

Submission by [REDACTED] "The Conclusion"

After nearly 18 years of incarceration, & having been to numerous institutions over the intervening years, I've perceived an odd truth that holds true for each one: no one ran them. Of course, somewhere in those buildings some person with a nameplate on their desk or door was called "Warden" & nominally ran the place. And below them on the food chain were their Captains & Lieutenants. But for all practical purposes, for the prisoner, the people who live in those prisons day-in & day-out; the Captain's chair is vacant & the wheel is spinning while the sails flap. The institutions putz along with the absolute minimum of staff presence, & the staff that are there invariably seem less than interested in their jobs. No one is present, interacting in any affirmative way with the people who fill the prisons. The leadership vacuum is real & total. No one who works in "corrections" appears to give any thought to the purpose of our being there, anymore than a warehouse clerk would consider the meaning of a can of soup, or try to help those cans understand what the hell they're doing on the shelf.

Great institutions have leaders who are proud of what they do, & who engage with everyone who makes up those institutions, so each person understands their role. They provide purpose & focus. But our jailers are generally granted near-total anonymity, like the cartoon executioner who wears a hood to conceal his identity. What is the point, what is the reason, to lock people away for years, when it seems to mean so very little, even to the jailers who hold the keys? How can a prisoner understand their punishment to have been worthwhile to anyone, when it's dealt in a way so offhand & indifferent?

Lack of empathy lies at the heart of every crime and injustice - certainly any I've committed. Yet, empathy is the key to bringing a former prisoner back into the fold of society. What happens in our prisons is completely within the community's control. The public expects sentences to be punitive, but also to rehabilitate. However, what we expect and what we get from our prisons are very different things. The lessons that our prison system teaches its residents is how to survive as a prisoner, not as a citizen - not a very constructive body of knowledge for us or the communities to which we return.

The U.S. has the largest prison population in the world - we incarcerate 25% of the world's prisoners, though we are only 5% of its population. This reliance on prisons is recent; in 1980 we had about 500,000 Americans in prison. Now we have over 2.3 million people locked up. A huge part of that growth is represented by low-level offenders who have made serious mistakes but pose little threat of violence. Most people I know from prison, even the violent offenders... especially the violent offenders, have lived lives that were missing opportunities many people take for granted. Those that gravitate towards criminal and gang behavior largely have felt marginalized since childhood. People naturally crave society and upward mobility. And where it is not provided, they will create it, even if it's outside of the law. It sometimes seems that society's response to that is that we've built revolving

doors between our poorest communities & correctional facilities; & we've created perverse financial incentives to keep those prisons full, at tax-payer's expense. America has invested heavily in prisons, while the public institutions that actually prevent crime & strengthen our communities - schools, hospitals, libraries, museums, community centers - go without.

Incredible things can happen behind prison walls because people are so remarkably resilient. We can survive almost anything, one of the reasons that harsh punishment alone doesn't bear fruit. In order for prison to truly serve the public interests, the people who run them must learn their own empathy, & learn how to teach it, by example, to those they oversee. Prison should not be a scrap heap. It should be a repair shop. Talent and brilliance exist here. These human-warehouses are full of misfit heroes that lack only the opportunity to contribute meaningfully. Human capital is the most valuable asset there is. ~~And~~ we throw it away by the millions. An astounding revelation for a society so fixated on recycling its broken things. Well, recycle me!