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The title of this essay is 'The Purpose of Prison' by Robert Sharp.

At the age of 40, after having spent most of my adult life in prisons, with another 20 years ahead of me for a wrongful conviction, I fail to see the purpose incarceration serves. Is the purpose to reform an individual? Is it an opportunity for an individual to repay a debt to society? Is the purpose to protect society from an individual? Or is it to use an incarcerated individual as an example to others, lest they meet the same fate? Incarceration may just be a form of terror used against an individual to force them to submit to the will of the state. Whatever its purpose, a judge has never honestly articulated what ends were to be met by warehousing me for days or decades.

If the purpose of imprisoning me was reform, the state could not have gone about it in a worse manner. My first time in prison was in the notorious maximum security prison in Joliet, Illinois. I was a teen my first time there. I would be sent there, and later the equally notorious Statesville, for selling \$75.00 in marijuana to a vice cop. My first cell mate was a crack dealer and member of Chicago's most deadly street gang. We became friends in the same way most men become friends when they're forced to share a few square feet and a toilet behind a locked door. Outside the cell I would become acquainted with dealers of every drug imaginable, murderers, armed robbers, pimps, rapists, thieves and any petty crime you can imagine. Everybody was a member of

a street gang or a prison gang. The most influential prisoners were members of drug cartels and what used to be called the Outfit. There was a hierarchy of criminals in Joliet, as in all prisons. At the top of the pyramid were the smartest and often times the most violent men. They were divided mostly by gangs and race. At the bottom of the pyramid were the most desperate and simple prisoners, broken men. Below even them were child predators and those discovered to have cooperated with the authorities - rats. These people were murdered for sport, with the silent acquiescence of staff making just over minimum wage. The economy in the prison was fueled by drugs, with heroin being the main staple. There were more addicts than there was accessible smack though, so the prices were high. Whoever had the most heroin usually had the most power. I saw more drugs in prison than I ever saw in society. I entered Joliet as a small time pot dealer and left with connections to local, national and international crime syndicates. I was not reformed by prison, I was deformed by it.

If the purpose of incarcerating me was to repay a debt to society, society should request a refund. Upon my release from selling \$75.00 of marijuana, I would next be imprisoned for possessing about \$300.00 in crack-cocaine. This time I would be federally prosecuted and sentenced to eleven years. The federal government would snatch away all of my twenties and pay over \$200,000.00 to incarcerate me for a decade. For that decade the state would also support my infant daughter, on the public dole, which was

compounded by emotional costs which can never be paid. Then there is my poverty stricken mother, one of these members of society supposedly crying out that my debt be repayed to them, who would spend the next decade crying over the loss of her only child. She would spend some of her meager earnings from a minimum wage part time job to visit me in far off prisons. She would feel obligated to send me money, as she had before me with my imprisoned father, so I could call home and find small measures of comfort a few dollars can find you in prison. Now, with just 5 years in on a non violent drug sentence of 30 years, my daughter will have only known me for a few of her 20 years, I'll never meet my granddaughter and my mother will languish in a nursing home alone after suffering a stroke this past year. Is this how a just society requires me to repay a debt, by keeping me from my obligations ~~as~~ <sup>as</sup> a father or only son? Is the suffering and neglect of the people I love, their harm, payment enough? Is society content caring for them as I'm warehoused decade after decade because I had the audacity to sell something the government created an insatiable demand for? My incarceration only increases debts to society, none of which will be paid by me.

Is the purpose of these sentences really to protect society from me? Twenty years after I was released from one of the world's most notorious prisons for selling an ounce of marijuana the state of Illinois reversed

course and legalized marijuana. The state is now expunging the marijuana convictions previously imposed, 770,000 of them, including mine. After I'd served a decade in federal prisons all around the nation, far from my home, the politicians who once believed I had to be punished at one hundred times the rate for possessing rock cocaine instead of powder cocaine, also reversed course. Now they determined the disparity was draconian and racist and they made the 2 equal, lowering the crack ratio to the equivalent of powder. This occurred 5 years after my release, and while the change couldn't restore the 8 extra years which had been stolen from me by a draconian and racist sentence, at least some of them who passed the original law muttered general apologies.

I had the privilege to encounter one of my old crack customers who society protected from me for a decade, the crack addicted prostitute who set me up for her \$50 in Crime Stoppers reward money. Ten years later she still enthusiastically smoked crack, she was still a prostitute, and she still executed controlled buys for the policemen she engaged in inappropriate sexual relationships with. While I'd been away she'd killed another person in a car accident while intoxicated, been convicted of perjury for lying in court about her role in the death of an elderly man she married for his money, and had been implicated in a gangland murder where her car was used to transport a murder victim in its trunk. I wasn't incarcerated to protect her, I was incarcerated so the state could justify not incarcerating her. Was society

better served by imprisoning me to allow her to continue her crimes? The state's actions endangered society even more with their actions, which resulted in 3 needless deaths.

Is the purpose of my incarceration to deter others from committing the same crime I committed? If so, I never encountered anybody who informed me my incarceration influenced their actions. The people I'd sold drugs to prior to my incarceration were still using the same drugs from before my decade of incarceration, after my release. There was no shortage of people who were eager to fill the void created by my imprisonment. My own father was sentenced to 20 years for dealing heroin and imprisoned from the time I was 5 until I was 15. His imprisonment did not deter me. Neither did it discourage my police detective step father from stealing drugs from a police evidence locker to give to my mother. Other police from his department weren't discouraged from purchasing drugs from me to share with their mistresses. Not even a States Attorney who had once prosecuted me for a drug crime was deterred from buying cocaine through me. I don't know a single person who changed their actions, attitudes or appetites based on my incarceration.

It's evident the most effective purpose of prison has been to influence my actions through terror. Prison is designed to force you into submission when all other tactics have failed. Every incarceration follows the same pattern. It begins with me being led by armed guards

into a place with high stone walls that resembles a medieval fortress or a place surrounded by fences that hold several rows of concertina wire that resemble updated versions of World War II era concentration camps. Regardless of wall or fence, there's always been guard towers occupied by trigger happy guards whose paychecks depend upon shooting any of the tortured souls therein should they attempt an escape or engage in any disturbance within their perimeter. Every entrance is the same. The manacled men on the bus become stone silent as the bus approaches the prison as their hearts fall into their stomachs, and they become filled with fear, dread, or both. Then you are marched under armed guard into a courtyard in chains, much the same way slaves were offloaded from boats over 200 years ago. While being processed like human chattel you are stripped of your birth name which gets replaced by a number. Dehumanizing an individual to the people paid to treat them as subhuman is easier when the individual is stripped of his individuality, such as his name. After you have been examined and deboused you will then be led to some sort of auditorium. In there you will be warned by some midlevel perfunctionary in a cheap suit that the Warden is on his way and you best treat this great man with respect. When the great man arrives he will make a short speech letting you know you're in his house and you will do as he says, and as the man in the cheap suit says, and you will obey the hundred or so others who work for him. Or else. And you don't want or else. After the speech you will be led to a temporary cell. In the maximum security

Prisons of Illinois, like Menard, this temporary cell is small and dungeon like. There is not any lighting. Inside the room of limestone blocks and century old steel bars you have to keep you company a fetid toilet, a stained mattress, roaches, rats, and the shrieks of the other tormented souls entombed among you. You may spend days like this before being released into population.

You are almost relieved to be led to your small cell in population after this, until you realize you will be spending years in this cubicle not big enough for yourself, but with at least one but maybe 2 other men. In a federal prison I was at on the Florida-Alabama state line your bunks came from the wall, concrete slabs, 3 high, resembling ancient mortuary slabs, which didn't provide enough room for you to sit up in. If you don't like these amenities though you are more than welcome to a single cell in the prison's Special Housing Unit, their moniker for solitary confinement, what prisoners universally call the hole, most appropriately. You will find yourself here for rule infractions, if you're targeted by other inmates, or on the whim of a petty sadist guard. I spent over 6 months in the hole once because I filed a lawsuit against the warden for illegally opening letters from my attorney. Your mind unravels in solitary confinement until you're feeble, given enough time. Solitary confinement is the most effective weapon of the sadist, not even a committed masochist can withstand it for long.

The monotony of prison life is interrupted by regular violence. You grow accustomed and apathetic to most of it, such as fist fights and stabbings, because

They are so common. It's the spontaneous mass violence of riots that get your attention. I've survived 3 of them so far. In the first one at Joliet or Menard, I was wedged into a stairwell descending into a dining hall when a prisoner behind me had his intestines flayed open with a homemade razor. Instantly, before you even realize the screaming, you smell the victims excrement leaving his body and can taste the iron from his blood in the air. When the stampeding bodies from the stairwell pushed me into the dining hall the scene was surreal. Most of the inmates were fighting each other with reckless abandon, with an animalistic furor I'd never seen before. Other inmates hid under steel tables which were already pitted from the shotgun blasts that quelled previous riots. The guards were firing dozens of shots indiscriminately into the mob from the ceiling and the backshot was ricocheting all over the room. When it was over the entire room was bathed in blood. In subsequent federal prison riots I'd witnessed mens scalps stomped off the tops of their heads and a guys eyeball being kicked from its socket before it was crushed under the boot of the other guy jumping on his head. These images never leave you.

In retrospect, looking back on my life in prison, I'm certain the government uses incarceration to force people to submit to their will. It's an effective use of terror. But for a false conviction I would not have returned. Ruling through terror takes us back to our Roman origins. The Ceasars would publicly crucify people, George Washington would exhibition public hangings and we build



Massive Cathedrals to warehouse people for decades when they fail to follow the decrees of politicians. It's an effective way to rule an empire. Although I hope this system of maintaining order through terror comes to an end before I complete the rest of my 30 year sentence for a nonviolent vice crime, I am not optimistic. I recall the words of Churchill in this regard, that the United States can always be counted upon to do the right thing, after every other option has been exhausted.

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