

An Indecent Proposal

By

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Knowledge is happiness, because to have knowledge—broad, deep knowledge—is to know true ends from false, and lofty things from low.

--Helen Keller

The growth of wisdom may be gauged exactly by the diminution of ill temper.

--Friedrich Nietzsche

I wanted to posit a solution to something I find perplexing about today's penitentiary, and its role in society. That is, there seems to be some disconnect between what free world people, i.e. taxpayers, believe their prisons do for society—and what I see from inside the razor wire.

Mine is a unique perspective: I am in here as an innocent, wrongfully convicted man. Because that is the subject of other writings of mine, I won't go into that here. Let's just agree to temporarily suspend disbelief for a moment.

When I came to the penitentiary almost twenty-four years ago, I had only a GED. I am, however, an honorably-discharged combat veteran. The military spent a lot of money sending me to specialized technical training in aviation electronic technology, test equipment calibration, and micro-electronic repair systems schools. I can fly. I have saved lives.

When I was first incarcerated, I decided that I would spend every minute of every day screaming like hell till someone listened to me; I broke no laws. Three years into that, I was dragged off, in my underwear, and forced to talk to those Folks in the Long White Coats,. Just one lady, actually, while I sat on a cold plastic chair, arms crossed over my bare chest, gorilla face on, fuck you and anybody that looks like you.

Her nose twitched. She asked questions, not about my innocence, but about my military experience.

Fuck you and anybody that looks like you—my version of name, rank, and serial number. This went on for a while, but I finally agreed to take some written tests, anything to shut her up. And get my pants back.

About three weeks later, she returned. She sat down, crossed her legs at the knee, chestnut hair in tumbling curls across her shoulders.

Go-rilla-face.

“How long have you had PTSD?” she asked.

I stared at her, bovine.

A few months—and a lot of medication—later, I realized that the only way I was going to beat the State of Texas, out of their wrongful conviction would be to battle in their coliseum, with their rules, against their Prada-draped scumbags.

I'd need a sword, Vorpal, like Carroll's badass blade that goes snicker-snack! And a Light Saber, like Skywalker's, and I'd need a shield, like Michael's, or an Iron Dome, stuff like that.

What I needed was knowledge.

If the state of Texas does one thing right in its prison system, it is this: it provides an opportunity for higher education. It is neither free, nor is it easy to qualify. In fact, it is the worst campus in the world. There are biases, barriers, and an array of flaming hoops to jump through. And that's just to get to class. But we get real professors from real colleges and universities, who bring real books and nightmarishly real exams and term papers. That is as it should be.

We hunger for knowledge like we hunger for freedom. In a sense, they are one and the same. The Enlightened Mind is the only one that transcends criminal behavior. The stark significance of that statement is so vital to the future of criminal justice that it bears repeating: Education is key. To Every. Thing.

On some level, I suppose we—prisoners—are a conundrum. A curiosity. Both Hollywood and the five o'clock news make us out to be tattoo-coated, knuckle-dragging barbarians with few teeth. Table manners aside, this is untrue. The greatest percentage of the prison's general population is made up of people who were raised in some environment that did not foster the values or expectations within social norms. Thanks to the Retributive Theory, that will get no better in here.

Prison is not the answer to criminal justice. It is a political, knee-jerk reaction, and a financially lucrative one at that. But I digress . . .

As a combat veteran, I took my opportunity for higher education. I have earned associate's, bachelor's, and master's degrees from nationally accredited colleges and universities. When that wasn't enough, I studied for professional certificates in both paralegal studies and private investigations. Then, I returned for a second master's degree. Education is an insatiable thing. That is so because the mind is so.

Today I read everything I can get my hands on: textbooks, magazines, newspapers, cereal boxes, it's all good. I write articles for colleges and universities. I write for prisoner advocacy groups and for at-risk-kids' organizations. I have won awards, from regional to international, for short stories and theatre. My writing has been published as far away as Canada, Belgium, and Jakarta, Indonesia.

In truth? I want to inform criminal justice. Every day I move among these prisoners, eat, sleep, and watch television amidst murders, rapists, and child molesters. But what I see is largely a group of emotionally-delayed men stuck in some purgatory between adolescence and adulthood--physical maturity absent social responsibility. There is a miserable existence in the shadow of self-worth. Prison is rife with identity issues that failed to resolve themselves in junior high school. It boils down to this: These people, for a multitude of reasons, have no earthly idea of what positive things they are capable of.

And therein ^{lies} the answer. There is a serious disconnect between what you see, what the media portrays, and what I know to be truth based on my own education-based comparison, analyses, and twenty-plus years immersed in the field. My lack of criminal "mindset" combined with the benefit of higher education in behavioral science

provide me an ideal perspective for prisoner study that informs criminal justice. My experience in paralegal opinion brings a wealth of inmates seeking information. And, believe me, I have studied it all. From matricide to molestations, armed robberies to child killings, nothing shocks me anymore. What I want to know, is how to transcend that mindset. Mind. Set. This is not rocket science; locking up the body does not change the mind.

This brings me back to my original question of what, exactly, do Texas taxpayers think its prison systems are actually doing in order to lower recidivism rates and make society a safer place for everyone? I can tell you that the southern edict of "lock 'em up and throw away the key", has repeatedly proven to fail. Nor is it cost effective.

Or even rational. We get released. We move into neighborhoods. We stand behind your family at the checkout counter. And we remember. We remember our penitentiary experience. The only rational thing to teach us, then, is that we can be valuable, that the world is not all about us—it's about others,.

What the Texas prison system needs to do, is make higher education, vocational education, and other opportunities a more immediate path to parole eligibility. That is, education and other forms of job preparedness should be calculated on a credits-earned basis, and applied to early parole for anyone, regardless of crime or legislative intent as to the minimum sentencing guidelines. It is not enough for our current parole system to claim that they already take these things into consideration. There must be a quantifiable system in view, or we are left with little more than speculation as to just how

any parole board has "considered" merits. This makes perfectly good sense because education has repeatedly proven to reduce recidivism significantly no matter the type of crimes committed.

Moreover, it would provide an individual source of self-esteem. One constant I have encountered among the prison general population, is that all criminals fare better in here once they realize their value as a human being. It is immensely healing for someone to see that s/he can do something of value, not for themselves, but for someone else. The ability to contribute heals like a salve against low self-esteem. We simply do not know what our potentials are. We fail to recognize that we even have self-worth. Absent that, low self-esteem allows hatred, perversion, and violence to boil inside prison cauldrons until one day, it is released into society. That is what the retributive model does. That is what the southern edict does, assuming higher education is not pursued. Make no mistake: There are some who really, really need to be here. Hard work will not interest them, and they will be filtered out by the credits system. (Later on, I want to elaborate on this idea, and why we need to take power away from the parole boards, profits, and give power back the judges.)

In Texas we have--ostensibly--parole credits for "good time" ^{TO} "work time". There should be an additional bracket for "educational/vocational advancements", as well as "social contributions", i.e. raising and training service animals, repairing wheelchairs for veterans, writing anti-gang-warfare articles for at-risk-kids' organizations etc.

What if. One of the most powerful things I have ever heard in my life, I heard on National Public Radio a few years ago. I tuned in late, so I heard almost none of the

details, but it was a broadcast of the moments when a fourteen-year-old girl had gone to the airport to meet a man she'd never met before. I can't recall if he was American or a foreign national, but he came to the U. S. all the same. It seems that this girl had decided to raise money for a worthy cause. The man was her cause.

Via the State Department, the fund^s raised were used to purchase this man's life, a complete stranger, who had been held for ransom by a terrorist organization in the Middle East. The broadcast I heard, was their first meeting as he arrived, safely, in the U. S. Never before had I heard anything so moving. I felt like the green, evil Grinch when Little Mary Lou Who melted his heart. And I thought, what if?

So, I wrote a letter to the State Department in Washington, D.C. and asked "What if a bunch of ragtag Texas state prisoners raised enough money to buy a hostage from the clutches of some radical terrorist group?" And what if the State Department in Washington quietly brokered the deal, so as not to offend the (political) American opposition to such hostage negotiations?

It made sense. Texas prison wardens love positive media attention, America saves (political) face, and Texas prisoners, most of all, get an opportunity to save a human life rather than nonchalantly taking one: self-esteem skyrockets.

And someone lives.

No response. State Department didn't answer. In retrospect, maybe I was lucky the FBI didn't show up.

But what if? What if I had chosen not to take Texas' offer of higher education opportunities? What if I had left myself with a GED. And PTSD. And, one day

moved in next door.

Education must be made a real and quantifiable means of obtaining early parole—the proverbial carrot, if you will. It provides incentive, in here, to pursue what we know to be effective in reducing recidivism. When prisoners recognize that they can—they will.

The state of Texas and a number of highly educated college university professors have given me the way and means to make these sorts of social connections and analyses, to learn observations that I simply would not have been able to discern previously. I am not, nor will I ever be, the same person who shuffled his shackled feet into these gates long ago. And for that, I am eternally grateful.

They even gave my pants back.

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