August 17th 2019

To: American Prison Writing Archive
(For inclusion in your program; I recently sent a survey form on one of my last essays)

The Delicate Difference

One of the most difficult things a writer in prison can do is to create a compelling case to the outside world to draw sympathy. This is mainly because there is a common belief that the inmate has nothing of value to say, and cannot be trusted.

Now, I grant you, there's truth to it - but its not absolute. There are many inmates who are trying to share the abuses they've gone through. Some did not get a fair trial, and was sentenced when they were actually innocent. Others, who were guilty, were sentenced with far too much time than the law allowed.

Many talk about prison violence and staff abuse, but many on the outside see it as "sour grapes", and don't give the inmate merit. Too often, the view of the inmate is overwhelmed by what prison officials tell the public. After all, who are you likely to believe; a prison officer... or a criminal?

This makes it difficult for a writer, such as myself, to make a compelling argument of staff persecuting inmates. Guys, please note; the punishment is to BE in prison; not to be tormented by staff. Yet, it happens far too often, and its difficult to explain this to the public.

This becomes even more difficult when the prison issues aren't as important on the scale. I can share with you a situation of a great moral connection with the public, and another that, while important to an inmate, would seem trivial to those on the outside. The latter makes it difficult to grasp the "Delicate Difference". To prove my point, here's an example of a situation most people may relate to (and yes, this actually happened). →

About a year ago (2015) an elderly man here at USP Tucson committed suicide - he hung himself. The staff here, not wanting to take the blame for the man's death (and likely a lawsuit) acted like he was still alive, and and proceeded to give the (dead) man chest compressions, but only until they got the body off the prison grounds, THEN declared him dead, thus relieving the prison of any fault. (Yes, this DID happen).

And while you might think that this is just part of prison, or that USP Tucson was not at fault, look closer, and understand the parts the prison won't tell you:

I knew of the man, an elderly Native American. He had been in prison a long time, and was advancing in Cerebral Palsy. It was slowly taking him, yet USP Tucson refused to give him the proper medication. So, he got a transfer to another prison, only to return to USP Tucson about a year later, because the other prison refused to help him.

The man returns to USP Tucson, where he was told that they could not (or would not) help him. The elderly man was now faced with the very real probability of his condition worsening to a tormenting level, with no course of help from BOP.

In short, they were leaving him to die, with no help.

I ask you, as a human being, under these circumstances, what was he supposed to do? What if it was your father, or grandfather? Is this humane, to leave a man in such a condition, with no hope at all? Rather than endure the coming years of torture, knowing the BOP and USP Tucson would only "watch him die", he felt that perhaps the best thing to do was to stop the pain - and end his life.

Have we gotten to this point, where a man's life has so little meaning, that if he is sick, humanity turns their back on him? I ask again, what was he supposed to do, if USP Tucson refused to help him? Yes, one can argue that suicide is never the answer... but if it were you...

So, in this situation, I can imagine that anyone could find some compassion in their heart regarding the loss of human life. You normally don't have to dig too deep

to find compassion in this case. But, does this apply so easily in my second situation (which is also a true account)?

For the last 5 weeks, the copy machine, label maker and printing machines here at USP Tucson have been down. Because of this, no one can make copies of documents such as legal work, creative works (like my essays) and other documents. USP Tucson says they're "waiting for a part", but most inmates believe it to be an excuse, and they simply dont want to fix it.

Now here, the situation may not be as compelling as the loss of a life. To many, if not most, this is trivial. Why should anyone care about the copier and labelmaker in a prison? In this is lost the Delicate Difference.

This isn't about a copy machine, or label maker, its about treating people fairly. Remember, the punishment is to BE in prison, not the persecution by staff. In any other business, if a machine or equipment breaks down, you fix it immediately. And if you're a government facility, there then can be no excuse for waiting FIVE weeks to fix a copier.

The prison (USP Tucson) put no notices of when the equipment was to be fixed, so all inmates needing copies or labels are inconvienced. The prison suggests that inmates needing copies can request it from the Counselors - ALL of which have working copy machines. But they don't tell you how difficult it is to find one; they are almost always "busy".

So, with at least 5 working copy machines available for staff, the inmates dont have reasonable access, and the only one we do have access to has been down for five weeks. This gives the impression that staff does not concern themselves when inmate equipment breaks down, but when it is staff equipment, it is fixed immediately.

And yet, the hypocrisy here is that if USP Tucson was due an inspection by the Regional Directors (which is merely a dog & pony show),

the prison will break their necks to fix everything they were too lazy to look at, to give the false impression that USP Tucson is "compliant".

Only when it benefits USP Tucson will they care to fix the things the inmates need. But its not for our benefit, its for them. So then, the staff has little regard or respect for the lives here...

Which explains more clearly the FIRST example I gave. Yet, in the Delicate Difference of the second example, compassion is lost, or not given a chance to bud.

Over the last 5+ years, I've written well over 500 essays on prison life. Many are inspirational, some are based on prison issues, but my intent, as likely every prison writer, is to touch the heart of every reader, to hopefully get them to see that every person deserves to be treated fairly, and that rehabilitation cannot succeed unless a person is given a chance to succeed.

And if the "gatekeepers" of rehabilitation are people who don't care about the inmates they work around, how then can society expect better people out of prison? Consider, every staff member is responsible, and accountable, to every inmate under their watch. To ignore that responsibility is a breach of humanity.

So, I share these issues, as I have on numerous sites, my essays and blogs, in hopes that the outside world can understand "The Delicate Difference", and help those in prisons who have been reaching out for help.

Stay tuned; I've got HUNDREDS more to share—