that we want ... they are the things that we do have, and just overlook.

If I am blessed to see free society again, I wish to help people open their eyes to the truth that we seem to forget, and that is that our moments are precious, and we should cherish their occurrences, and be thankful for them. I will live my life in proof, that a rose may indeed grow from concrete.

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