

Picture a room, 8 feet by 12 feet. Dull, stained, peeling white paint covers the concrete walls. This spacious suite features numerous amenities: a stainless steel sink/toilet combination; pale bluish-gray painted steel shelves and desk; plentiful lighting (which never shuts off completely); a splendid view of rocks and a 30-foot concrete wall; all topped off by a concrete slab, on which rests a 3½-inch "mattress" (probably invented by some deranged chiropractor). Welcome home for the next however many years you'll be in residence. Oh, and by the way, you'll be in your amazing suite for, at least, 20 hours a day. This is prison. The reality many people confront.

Although I make light of the living accommodations, it's very far from entertaining. Humor helps us as people to come to terms with a harrowing and dire reality. Prison is where we send people who have broken society's laws; whether they chose not to or couldn't avoid breaking the law. They are in a prison, a correctional facility. Of the 2.3 million residences currently occupied by prisoners, about 90% will one day return to general society. In the meantime they are prisoners. But, what does that mean 'prisoner'? What does it signify? Who is this prisoner?

One definition, according to Oxford Pocket Dictionary, is a "person kept in prison." Well, duh, right? Just as a painter is someone who paints; a writer someone who writes; a lawyer someone who practices law and so on and so forth. We

all know what a prisoner is, but "what" defines said prisoner is the real question.

Consider the lives we lead....

Where do we find meaning? What gives it substance? For a father, he may find meaning in the learning, growing, accomplishments and ups and downs of his children. A doctor may feel her life has substance everytime she saves a life during surgery. A barista may find joy in providing a grumpy columnist that first morning coffee which always provokes a smile of gratitude. Yet, these are only singular aspects of daily life - family, work, social interactions. Furthermore, these are facets of general society life not prison life. While those of us at liberty may rejoice over any number of things and complain wholeheartedly over thousands more. A prisoner is denied the simplest luxury of complaining about trivialities. No traffic on the way to work. No water, garbage, electric bills or taxes. No parent/teacher conferences. No annoying, but cherished, relatives and in-laws during the holiday seasons. No strolls on a promenade on a nice autumn afternoon. Prisoners have no such freedoms. For many of us this would signify prisoners have no life. A reasonable conclusion but far from correct. There is life in these luxuriant residences, even if society questions its worth.

Prisoners do not stop being people when they are

locked away and society turns its back. A prisoner still craves affection, acceptance, interaction, meaningfulness. Many prisoners, the vast majority, experience the psychological traumas of isolation, abandonment, oppressive monotony, depression and a whole host of other complications. Think of Tom Hanks in "Cast Away." This is similar to what prisoners do everyday. They create a world in which they can live, progress, thrive and find meaning in. Forward progression is the constant, common human inclination. We are surprisingly resilient creatures. Prisoners give purpose to their existence once associates, friends, close friends and family have forgotten or abandoned them, and society shuns them.

We generally prejudice people but, in particular, we prejudice prisoners. We look at a prisoner or read of their exploits or record and easily pass severe judgment — By the by, (save a couple anomalies) they're a worthless lot. Our society can find redeeming attributes in drunks, addicts, deserters and national traitors (Benedict Arnold). Why do we have such difficulty doing the same regarding prisoners? Our attitude and perspective of prisoners, towards law and order and justice make it difficult.

First and foremost, prisoners are equivalent to slaves in the U.S., read Amendment XIII of the U.S. Constitution. With this in mind, consider what slaves were.

Essentially, nothing more than property; albeit cognizant property, but property nonetheless. Not even detailing the centuries of convict prejudice dating beyond the birth of this nation. In the last fifty years or so, the "tough on crime" stance has ingrained mental barriers, prejudices, which prevent us from seeing the prisoner as just another person. We illegitimize prisoners as people first, by stripping away most, if not all, rights we deem proper for common man. Next, we objectify prisoners with labels. Finally, we deny prisoners our and their own humanity. Should we doubt this. We need only scroll through the innumerable stories of deceased prisoners, inhumane treatment or conditions in prisons, or the media's spin on stories highlighting crime. Or, we can search vast court filings of abused/maltreated prisoners (who, by and large, receive no justice or recompense for wrongs suffered) on LexisNexis<sup>®</sup>. Eventhough we may be appalled by such occurrences. How many times have we thought, "well, serves them right, shouldn't have broke the law!"? As some unnamed genius once declared, "the proof is in the pudding."

We have a retributive justice system — an eye for an eye, symbolically speaking. For prisoners our retributive justice doesn't cease once judgement has been passed. Everything mentioned above and much more follows. Punishment only begins with sentencing and continues as long as one is identified as a 'felon.' As some 90% of all prisoners will be

released back into society. Perhaps, we should shift our concept of justice from retributive to restorative? After all, what is justice but the correction of a wrong done? A punishment in essence. We all comprehend this. As children when we did wrong we were punished to show us: 1) there are consequences; and 2) to enjoin us not to repeat the wrong. Now, imagine if we (as children) were punished in a similar manner as we (today) punish prisoners. In other words, imagine your life, your value as a person, retarded at the day you first got called into the Head Mistress's office; or, when you broke Grandma's vase because you were playing inside after being told not to; or, any number of other incidents. What would our lives be if we were eternally chastised as the six-year-old who stole one of Mrs. Tafuya's lemons from her lemon tree? Unfair? Unjust definitely. It may seem farfetched, but this is how we treat people who commit crimes today. Though, to change this we would need to drastically overhaul our perspectives on justice, crime and those who commit crimes.

In reality this is not a difficult task. In spite of how much and far we have become conditioned or accustomed to the idea that a prisoner is alien—other than human. Fact is, they aren't different or alien or whatever. Not sorry to debunk the myth. They go to bed at night and rise on the morn with the same preoccupations we do—will so and so be there? Will I have enough money for

such and such? Work tomorrow is going to be tough. Man! What am I doing with my life? Not so surprising, they have more than a few of our aspirations - higher education, secure financial future, a home, a family. Even a few of our loftier ones - raising children right, helping the helpless or unfortunate, contributing to the advancement of mankind. Prisoners even interact, socialize, experience daily life as we do.

"But we aren't criminals!" you say, and right you are. I would love to say we are absolutely correct in our prejudice, our negligent treatment, inattention, non-consideration, our disdain, our severe judgements. I would love to say it is simply black and white; criminals are villains - the bad guys. Fortunately, for all of society, that is not the case. A prisoner can still be a productive addition to society. Hugo Pinell is an exemplary instance. So are the prisoners adopted by each chapter of Amnesty International. Their crimes didn't disable their human capacity and humanity.

Prisoners are still humans, the same as us. As humans we all make mistakes. Failure is a lifelong lesson, perfection is for those who have never lived.

With guidance and perhaps, a little less thirst for vengeance (vindictiveness), we can make it so the ninety-something-odd percent of persons returning to society don't recidivate; but rather, rejoin society helping to enrich and advance it.