

The Great Penn Lockdown

My most regular correspondent, who is not a member of my natal family, recently summarized my incarcerative experience based on what I had written in my letters. He wrote, "It sounds like way too much people contact. In fact, it sounds like you are never alone, which would drive me crazy. Nor can I imagine being locked in a small room with someone who is a stranger." I recently had a chance to put his social theory to the test.

Periodic lockdowns and the associated shakedowns are a fact of life in prison. How they are conducted, however, varies widely between different facilities. I did the majority of my two to four-year sentence at a small, rural prison called the Southern State Correctional Facility (SSCF), which is located in Springfield, Vermont. <sup>That</sup> ~~This~~ prison consists of three separate residential buildings, which house about 350 inmates at a time. Lockdowns and shakedowns occur about once every six months at SSCF. A facility-wide shakedown can be completed in one long day. Usually all inmates are released from their cells by dinnertime.

For the past year, I have been residing in a private prison called the Tallahatchie County Correctional Facility (TCCF), which is located in Tutwiler, Mississippi. There are about 250 Vermont inmates living out-of-state in this facility that houses a total of 2300 inmates from multiple jurisdictions.

We endured our first lockdown in this facility from Tuesday, February 5 until Friday, February 8. We were all locked in our cells for four days straight. We were released from our cells after the shakedown in the MB living unit. The word around the day room after we got out was that this facility enforces a lockdown and performs a facility-wide shakedown once every twelve months. In reality, it happened again less than eight months later.

I was typing in the Inmate Law Library (ILL), located in the Multi-Purpose Room of the M-Building at 9:00 AM on Monday, September 23, 2019. The MB Correctional Counselor (CC) barged into the law library and announced, "This is an emergency headcount; please return to your cells!" I quipped, "If this is a true emergency, wouldn't it make more sense for us to just shelter in place?" The inmate law librarian suggested, "Let's pack it up, boys!" And just like that, we were locked down for the next four days straight.

I had been living with a 62 year-old Jamaican man named William Penn for the previous seven weeks. We originally met at the Northern State Correctional Facility (NSCF) in Newport, Vermont during a Christian chapel service late in the previous year. We were shipped to Mississippi by bus as members of a group of nineteen Vermont inmates in Mid-November, 2018. Since then, Penn has had four different subsequent roommates in the same cell. I have lived in three separate cells with a different associated bunkiein each one during the same time period. Some people here say that both Penn and I are hard to live with.

Penn and I came to live together on Monday, August 5, 2019. I quickly realized that our daily schedules are polar opposites. I tend to be more active in the morning, and Penn is more alert in the evening. I like to go to the law library in the morning and attend classes in the afternoon on weekdays. Penn likes to read the Bible and study his criminal case on his bottom bunk during the week. He likes to read for pleasure on the weekends. Penn cleans the cell every morning, usually while I am at the law library in the Multi-Purpose Room.

I try to stay out of the cell as much as possible on a normal day. Since I moved in with Penn, I have started eating all of <sup>My</sup> meals in the day room and washing my dishes in the public sink. That was obviously not possible during the most recent four-day lockdown.

I actually got a lot done in the cell during the lockdown. I completed building and staining a picture frame for my most regular correspondent. I painted a greeting card for my ex-girlfriend and a harvest card for my mom's boyfriend, who is a viticulturist. I read two books and one magazine. I copied two excerpts by hand out of one of the books that I had read. I wrote two letters and developed a summary syllabus for my Relapse Drug and Alcohol Prevention (R-DAP) class. Penn and I both watched the unfolding of the Trump Impeachment Inquiry on my television.

Needless to say, the time Penn and I spent locked in our cell together was both productive and entertaining. Overall, we cooperated pretty well during the most recent lockdown.

We helped each other reorganize the room after it had been trashed by the cops during the shakedown on Thursday morning. At one point during the lockdown, Penn had declared, "<sup>Bruno</sup>~~Bruce~~, I love you like a brother, but sometimes you get on my nerves!" Penn and I definitely have our differences, but we certainly are not strangers.

Afterword:

I moved out of Penn's cell on Thursday, October 3. I got dragged to the hole (solitary confinement) on Friday, October 11. I returned to the General Population (GP) on Thursday, October 17. Now I live in the G-13 living unit, which is located in the main building, with a new cellmate. We may have started out as strangers, but we got to know each other very quickly. I appreciate his company most of the time. It sure is a lot better than living alone in the hole. (12/3/19)