

In Development of a Criminal Mind

I'd just arrived at Massachusetts Correctional Institution Norfolk and I was as green as Saint Patrick. They don't transfer inmates any fresher than I was in that moment. On my second day at Norfolk, I came in from the yard and desperately needed to take a shower. I stripped off my sweaty garb, grabbed my shower bag and jumped in the rain box. I pulled the shower curtain closed - there are no doors on the showers in Unit 8-2 - and ran the water until it got hot.

As I scrubbed layers of filth off my body, I noticed an angry looking inmate standing in front of the shower. The shower curtains only come up four and a half feet and you can see over the top of them.

"You're in my shower, beat it!" said the angry looking guy standing there.

Even though we were making eye contact it took me a second to figure out he was talking to me.

"This is your shower?" I asked. I'm sure I looked and sounded a little incredulous.

"Why do you think that towel's hanging over the rail? You think that's a decoration?"

"Shit, my bad man. I guess there's not much I can do about it now."

There was a towel hanging over the rail. At this point the guy's looking at me like he wants to kick my ass, and I'll admit it, I was a little frightened.

When the cops first arrested me, and locked me up, I didn't know where I fit in. For those who've never been locked up, prison's this massive dichotomy of bizarre personalities and odd rituals. Coming in as an outsider, at every level of incarceration, it's overwhelming. When I first arrived at Plymouth County Correctional Facility in 2008, I was denied bail. Not a good feeling. I'd never done time before...I was lost. I decided to act out the part of what I thought a prison persona should be. First, I tried to be a tough guy, but I'm not that tough. Next, I tried to be a comedian, but I'm not that funny. Finally, in desperation to be something, I tried to be the distant loner, but I'm too plugged-in. After a couple months of trying to fake the funk, I decided to be myself. That's when I started doing my own time.

What a strange idea, doing your own time. Outside of prison you'd probably have no clue what I was talking about. In prison, however, the concept's as old as time itself. Think of the expression this way, don't drag other inmates into your petty issues,

never complain about the length of your prison sentence, and respect the next man. There are hundreds of rules that apply to inmates in prison, and "doing your own time" is only one. Therein lies the problem. When you're a new fish you learn each of the rules individually. I call it trial by getting punched in the face. If you break a rule, there's a good chance you're going to get punched in the face.

For example, there are certain words you don't say in prison. You never call another inmate a punk, rat, or a bitch unless you're ready to fight. White guys should refrain from using the "N-word" at all times around black guys, unless you're a gang member. Then it seems to be okay to use the "N-word" in the company of your fellow gang members even if you're white. In a similar vein, I've witnessed a white guy fight a black guy over the term "snow bunny." The white guy thought it was a derogatory reference towards white women.

There are other prison rules that seem somewhat random, but they're important to be aware of. If you lean over someone's food it's considered disrespectful. You might get a pass the first time, but the second time you're either going to get cuffed upside the head or punched in the nose. Never walk up on someone too fast. They'll think you're running up to fight. If you're standing behind someone who doesn't know you're there, cough, tap your foot, sing the theme some to "Welcome Back Kotter," but make them aware of your presence.

Sure, if you're lucky, someone like Tony, Paulie, or Charlie takes you under their wing and teaches you the A-B-C's of prison.

Eventually though, no matter how smooth you operate, you're going to make a mistake. And when that time comes, bam, bap, boom, you're going to get socked in the nose! That's prison.

After I got out of the shower I walked back to my cell and had a quick consult with my cellmate, Dave. The inmate whose shower I'd stolen had yelled "See me in thirty six when you get out!" and stormed off with his towel. My cellmate told me to lace up (my sneakers) and go meet this guy. He told me I'd have a lot more problems going forward if I didn't stand up for myself. Dave gave me a few more pearls of wisdom and sent me on my way.

As I walked across the tier to cell #36, I felt like I was getting ready to go to war, anything could happen. It didn't help matters that the guy I was going to fight was six feet tall, 250, bald, with a tattoo of a flaming skull on his throat. I'd had a fair share of fights over the years, but I'm not a brawler.

Inside the doorway of Cell #36 stood this big, mean, angry white guy. He motioned me into his cell like a Kung Fu Master.

"Come here," he said.

I walked into his cell with my palms facing forward.

"Listen man, we've got plenty of time to fight. Hear me out."

The big guy nodded; I took that as a sign to proceed.

"I just got here yesterday. I haven't been on this unit for two days and I'm already fighting with the locals. I wasn't trying to be disrespectful, I just didn't know that hangin' a towel over the rail meant you had next."

The big guy's expression shifted from one of anger to confusion. I could see his wheels turning as he considered my words. I'm not tiny myself, but he was prepared to fight so it didn't matter.

"You're that new?" he asked.

"Yup."

"Sit down, man, let's talk."

That's how I met Texas. He'd been at Norfolk for a couple of years and hated it.

We worked out our issue and ended up getting along after that. I wouldn't say we were friends, but we didn't hate each other.

Prison isn't a place where nice people survive. Being locked up around angry, violent, frustrated individuals doesn't foster feelings of warmth and coziness. Genuine relationships aren't created behind the wall. It doesn't matter how many educational or social programs we're offered, the atmosphere is poisoned by inhumanity. Where do you think these belief systems stem from? I'm not always sure what influences may have brought these people to prison, but prison is the ultimate influence in making these people ultra-violent. I'm sure

hundreds of thousands of men and women have been incarcerated over the years only to find the last piece of empathy inside them strip mined. It's a long, sad, slow song that society stopped listening to a long time ago.

Since I've been incarcerated - a little less than ten years now -- nothing has been given to inmates, and so much has been taken away. I'm not talking about laws relating to incarcerated persons, I'm talking about our way of life inside prison. You see, everything we enjoy in Massachusetts Department of Corrections is taken away in fractions. From our personal items to our personal freedom. This slow erosion takes place in the name of security, always in the name of security. It sounds rational, but it's not. And, with less satisfaction in life's small pleasures, prisoners harbor a staggering amount of resentment. The pattern becomes clearer when you witness the epidemic first hand. Prison heaps negativity on sons and daughters and churns them into granite blocks of sour butter. Once sufficiently angry and criminalized, we're sent back out into society to criminalize others.

The most compassionate person you've ever met would be less so after two years of confinement. Consider this, do you want these people mingling with you after they're released back into your community? Is this the man you want standing behind you at the gas station while you're waiting in line with your kids to buy a bottle

of water? Is this the woman you want to have a confrontation with at the beach after she kicked sand onto your blanket for the third time that day? What happens when you tell the impatient ex-con at the grocery store to relax, and he hauls back and puts his fist down your throat? You'll want to blame these individuals for being overly aggressive, but the fault lies partially with the systematic training that helped create these negative, and often hostile, attitudes.

These are dangerous temperaments, temperaments defined by mass incarceration. Human warehouses where zombies are released after ever lengthening sentences with no moral fiber left in their being. The recidivism rate in America is staggering. We're in the midst of a self-defeating disposition in which our government's role has been brought about by enterprising private institutions, the state and federal prison systems create thousands of middle class jobs and exert immense political influence. As a whole, the prison system is a better lubricant to grease the economic axle of the United State of America. There's also those pesky smaller greedy corporations that have zero concern for the growing financial burden placed on millions of Americans trying to provide for their incarcerated loved ones.

Prior to my arrest, I was a caring, loving empathetic human being in ninety nine percent of everything I did. I was extremely social and considered myself a happy-go-lucky soul. My life revolved

around family and friends, and I spent a great deal of effort nurturing those relationships. Yet, after almost ten years in prison, I've hardened considerably. My lack of concern for the well-being of other shocks me at times. I find myself guarding my thoughts to save some semblance of my former self. Without that effort, I'd have already lost the vast majority of my earlier identity. I ask myself who I will be when I return to society. What will become of my balled up anger and aggression? Will I be the one to commit an unnecessary act of violence on a person over an insignificant altercation? Has my former value system been ground to dust, and, if so, how do I rebuild it? I already know my self-worth has dwindled down to nothing under the hateful stares of the prison guards, the questioning looks of the convicts, and grinding slam of the cell door.

Putting up 25 foot walls and locking people in cages twenty hours a day isn't going to change the end result. You can't continue to funnel inmates through the same landscape and expect a different outcome. Prison populations continue to grow exponentially in this country because violence only gives rise to further violence. For the good of all, let's pay attention to the problem and allow further rise for all the human beings behind bars.