

Forced Competition

By

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You do not need a degree in zoology to understand and explain how the herds, the flocks, and schools of earth's creatures seem to act as one entity in perfect synchrony as if telepathically communicating in some inaudible animal language beyond human understanding. These mammals, birds, and fish are perfectly synchronous in their behavior and movements out of some primordial instinct of necessity — every single life competing against the other in unison for survival. Come to prison and you will be able to explain this phenomenon better than anyone with a doctorate in such studies.

How? Because you will live it every day!

In prison the "laws" (guards) force us inmates to compete for everything. This competition against one another is not based on sportsmanship, but rather greed and selfishness born out of a conceived necessity. If your situational-awareness is not fine-tuned, if you are too slow, too friendly or overly compassionate you will miss out, lose your turn, be scared and hustled. Everyone of us inmates are competing against the other for survival. Not really physical survival like our counterparts in the sea, up in the air, or upon the land (real prison is nothing like HBO's OZ or FOX's Prison Break), but for mental survival.

The "trophies" for all this competition? Just a little bit more comfort.

One of the most uncomfortable experiences you will ever live is finding yourself a "resident" of America's Prison Industrial Complex. As time progresses, however, the human mind and body adapts and grows more and more comfortable as conditions improve. Believe it or not your county jail is far less comforting than prison. (I will write extensively on all the links in the chain of America's Criminal "Justice" system in future essays.)

As your relative comfort level increases it feels so good that returning to a previous level hurts twice as bad as the original condition. It is human nature to seek out comfort. I promise you, eventually you will lie, cheat, steal - damn near whatever it takes - to maintain a certain degree of comfort in prison. Otherwise the mental strain of a continuously fluctuating level of comfort will soon break you out of intense frustration. Frustration leads to anger. Anger leads to disciplinary action in which you dig yourself into an ever deeper hole. Before you realize it frustration and anger have you in so much trouble that most means of obtaining comfort of any kind will be drastically diminished through disciplinary sanctions imposed upon you. And once you recognize yourself at the bottom of that deep, dark disciplinary dungeon peering out, it is timely and difficult to extricate yourself from.

I was sitting in my cubical early one morning following my usual routine: Wake, dress, brush teeth, make coffee, sit, write or read a book while listening to music. I happened to look up and notice two offenders engaged in mutual combat ("law" talk for a fight). I had no idea what they were fighting over. Metallica happened to be pulsating my eardrums cancelling out all other noise. Embarrassing to admit, it was a strange and somewhat pleasurable stimulating experience observing a real live fight between two fellow human beings while And Justice For All rocked my psyche. It was like the two "combatants" were in some sordid Roman Olympic event; both exchanging quick blows in rhythm and beat to the heavy metal music... -

... One fell after a punch to his chin and hit his head on the

White paint chipped, rusted iron bench in the Shower area. He quickly stood and rushed the other guy, blood leaking in thick stream from a two inch gash in his brow — his state issued white shirt turning a deep crimson. Both fell but quickly recovered their footing. Successively quick punch for punch were exchanged like two light-weight prize fighters exciting a crowd... —

Believe it or not there are rules to fighting in prison, for the most part anyway. You call someone out or get called out to a corner, under the stairs, or to the Shower; areas where camera and guard views are restricted. Then you box it out, toe to toe. No kicking is permitted. When someone falls the other waits for him to stand and continue the fight. If he does not get up the fight is over. You never "smash" on someone after he falls to the floor. You are not supposed to use any kind of weapon. Break any of these self-imposed rules and you risk retaliation from your opponent's gang; if he is not gang affiliated then retaliation from his race. (I will write an essay titled, Race Relations, in a future essay.) Only gang sanctioned "hits" allow weapons or smashing someone on the floor.

... Another Chin shot dropped the bloody faced inmate. This got him so enraged he got up, ran to a yellow wet floor / piso mojado sign, grabbed it up (a rule violation forfeiting his respect from those watching) and began swinging wildly, striking his shirtless enemy over and over in rapid succession in damn near perfect rhythm to Metallica's bass guitar, depositing long, red welts zebra style across the back, arms and chest.

This whipping seemed to defeat the receiver; he hunched over at the waist, Chin to chest, arms covering his head as he moved backwards a few steps after each blow. This continued out into the dayroom and back to the shower area until some homeboys of the "illegal" piso mojado branding rule breaker stepped in and stopped the fight, berating and ridiculing him for using a weapon.

After every fight there is a flurry of rapid actions by other

offenders to clean up and sanitize the scene and bruised and bloodied inmates in an attempt to shield them from detection by the laws. All blood is quickly wiped clean. Bloody clothes are stripped off and discarded into trash cans or flushed down toilets. Amateurish first-aid is applied to wounds to stop bleeding and swelling. It is all very entertaining to watch!

During the fight I kept anticipating guards five deep rushing in to stop it. There were a total of 10 cameras surveilling our little gladiatorial arena with an officer in the "picket" (control room). No guards ever came! I went back to reading - Guns & Roses' Welcome to the Jungle in my ears.

I later learned the cause of this physical altercation. The Commissary line. In offender parlance, if you will, COMMISSARY IS NECESSARY! Extra emphasis on IS!

Commissary is the single greatest source of comfort an offender has. Even those with no money rely on the commissary of others for payment of their respective "hustle". (An essay titled, The Art of the Hustle, is coming soon.) You would think it prudent for the safety and security of the facility that a fair system of running inmates through commissary would be implemented. Not so! And this is where we convicts trump zoology doctorates (no pun intended, MR. President) in the understanding of the herd, flock, and school behavioral movements of nature's wildlife.

At my current location offenders, in our subcultured lexicon, have the privilege (not a right) to "make store" (commissary) on average once a week with a spend limit of 95 dollars. A brief example of prices: ramen soup - .30¢; hot sauce - .95¢; bag of chips - \$1.50; pint of Blue Bell - \$2.20; clock radio - \$20.00; hot water pot with insert - \$22.50; nine inch electric fan - \$20.00. Our current price list is 529 items long. The least expensive being a .3¢ envelope. The most expensive a 225 dollar cheap, clear plastic electric typewriter (an extortion when touch screen laptop computers are now under two-hundred dollars in the Free-world!)

But anyway, the Competition imposed upon us offenders has those with money vying for a spot in the Commissary line. Out of 119 inmates in our wing there are only 12 available seats on the bench from where guards want us to wait until they sign our Commissary order slips and send us on our way. There an officer is supposed to verify the sending officer's signature, allowing offenders to stand in another line to the window he purchases his items from. However, this verification process is rarely followed.

All Commissary is run by building. There are six buildings housing inmates on my unit: four with three wings of individual to man cells, and two warehouse style dorms with four wings of single man cubicals. "Shots" of seven inmates per wing begin around 7 a.m. and stop around 5 p.m., Monday through Friday. Commissary is closed on weekends, holidays, and on truck-resupply days which arrive every other Wednesday.

Beginning 24 hours in advance inmates begin to save their seat on the bench in the wing. Seats are reserved on a first come first take basis simply by placing a book, a cup... etc., on the bench. Seat saving is against official policy but only two guards ever enforce this regulation by confiscating seat saving items. To counter this some offenders place sticky Seoderant tables on the bench. Once a guard clears seat-saving items our unwritten rule reverts back to the first come first take mantra.

By 6:30 a.m. Commissary day all seats are occupied. If you are not paying attention you'll miss out. Someone will be quicker than you as the guard approaches your wing. All at once, as if on cue, we offenders stand (all 12) and rush to the door the officer is about to enter. A few disrespectful inmates lurking around the perimeter will attempt to dart into the ward approaching the door. As soon as those on the bench vacate, others quickly assume the vacant seats. If you are not one of the chosen lucky seven you lose your place.

If you can, mentally picture what I just described happening in one second! That's how fast we move. We offenders literally

behave like herds, flocks, and schools; everyone of us maintaining an inch's space between us, never touching. It's disrespectful to touch another inmate in the herd. Disrespect leads to a fight. Guards are supposed to enter and select one inmate at a time in the order they are sitting, maintaining a semblance of order. But again, need it be written this rarely happens?

Sitting on the bench waiting your constantly anticipating motion; your goal is to be the first to notice the approaching guard and trigger the herd's movement, all following after you. One time my mind drifted to the free-world when the herd began to move. Within the split of a second I sensed the movement around me. Within this same second I was on my feet moving with the herd in synch to the door. I was not one of the lucky seven. I was too slow, and not wanting to physically elbow someone, I yielded to those who were paying attention and got half an arm's hair length in front of me.

The fight described earlier: one or the other failed to yield the right of way. Both collided causing others to collide. They were eventually found out by staff after the wounds of one were noticed by an alert guard who went to the video archives and found the altercation. Both lost their privileged single man cubical living and were sent to the small two man cells for a year's time. Both also lost all commissary, visit, phone, and outside recreation privileges for 45 days.

I'm curious to know the consequences for a bird, a fish, or say a bison on the High Plains in the early nineteenth century, getting out of place and bumping into their respective flock, school, or herd-mates. Has this ever been caught on film? Do these creatures fight it out or simply adapt as a group and peacefully move on? I bet they would behave more honorably than we humans more times than not. Any zoologists out there care to answer?

Occasionally an inmate waiting on the bench will purposely jump up and pretend to move towards the door as a joke. This

Can cause a fight, too. Everyone else waiting will instinctfully jump up and move with the practical joker thinking he saw something they didn't. But in fact there is not an officer approaching. Our instincts, sensing movement, involuntarily told our brains to move as fast as possible while maintaining that inch buffer zone in following the prankster. This really pisses off those waiting! For, believe it or not, one receives an instant dose of high adrenaline the instant movement is detected which raises the heartbeat, widens the eyes and sharpens the senses. Your mind requires these chemical reactions for it to maintain the proper spacing and quick movements without touching in such a tight formation to outmaneuver your opponent for a spot in line up front. Adrenalin equals self-preservation!

However, a shot of adrenaline when not needed is very agitating! Those suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) know this all too well. When your flight or fight instinct kicks in and there really is no fight and nowhere to go in flight it's like an utter and complete malfunction of the entire biology of the human nervous system and respective psyche. (I will write an essay titled, Veterans in Prison, to explain this further.)

It's when I got caught in one of these pranks that it hit me like that proverbial ton of bricks: I followed the herd without thought as if some monotonous drone in that Superbowl commercial. I suddenly experienced an epiphany and knew how and why herds, flocks, and schools behave the way they do. These creatures do not telepathically communicate, rather each individual in the mob is so finely tuned to their environment in hyper alertness they move according to the chain reaction set in motion by the first in the group to move. To the human eye the school moves as one big ball. But I bet if you were to slow film of a school of fish moving in reaction to a threat slow enough you could spot the first fish to move triggering the others to act in turn. Get out of place by not paying attention in their world and you end up as a cloud of fecal matter excreted out a shark's ass. Thank God our consequences for complacency are not so dire!

I find it frustrating and increasingly absurd we offenders reduce ourselves to the level of "animal" behavior to make store. But if we do not and miss out our comfort level may fluctuate into the red; we are forced into a perverse form of indefatigable competition to remain in the black. But to err is human, and when one of us forgets his place and grows complacent, he may end up a participant in the arena. The irony of it all is that comfort breeds complacency!

Unfortunately the story does not end here. This exact scene plays out for the library and even Church. Commissary is the ultimate trophy, however. You will have inmates competing for a spot in the library and Church lines who will head directly to the Commissary line when called out. On one sad and pathetic occasion the prison Chapel was visited by an outside Church. Free-world treats were to be served. Only 15 offenders per wing from all six buildings (300 out of 1700) were called out. As the guard entered our wing about 50 inmates schooled up and rushed the door. There were a number of especially selfish pieces of shit among the 50 who had never been to Church a day in their lives - They only wanted the free sugary treats.

The officer attempted to organize a strait line. Her efforts were utterly and completely futile! The guard moved from left to right screaming, "FORM A STRAIT, SINGLE FILE LINE!" Five times she repeated this and every time the mass of inmates in their herd, flock, and school formation, tightly packed together, moved right along with her. That strait, single file line never formed.

The guard, young and inexperienced, grew very angry. Finally she stepped back through the door and slammed it shut in the face of the flock following closely on her heels. With nowhere to go that inch spacing was lost and inmates began to domino into one another! There was a mass scattering in all directions while cursing threats flew about. There was one fight. Things could have gotten worse real quick like, but the tension died and the mood of the dayroom cooled.

Jills-9

The herd lost that day. Selfishness and greed amongst a few members killed them all. Place us humans in an environment where basic survival is a necessity and we will destroy ourselves. I read somewhere it is our self-awareness that sets us apart from animals. I do not believe this is accurate. I say it's our greed and selfishness when desperate enough that proves we are no different!

Now you may not buy-in to any of this with all that you have in your respective comfort zone — dismissing my words as those of some mentally bent, disgruntled convict — however, I promise you, get desperate enough and you, too, will revert to your current definition of evil. I pray you're lucky enough to never find out...

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