

The American Prison Writing Archive

198 College Hill Rd.

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My crime: The very simplified version of my life, I was 19 years old, in a whirlwind courtship. I had lied to my adoptive mom to get money supposedly for college but it was to help the dude obtain drugs, I was pregnant with his child and he was leaving me. I shot him and was sentenced to life in prison. After an escape and trip to Thailand, I was essentially put in lock down 5 years in Minnesota. My mom and even the administration felt it inhumane. I ended up as an Interstate life prisoner. I was transferred to CIW, then CCWF and finally VSPW; *in California,* where I totaled 14 years. I had another alleged escape attempt (long story). I was transferred back to Minnesota lock for a year then shipped out to Oklahoma for 12 years. I'm have been brought back to Minnesota and have been here almost a year again. I've been incarcerated 31, going on 32 years. I have spent more time in prison than out of prison. I have grown up in prison, and although I am a first and last time offender- I learned how to be a criminal in prison. I wasn't a shot caller. I keistered drugs, made various forms of alcohol and tattooed to make money. The gangs are violent and treacherous, what else was I going to do with my life? The rest of the inmates wanted to party- who wouldn't, ergo prison is set up for punitive reasons, inmates are rebellious and not rehabilitated. But what happens when the majority of these women end up as your neighbor?

What I know about the Worst Prison and the Posh Prison, Staff and Inmates: I know without a doubt, the key to happiness is not money or material things. I am in the most posh prison in the world and I find it to be an amenity filled hell. (Shakopee, Minnesota) I would trade it for freedom. Actually if you open the gates without consequences, I doubt anyone thinks it is a resort and would stay. Although, if they would opt to stay; that's what I consider institutionalized; (Unable to function outside an institution).

I would hate to wake up black, particularly a woman with sons. It must feel like your umbilical cord could be a noose at any time. Maybe they don't want my pity, but even in the Buck Rogers era of 2018, there's a necessity to say "Black Lives Matter", how sad. Blacks haven't made it that far off the plantation, as a whole- many are locked up, working for "the Man" in the prison system. For African American males the justice system is practically legal genocide, but I digress.

Is there a sadder commentary? Oh yes, women, young, old, mentally ill, missing limbs, pregnant- come one, come all, ironically, the prison system does not discriminate. The prison system will stamp another number

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on you and the bottom line is that now prison is a business. Do the head count, get the supplies, it's a dangerous job, get more staff and wages, create more jobs, prosecute more criminals, wash-rinse-repeat.

Prison Administration talks a good game about how inmates need to learn to take personal accountability but when you need an answer, they're expert at passing the buck. I have yet to see them hold themselves to a HIGHER standard of an example. Generally, staff cuss more than inmates here, holler, and say the rules are meant for inmate NOT the staff. They are the bosses we are nothing, they are bosses over nothing. The posh prison talks about proven strategies to reduce recidivism, they think they are better than everyone else, maybe I am from here because I feel better than them. I can survive, not just in some sheltered glass hot house.

I am proud of the women that hold onto their dignity. Many women create beautiful crafts out of whatever they're allowed to have. When they work on projects for their kids, they glow. Of course things are made out of necessity as well like tampons which the prison has a monopoly on @ \$3/10. By the time fines are deducted, the prison has all the wages back. Women take pride in their work and don't want to see our jobs taken by foreign competitors.

The most posh prison has cable TV, keys to their own rooms, salt /pepper and three plastic utensils to dine with, microwaves, washers/dryers, gym with treadmills and weight room, flowers, jobs and education. It also has guards so crotchety, you're scared they may go postal or so young, they want to make a name off your misery or are too busy flirting to do their job.

Blanket punishment is normal, why catch a suspect when you can have peace of mind and collect the same paycheck by locking everyone down. I can't imagine if they had a situation of real magnitude, since lock down is already the answer. There is overcrowding in every facility imaginable, when you put too many rats in a cage they kill each other off. Guards are trained to handcuff inmates but not to notice depression. Within the job description, guards strip prisoners naked and search for drugs but not trained to address the anxiety for both sides.

The posh prison busts you for passing food, and the extra food goes to the hogs. The real prison, the first tray, is bologna, bread and carrots. By the last tray, it may be crackers, peanut butter pack and carrots. Neither situation is right. There are Native women that get large checks from their tribes and literally have no plans for

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staying out of prison because they live too well in prison. Reservations should put the money into savings, because this prison takes *cost of confinement* and is making money off them.

The posh prison doesn't understand the problems of a real prison, understaffed and flooded with drugs. I tried to give a standard prison strip and was told no one asked to see ALL THAT. I guess drugs just jump out of people at a posh place. A posh place doesn't stand up behind grates and have the security dogs sniff inmates. The posh have a dog program where the dogs poop in a plastic bag. I believe that when a civilian comes home from the store, the dog will want to have a bowel movement and that the posh prison makes *even their dogs* neurotic. Then there's the riotous prison that burned their mattresses when O.J. was found innocent. (California, Chowchilla) I wondered, if that was celebrating, what does protest look like?

There are cameras everywhere that no one is watching. The posh prison inmates paused in a hallway are written for loitering. While in a real prison inmates get assaulted. What they both have in common is that no one cares. Staff don't care how an infraction affects your time. The staff work so much I guess they have nowhere else to meet someone, so they all date, get their friends' jobs, and the nepotism is through the roof. I truly believe the guards should be made to work in different facilities before they come to a female facility and they should all have psyche tests.

The real prison considers cell phones, drugs and fighting their main infractions. The posh prison thinks passing items, no identification, and braiding hair are criminal thinking.

All prisons have oppressed womens' rights to legal remedies within the system. One must file an individual grievance to the person that the problem occurred with. There is no such thing as a class action grievance or it is considered creating chaos or inciting a riot. The Women's Advisory Council or Inmate Councils are usually a way for inmate flunkies to disseminate administrative information. If notes are properly taken, then there is evidence that nothing has changed and staff state monthly that they will look into it. Prison is very much like a pedestrian having the right of way to cross the street versus a driver in a car. You're suppose to cross but you will likely never actually benefit because it is not worth the alternative, if the driver decides to exercise their power.

Mental health patients are sprinkled throughout the prison and when they get unmanageable, they are carted off to Administrative Segregation for more medication. That seems standard fare for all prisons.

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Administrative Segregation: I believe that *what you don't know can kill you* and that you may be hard pressed to tell certain situations in U.S. prisons from Gitmo. A person without hope is a dangerous person, because they may feel they have nothing to lose. You don't know what another person has been through or is capable of. I have assaulted staff, been maced, I didn't feel anyone was listening to me and I simply didn't know how to use my words. I have spent many years locked in Administrative Segregation (Ad. Seg.) &/or Security Housing Unit (SHU) and despite laws to the contrary the system finds loopholes to lock people down, 24 hours a day. Some systems don't count the investigation days. Some prisons offer yard, but there's always a fight before you can get out there. Inclement weather, short on staff, almost any excuse is enough to ensure that you will remain in your cell 24 hours a day. In any Ad. Seg. across the U.S., the inmates are locked down at least 23 hours a day. Never have I seen one that offers studies and that is the one place that a person may finally have an epiphany. What a waste of a captive audience and future work force. (According to National Geographic, there are roughly 80,000 prisoners/ people in Ad. Seg. locked down across the U.S.) Truthfully, I believe any extended stay in Ad. Seg. causes a type of temporary insanity. If you don't have mental health problems going into Ad. Seg. you will by the time you come out.

While in Ad. Seg., a woman next door to me spoke with me through the vent. I told her how much I loved animals. She said she did too, they're such good company. She continued, almost secretively asking if I ever felt so alone that even a bug seemed like good company? I could kind of imagine watching ants or something. She said she had a secret friend a grasshopper, she broke its leg so it couldn't escape. I suddenly felt a bit ill and creeped out. Then I had to reflect on a couple years I served in Ad. Seg. flooding the tier, covering windows with my mat or paper gown, being maced. College Interpersonal Communications book *Interplay* cites a story about a King that didn't allow children to be touched or talked with, in order to see what language they would develop and what occurred was insanity. *Same book* John Mc Cain's POW story was cited. Prisoners found communication with each other worth the torture or punishment that was sure to follow. Loneliness is a private hell which manifests itself in different ways such as immobility or unbridled anger.

There needs to be different **housing for Pregnancy** (an infamous justification for fighting pregnant inmates is that they are not pregnant in the face). **The elderly** simply need more medical attention and should be

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considered for release. (I came in at 19, I'm 50 now with arthritis in my shoulders and ankles, osteoporosis, plantar fasciitis, a bone spur in my foot, high cholesterol and a myriad of other health problems looming.)

The real question of women's history of crime is not "**Why women murder?**" but "Why so few, do?" Considering a woman is beaten in her home every 15 seconds and women account for 86% of Domestic Victims. (Rennison, 2001, p.1; Smith & Farole, 2009) **Death row inmates** should be in wings where they can socialize **verbally** with each other. Although women commit 1 in every 8 homicides, they commit less than 1 in 20 of the types of homicides that are heinous enough in society's eyes to merit execution. Women typically kill family members, lovers in anger and by way of poison or less violent methods. Women are also much less likely to have prior records for violent felonies. At the close of 1999, 50 women were on death row in 17 states, death rows are usually located in isolated parts of the prison and quite small in comparison with men's thus resulting in very little contact with anyone. (Encyclopedia of Women and Crime, 2003) Most people wouldn't dream of caging an animal for an extended period of time only to put it down. Death row inmates are sentient and know their time will come. Death row inmates are the easiest to want to punish, not just incarcerate. While exacting the pound of flesh, how about allowing conversation amongst themselves. *Killing people who kill people does not show that killing people is wrong.* (unknown) At least treat them humanely, in case they are innocent

Rebuilding Self, Family, Community and World: The problem with prisons, is not just their *policies* or *staff*. The **inmates** need so much basic help. In the world, licenses are required to fish, hunt and drive, but not to procreate. I'm not an advocate of government standards for procreation. I would be too fearful of abuse like sterilization of the mentally retarded (it used to be legal). However, I am advocating that there should be sex education. In California, I had a roommate that had a female type infection. I advised her to go to the nurse, it was probably just a yeast infection. My roommate came back sicker than when she went. I inquired, to find she had taken the suppository, orally. When I asked if she had looked at the diagram- she had and apparently the birth canal looked like throat to her. In Oklahoma, I had a roommate in her 40's with two children, they issue used underwear. She wanted to know if women make sperm and if we could pregnant from the underwear.

Relationships are a huge factor for women coming to prison. Perhaps there should be government incentives for daycare at job sites. There have been women incarcerated for leaving their kids unattended or with

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boyfriends that abuse the kids. The mom can't seem to leave the abusive guy. The mother is still held responsible.

Why do I care particularly about women. "The hand that rocks the cradle, rules the world", may be true, but women are not getting the support they once had, focusing on career, and maybe the easy money of crime and drugs. Of course, there is still a double standard, there are unmarried mothers not unmarried fathers. Single mothers have become so prevalent – no one thinks it odd anymore. When men are in prison, their wives or lovers, will move the children ½ way across the country to be close and visit daddy in prison. But if mom goes to prison, grandma watches the kids and brings them to visit. Mom better find a trick/john or girlfriend – because the mouse will play while the cat's away.

Women seem to perpetuate their own worst relationships while in prison. One woman jumped off the top tier because she owed for pills. A different one jumped because her girlfriend didn't want her anymore. (Oklahoma, Mc Loud) Another hung herself because her woman was leaving her and many women give themselves sexually to the guards, for some type of contact and attention or tobacco. Many women imitate men and use other women for their groceries. It is the saddest soap opera that is played out, from unhealthy and dysfunctional lives to a system that does nothing to promote healing.

I was sitting in a Beyond Violence class and a victim was saying she has never been one to take medication but maybe she needed some extra help, prison is depressing and fills one with anxiety as everything is out of your control. I wanted to point out that everything was out of her control before and in her abuser's hands. The two therapists in the class ignored the woman to say that we need to keep the class moving to get through the curriculum. Today's problems are tomorrow's new groups versus handling a problem they were faced with. Of course the therapists are reading straight from a textbook and younger than my insoles. Competent help regarding relationships would be difficult, but it has to be addressed.

I care about girls that will turn into women, because I fall into the most horrible of all statistics. Statistically, the Adverse Childhood Experiences Study indicates that a person with a score of four or more is at greater risk for being a substance abuse. The same study done with women inmates showed that scores of 7 or more had 980% more risk of having mental health problems. (Beyond Violence, Stephanie S. Covington, 2013) Just knowing that

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you are at risk, may prompt you to seek help. There are secrets so terrible that you don't even want to review them in your mind because you're afraid that you'll have a nightmare or worse yet a nervous breakdown.

Felipe De Brigard did an Experimental Philosophical Study call The Experience Machine. Essentially, people were told that visiting scientists from the future could put you in a machine and keep your body alive and you would go to sleep and dream a fabulous life of fame, wealth and happiness until your real time to expire. Would you go into the machine? Most people, while not living the most satisfactory life still said no. Then he switched the circumstance and the survey said that scientists from the future came to tell you that you were in a machine and your life up till now is just a dream- do you want to come out of the machine to live a real life? Most people said no. What I gather from the study is that people don't like change. Society's scorned have to CHANGE and pulling yourself up by your own bootstrap is hard.

The ironic part is that if you try not to change, even one iota, you will still grow and change unbeknownst to you. There is no way to remain exactly the same. It is a matter of 1) focusing on relationships 2) consciousness raising to recognize empowerment 3) promoting responsibility 4) therapy to heal earlier victimization 5) instilling hope : **classes** and tools for the RIGHT CHANGES and a better life.

When you're young, it's difficult to have preparedness for leaving home, going to school, staying in school and being focused. You don't know what lies ahead, you are forced to start trusting yourself. Life is a journey that you walk and come in contact with other people, not all are positive influences. When my mother talked to me about the birds and bees, I left thinking we had truly discussed flowers and pollination. Never was a vagina, penis, or menstruation mentioned. I wish young American ladies, were taught more about other cultures, Islamic child brides, stoning of women for adultery, African cauterization of clitoris. I'd like to see American women value themselves and their sexual choices.

I care about women because when you take them from their children you are ripping apart families, mothers are sometimes also the breadwinners. How many times have you heard about mothers and their cubs. "My past is what I've been through, It's not who I am. It has helped mold me, but it does not define me! Fate whispers to the wolf 'you cannot withstand the storm' and the wolf whispers back, 'I am the storm'. – (Unknown) Women are fierce and don't like to be told what to do, they can change the world, if convinced it needs changing. Maybe

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some that visit the Expo will get ideas that spawn changes within themselves, the system, or help prisoners transition back to society.

About the Author: 51 yrs. old female, American – Asian, Lesbian, I subscribe to a few eclectic and broad philosophies. I believe the Confucian way, that human nature is initially good. There's a philosopher, William Kingdon Clifford, which said it was wrong to believe in the existence of God. He uses the story of a guy that owns a fairy that isn't sea worthy but figures it will still sail. It sinks, and the ship owner is responsible, because he didn't stifle his doubts without evidence. Clifford's distilled theory: that it is wrong to believe anything without sufficient evidence. I subscribe to his opponent, William James, which ended up in an asylum and could identify with the patients. James felt that faith helped him handle and cope with his depression. That in the face of lack of evidence if you find it helpful to believe versus detrimental, then why not believe. I am a survivor, however, the well-spring within me is still attributable to my adoptive mother and the gift of faith she gave me. I believe in a Creator and that we are not the only beings in the Universe. (Even Biblical zealots may have to concede that if we are created in God's image then there are beings NOT of his image.) I am extremely tolerant of organized religion, although not a subscriber myself. I always liked Star Trek, a model of inclusion: sex, race & species. I find it sad that it is typically the religious that care about prisoners, scarcely any humane or personal dignity groups, even religious groups are culling to a bare minimum against the death penalty.

Past Accomplishments: Published in Books Poetry Unbound and Yellow Medicine Review. Published in Tenacious, and countless other prison zines. Two PEN honorable mention pieces. Participant of the Oklahoma Scared Straight program. Editor of the Oklahoma prison, Faith & Character Newsletter. College classes at every given economic opportunity. (Business Solutions, Sociology, Health and Fitness, Intro to Art, History of Rock and Roll, Interpersonal Communications) Certifications: Nurse's Aide, Legal Secretary, Career Tech, and countless Brain Bench certifications. Fork lift driver, OSHA, warehouse training. Currently in Office Support

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