

Perspective, Greed and Selfishness in Prison

BY

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Prison has a unique and haunting way of putting things into perspective. Doing time slows down your present but, oddly enough, speeds up your past. One has a lot of time to sit and ponder. Reflect. And you never know when some past memory and experience will burst into your present-psyche, body-snatching your physical expressions into a kind of deaf and dumb, paralyzed-Zombie state of that infamous thousand yard stare...

It is not hard to spot these "living-dead"; the only cure a simple five word scream from a homeboy, "Jacob, GET OUT THE WORLD!". At which point the victim snaps out of his trance as if someone had simply walked up and flipped his life switch pulling him back to the world of the living-present. Of course "the world" being the free-world beyond our cold, reinforced concrete walls and razorwire smothered fences.

Perspective... It brings understanding. Realization. And as a consequence feelings of remorse. Regret. Guilt. My latest deaf and dumb zombie trance occurred the night before Thanksgiving 2017. I work in the kitchen in a sanitation position from the hours of 1430 to 2000 (2:30pm - 8pm), five days a week. Basically I clean and sanitize the entire kitchen during my shift.

Being the holidays, things were in a frantic pace in prep for the Thanksgiving day meal. We got out late that night. The Turkey-day lunch, to be served to the 1700 offenders in less than 24 hours, believe it or not, was a damn good one! Real turkey, brisket, four different desserts, stuffing with the works - it was all there and more - and in quantities large enough that two trays were

Required to hold it all.

Anyway, it was late - already 45 minutes past 8pm - and I was mopping away from the main group of inmates being stripped-out. (Strip searched by the kitchen boss to prevent the theft and trafficking and trading of kitchen food smuggled back to cells - a subject for a future essay titled, The Art of the Hustle.)

The Strip Search Complete - Conducted by a pretty good kitchen boss with a proverbial nod, cough and wink - the guard reaches into his pockets and pulls out Free-World Candy: Walthers Original and bite-sized Hershey Chocolate bars. The "law" (what we offenders call corrections officers) then throws the candy at the mass of about 40 inmate kitchen workers.

It was the noise and sudden herd/flock like movement of the inmates that caught my attention. I was about 40 feet away on the other side of the main dining hall. I stopped mopping and watched... They were all begging - the inmates - with their hands up calling out to the law in anxious anticipation. Their facial expressions and reactions were those of desperation: non-blinking wide eyes, wrinkled brows, fluttery hands and fingers, mouths ajar in a slight pucker and the quick shuffling of feet closer and closer to the guard... Two, three, five at a time dove for one of the many pieces that hit the floor. I fought off the urge to drop my mop and run over and compete for a little piece of momentary comfort.

And then it happened! I had absolutely no control over it. I was gone. Physically I was still there in this stupid, joke of a Texas prison; still there holding that dirty, old mop... But mentally I was gone! I was back in Afghanistan standing in the back of a flat bed truck with my Bosniak (Bosnian Muslim) friend and fellow contractor trying in ever increasing frustration to hand out food rations about to expire, destined for destruction by fire inside our forward operating base's (FOB) burn-pit, to a crowd, now a mob, of local Afghans who were growing more and more desperate as the "aid" was running out.

The men, youth and boys in this mob moved and acted just like those inmates trying to get that Free-World Candy from the kitchen boss. It was the movement and sound and physical actions of my fellow offenders that triggered this episodic deaf and dumb, paralyzing Zombiness. I was back in the world! Back in the "moon"-dusted streets and fields of Kandahar.

I was screaming in Pashto, then Dari, next Farsi the memorized phrases (since lost to me) of, "Stand in line!", "Stop moving forward..." et cetera, into a bullhorn as my Bosniak colleague tried in vain to hand the Afghans, one by one, a football sized package containing Islamic approved food and candy. His efforts, and mine, were utterly futile!

The mob began to act more and more desperate - some even trying to climb up on the truck. I had to push them off. The dust from all the shuffling, sandaled feet was choking. A sea of humanity without reached arms, stretched, grasping hands and fingers kept moving forward - ever forward - until those up front were beginning to be smashed into the back of our truck. I kept pushing and shoving men and youth off the side. As they fell they were literally swallowed by the crowd and could no longer be seen. From side to side I was dashing about trying to keep some semblance of order. But it was useless...

My frustration quickly turned to anger! With anger now fully within my being any and all compassion, empathy and sympathy I genuinely had for these people were set aside. My partner had given up his task and looked at me with pleading, guidance seeking eyes. The situation had quickly turned into a security and safety threat not only for the locals but for us, too.

I looked at my friend and in his native tongue screamed over the roar of the pleading locals - who by now had managed to grab individual packages off the truck and were fighting over them - "JEBIGA, EHH!!" (FUCK IT!!), and banged three hard times on the roof of the cab; my signal to the driver (also a Bosniak) to begin to move out as safely as he could.

As the truck inched forward I began throwing packages out as far as possible to the rear into the crowd. My partner followed suit. Both of us were still pushing and now kicking the few desperate enough who tried to climb up. I had grown so angry I lost my professionalism and began cursing at them. The irony of it all, at the time, was lost to me. I wasn't even supposed to be outside the wire of the FOB handing out "aid". But I was so tired and sick of burning perfectly good food in front of hungry people due to our (contractors) mismanagement of resources I had to do something. I had succeeded in Bosnia years before in a very similar action: the "illegal" delivery of nearly expired (three year shelf life), about to be destroyed U.S. Army Meals Ready to Eat (MRE) to hungry Bosniak villagers. It all went well. I was very stupid, reckless and extremely naive to believe what worked in the wooded mountains of Bosnia would work in the deserts of Southern Afghanistan, however.

As we put some distance from the crowd of Afghans - about 100 feet or so; no one really ran in chase - I began shoving all the packages off the truck. I then sat down with my back to the cab and watched in utter and complete sadness and regret as men, youth and boys rushed our droppings and were soon lost in a cloud of dust -

"JILLS! GET OUT THE WORLD!" the kitchen boss screamed... "Let's go. It's late!"

And just like that I was back... beads of sweat dotting my brow, my heart rate elevated... standing there holding my mop with white knuckles. And I was sad. I felt very ashamed of my hatred and judgement of those Afghans. Guilty that I had pushed and kicked hungry, desperate people who were only trying to survive that stupid war. I literally fought back tears. Silently, to myself, I apologized to those Afghans - as if it would make any kind of difference at all.

After I put away the mop, got stripped, and was waiting for the boss to let me go home (to my cell) I was still very depressed and saddened. The main group of inmates were already out.

I leave last with the kitchen officer.

"Jills, I got something for you," the officer said. He handed me a hand full of the candy he was throwing to the inmates only moments before. "Happy Thanksgiving", he added.

"Thank you sir", I replied. "I really appreciate it. Happy Thanksgiving." I quickly put the candy in my jacket pockets.

Back in my cell I fingered and smelled the Hershy Bars and Worther's originals. I wanted so badly to eat them all! I could of, too, and no one but me would have known. None of the 118 other inmates around me knew I had them. I considered, fleetingly, of selling them for a Ramen Soup a piece, or maybe some coffee...

But I couldn't. I was still sad and mentally bent over my little sand-box "Flashback"... I could have cried then... I was relatively alone - no one would have seen. But I didn't. I took one last deep sniff of the chocolate, let it out as a long, craving sigh..., got up and walked around to the most indigent inmates I could find and gave away - free! - every single piece!

It took me coming to prison and experiencing what it's like to live with limited resources - resisting an urge to struggle with other inmates for a single piece of chocolate the size of a quarter - to understand why those Afghans were behaving the way they were. They lived a life where they were forced to be selfish and as greedy as they could possibly be in order to provide for their families. In their world of object poverty, brutal, endless war with corruption and incompetence on both sides, I can now understand why/how a nice, unselfish, non-greedy Afghan would not survive.

In prison the nice guy finishes last and does without over an inmate who acts selfishly and greedy. In prison, if you do not arrive selfish and greedy, you will soon learn to be - or you will do without. I have, I am ashamed to admit, grown more selfish and greedy in the five years I've been incarcerated. As five turns to 10, it sincerely

Concerns me just how much more greedy and selfish I will become without even realizing the change.

In prison being selfish and greedy - throwing all pride and personal dignity to the wayside by scamming, scheming and hustling - ensures you greater comfort. In those inmates jostling, begging for a piece of free-world candy, they were instinctively without thought, seeking just a little more comfort. I, too, literally had to force myself from running over to the main group in an effort to grasp my fingers around that quarter sized piece of momentary comfort. I am embarrassed for myself and for my fellow offenders...

This is the end for now. If you were anticipating some kind of inspirational, happy ending, I'm sorry to disappoint. No matter how hard I tried I just couldn't find one. At this point, I regret to admit, a motivating, happy ending does not exist. Perhaps some day?

Please stay tuned, however, if you are interested in reading more of my writing on America's Prison Industrial Complex. In my next essay, Forced Competition, I explain how prison forces us inmates to compete against one another for damn near everything. And this competition is not based on sportsmanship but rather greed and selfishness borne out of necessity...