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PRISON-TAUGHT RACISM : AN ACQUIRED TASTE.

People are not born being racist, which is a simple truth about the natural state of the human being. Children prove that truth to us every day. Try observing a group of young children at play, and you'll see that they naturally attract to one another. They naturally accept one another no matter the color of their skin, or the difference in their language. It is not until later on in their lives that a few are taught to become racist. Some are taught by their parents, and others are taught by their societies. Other more unfortunates find themselves thrust into the New York State prison system, where inhumane and barbaric conditions teach them to become racist.

I was incarcerated at the Great Meadows Correctional Facility, located in Comstock, New York, when I read it. It was written on a wall along with all of the other profane thoughts and messages that some people find the need to express when no one else is watching. The difference in the message that I found myself reading, though, was that the writer was a coward. Once I realized that, I also realized that it was not a message at all. It was actually an ominous-imminent-threat, a threat that the cowardly writer fully intended to carry out whenever an opportunity presented itself.

I laughed, at first, after I read it. It was humorous: weak,



but humorous. I figured it had to have been written by some white kid who couldn't cut it. Someone who'd been beaten up, and bullied by Black and Latino inmates throughout his whole bid.

At any other time I would not have even noticed it. There was no telling how long it had been written there, so it was likely that I'd stood under it on many occasions without paying any attention to it. The only reason that I'd noticed it then was that I'd been waiting for so long for the officer to come upstairs to let me into the cell. I was bored, and pacing back and forth between 4 and 5 companies in honor block. I'd become bored to the point that I found myself literally reading the writing on the wall.

All of the other messages were written in bold letters, with different types of colored markers. Most of the messages were humorous, or defamatory towards the officers. However, the threat that I'd found hiding among the other boldly written messages was written with a black ink-pen, and almost invisible to the eye against the background of the green paint. I could tell that whoever had written it was afraid as he wrote it. He was afraid that someone would walk up the stairs and catch him in the act.

There was no doubt in my mind as to whether or not he was a coward. The writing was so small that it could only have been described as miniature. It was hidden in plain view. The writer didn't want anyone to see it, but he wanted everyone to know it. The neat-precise print seemed to tell me that the writer was ashamed of how he felt; but, despite that feeling of shame, he also had an overwhelming need to express his inner-most feelings while no



one was watching: "Niggers and spics - niggers and spics - I'm gonna get me some niggers and spics!" He had used a perversion of the words from that cute "Kibbles and Bits" dog food commercial to express how he intended to hurt anyone from among the people he hated and feared the most. Of course, being the coward that his hidden threat exhibited him to be, he would only carry out his threat when no one was watching.

Initially I felt only loathing for him because I'd known, and worked along side of gangsters and tough White dudes who would tell anyone their true feelings in person. On the other hand, though, I felt sorry for him. I suspected that all of that hatred had been fostered, and fueled, by his experiences in prison. Consequently, I could not help but to think that he probably hadn't had a proverbial "racist bone in his body" prior to his incarceration. It was the brutalization he'd suffered (probably from a young age) at the hands of the Blacks and Latinos during his stay at the Great Meadows Correctional Facility, and perhaps other Upstate prisons that had turned him into a racist.

The name "Great Meadows" is misleading. That name conjures images of green grass, flowers, and serenity. The truth is, though, that all of the inmates who've ever been housed at that facility have neither seen nor felt any of the pleasantness the name conjures. The only things that inmates have ever felt there were harshness and the constantly hovering threat of violence, which is probably the reason that every inmate who was ever housed there automatically referred to it as "Comstock," a name more befitting



of the daily harshness the inmates endured. Comstock was (and has always been) known to employ arguably the greatest number of White-racist officers in the state. Further, its inmate-on-inmate violence is unmatched. It is the only prison in the State of New York that has been dubbed "Gladiator School" by the inmates themselves. Since then it has lived up to that name in every respect.

I was housed at that prison (on and off) for a total of about seven years. I can honestly relate that during that period not one day passed without at least five violent incidents having occurred. Each time an incident occurred the facility's alarm system would sound. It was a series of bell-sounds whose purpose was to call all available officers to the location of the incident. There were some days when those bells would sound five times before lunch. Many of the incidents were orchestrated by the officers themselves. Either they were beating up inmates, or they were orchestrating fights between inmates. This was especially so in the long-term keeplock area during the recreation period. Inmates being housed in the long-term keeplock blocks, for disciplinary reasons, were permitted one hour of rec per day. That one hour of rec consisted of the inmates being let outside to an area between the buildings where fenced-in cages were constructed. Those cages were constructed to accommodate between one and four men at a time. The sadistic officers would orchestrate fights by putting known antagonists into the same cage together, and then watch the outcome.

The racially motivated beatings of inmates (by officers) that occurred during the period I was there are also too numerous to



count. For a while there (between 1992 and 1993), such beatings occurred almost daily. Any given company would be on its way to the messhall, or to the yard, and the officers would pull some young (teens or early twenties) Black or Latino kid out of the line. The inmate may have done something as minor as speaking in the hallway or simply had his shoe-laces untied. Without having given any reason as to why, however, the officers would tell the inmate to step out of the line and then direct the rest of the company to proceed to their destination. Upon returning to the block the rest of the company would find themselves side-stepping the blood that was on the floors, or stairs. After making inquiries they would hear tell of how other inmates had heard the screams and cries for help as the officers beat the inmate they'd previously pulled from the line to a bloody pulp.

In order to justify those beatings the officers would write misbehavior reports against the inmates. Each of those reports would invariably claim that it was the inmate who assaulted the officers. The issuing of those reports would then require that the inmate appear at a prison disciplinary-hearing where he would, of course, have been found guilty of all charges. Consequently, that inmate would (quite likely) also have been subjected to an outside court proceeding, where an additional extensive length of time would have been added to his sentence.

Imagine the hatred that a young Black or Hispanic man must have felt for all White people after having been beaten bloody by a group of White Corrections Officers. Now imagine how he felt



when he tried to explain to another White prison disciplinary hearing officer, or outside-court judge, that he could not possibly have assaulted five White-men who were armed with batons. Now imagine this person enduring years of such treatment and then being released back to (most likely) New York City.

The inmates at Comstock felt a little vindication in 1993 when one of that area's newspapers got hold of some video footage which showed a racially motivated beating of an inmate. The incident made front page news and was also aired on the television news. The video evidence gave proof-positive that the brutality it showed was racially motivated because the camera was also equipped with a very sensitive microphone. The footage began by showing three officers escort an inmate through a fence, and out of the yard. It showed the officers direct the inmate to the side of one of the buildings and surround the inmate as they made him assume the position: hands on the wall, feet spread apart. It showed that suddenly, with no provocation from the inmate, the officers started beating him with their batons. As the incident was being aired on television we heard the officers' comments as well as the sounds of the sticks as they struck the inmate's body: "FUCKING SPIC!" --- "CRACK!" "YOU FUCKING SPIC!" --- "CRACK ... CRACK!" Those officers beat that inmate until he laid in a crumpled heap. His defenselessness, however, did not stop them from continuing to beat him while they repeatedly called him a "fucking spic". As it turned out, though, the inmate was not Hispanic at all. He was a White kid who was actually from somewhere in that area. His mother



had a lot of political influence and somehow forced the facility to turn over the video recording, which she then made public.

The average person may find the foregoing stories hard to believe; nevertheless, they are all true. Furthermore, all of the aforementioned conditions exist at that facility to this day. Today's correctional facilities are purported to be geared toward the rehabilitation of the convicted felon. What we find instead is the dehumanization of the convict, so much so that the convict is in need of rehabilitation after his release from prison. Every year thousands of young men are herded through those Upstate New York prisons, prisons like Comstock (Great Meadows), Clinton, Attica, and Elmira. The truth is that most of the staff in those prisons are inherently racist. And, they are prisons where violent behavior is encouraged as the norm. The convicted felons who will be housed in those prisons (particularly Comstock) will endure the aforementioned inhumane conditions and will themselves acquire the taste for racism, and will become more violent. Subsequently, they will be released back into the areas they originally came from, areas whose communities will become the recipients of all of that prison-taught racism.

#### CONCLUSION

"We've been sent to Sing Sing to be re-humanized" is what I've said to a lot of dudes who, like me, spent decades in Upstate prisons. Many such inmates find it hard to adjust to the humanity we find here when dealing with the civilian staff and volunteers. Just a few days ago (while we were at the commissary) one such



inmate mentioned how a white-female volunteer reached out to shake his hand. He said: "I was stuck! I didn't know what to do." He had been shocked by the humanity she extended to him. He'd spent so many years out-of-touch with humanity, and out-of-touch with reality, that he didn't know how to respond. Out of the many thousands of inmates only a fortunate few get the opportunity to come to a prison like Sing Sing where there is a good amount of outside humane contact, humane-human contact that will remind them that the world is not founded on violence and racial hatred.