

July 7, 2020

The New Normal

The stern countenanced judge sat upon his pulpit and placated an outraged community by condemning me to eight years in the Colorado Department of Corrections on two separate economic crime cases. I appeared stoic but felt numb, my stomach began to churn and my knees wobbled. At 39, raised in a dysfunctional middle-class, blue-collar, suburban family, I'd only spent one night in county jail, when I was arrested on felony theft charges, more than a year prior. I wasn't as prepared as I should have been to face a prison sentence. My defense attorney repeatedly mentioned the possibility, but he seemed sure that my complete absence of other criminal history warranted a term in community corrections, despite the magnitude of my offense. In hindsight, it's obvious to see how my betrayal of trust with the theft of obscenely large sums of money and no obvious motive like substance abuse, was an outrageous breach deserving incarceration. Placing me in a restricted environment where I would be supervised and required to support myself financially as well as begin paying restitution to my victims was not considered punishment enough. Removing me from society was more desirous than healing the mental health and domestic violence cycle I survived or damage I had caused.

I had been a contract bookkeeper for a medical practice, and issued checks to myself from the business account, embezzling almost \$300,000 during the roughly four years I was there. In the second case, I volunteered as treasurer for a local business networking group and stole just over \$6,000 in a year. I pled guilty to the theft because I chose to accept responsibility for my poor judgment. There is simply no excuse. Nobody I knew had any idea how I was maintaining my home, vehicle payments, food or any of the social events I attended. It was grossly negligent and I rationalized my ongoing theft repeatedly, telling myself "just this once." It never ended though, as I careened from one "crisis" to another. My theft was discovered when the CPA prepared tax returns sometime after my contract concluded. Four years later, police officers knocked at my apartment door late one night, getting me out of bed. They had been at my home before for a domestic disturbance call when my ex-fiancé refused to leave after a physical altercation. The officers were professional and kind while they arrested me, allowing me to put on a winter coat and boots to wear on the ice.

Being raised in a home filled with mental, emotional, and physical abuse, it shouldn't come as any surprise that I chose men with addictions who were dangerous. With no example at home of respectful partnership, I chased after situations that were malicious at best. Eventually I married a man who couldn't bear a single day without getting high or drunk repeatedly. He refused to hold a job for any stable period of time and my income from multiple part-time jobs wasn't enough to fund our ever-increasing lifestyle. We didn't qualify for financial assistance, it appeared we had two incomes and no children. I couldn't keep a roof over our heads and saw no other solution except to take money that was not mine. I finally walked away after he took a baseball bat to a stranger's car parked on the public street in front of our house in a drunken rage. I rented and furnished an apartment with stolen money, and quietly hired movers to help me while he was away. I continued to steal as we divorced, sold the house we never should have bought, and secured a townhome which required a huge financial investment to make inhabitable. I selected a man recently released from prison and financially supported him and his infant daughter while he completed parole and unsuccessfully attempted to curb my frazzled emotions with money to regain equilibrium, which never happened. I've learned that my triggers are stability based, originating from low self-esteem caused by my adoption as an infant. I believed I needed to acquire both friendship and romantic relationships, precisely creating the downward spiral of self-worth and abandonment issues that I refused to acknowledge. At my

sentencing in June 2012, I had been married and divorced twice, had no children, and severed ties to the toxic family that raised me. I felt alone and adrift in the world, having no significant connections to formalize my existence. I believed the delusion that I didn't matter and had created relationships that corroborated that. In the months leading up to my sentencing, I seriously contemplated suicide, and saw no reason to continue an existence that I thought had been thoroughly destroyed. I imagined how to do it, trying to visualize some method that wouldn't be too painful or bloody, leaving a mess for some unfortunate stranger to have to clean up. Months later, the legal eviction process allowed my landlord to empty the apartment and all my personal possessions landed in a heap to be picked through by the dumpster vultures, scavenging through furniture, clothing, cooking utensils, journals, records, history, prized childhood mementos.....all the leftover detritus of a life unwillingly left behind.

After the gavel hammered down, a sheriff's deputy led me to the empty jury box and handcuffed me. Petrified and shocked, we moved through a door at the front of the courtroom and he navigated around dark corners and through bleak corridors as I was escorted to central processing. A female deputy pointed me to a small, white concrete room, filled with metal shelving and supplies. I was cold and humiliated as she told me to strip fully naked and learned the squat and cough procedure that I would need to adapt to immediately. Tears formed, which I quickly swallowed, even a novice recognizing that weakness in this place was a recipe for disaster. My clothing and purse contents were inventoried and bagged up to be stored. I was given white underwear, socks, t-shirt and a uniform of red and white striped shirt and elastic waistband pants with orange flip-flops to wear, JCSO printed in large block letters down the pant leg. I was booked into the county jail and fingerprinted, photographed, escorted here and there, to wait on a bench or in a holding cell and then taken to another small room to wait some more, signing forms and generally felt lost and confused. I answered questions regarding medication needs, mental state, past criminal history, family and friends. Nobody was interested in explaining what was happening or next steps. That complete lack of communication endured throughout my experience with incarceration. The system doesn't explain anything to prisoners and they don't appreciate intelligence or proactive problem solving. I was offered a free phone call, but there was nobody to call, not a soul who cared where I was or what had just happened. The few people that I had told about my legal proceedings came to see me at the jail later that day and I've never seen or spoken to them again. They were stunned at the sentence but also overwhelmed as they heard details of how long I had persisted in pilfering money. My shame had made it impossible for me to be completely honest with them. Understandably they must have felt violated or angry and weren't willing to continue a relationship with someone who had kept so much from them.

Several hours later, I was led to a roughly 6 foot by 8 foot cell with a concrete shelf for a bed and a metal sink and toilet inside, called a wet cell because of the water inside, with no privacy for bodily functions. Soon another girl arrived, and we had to place a "boat" on the floor to hold a mattress, making it a two person cell. I was issued a pair of dingy white sheets and two scratchy blue, woolen blankets along with a small hygiene kit containing a golf pencil, short toothbrush, clear toothpaste, a bar of lye soap, and a black comb. I received more uniforms and undergarments to wear while in jail. We were fed three meals a day but mostly I was too anxious to eat more than a few bites. The food was neither fresh nor tasty, with abundant starchy carbs but nothing fried or crispy. I felt disoriented and kept still, not interacting with the other women, unaware of the implicit norms of this unfamiliar culture, which was completely foreign to me. All of the DOC bound girls were housed together so I began to hear some of what I was about to suffer through as I transferred out of county jail. I refused to respond when asked about my charges or how long my sentence was and I didn't ask questions either, keeping my ears open even as I listened to others talk while we watched the single television mounted on the wall. Some played card games while others raided a bleak book cart, filled mostly with ripped bibles and tattered romance novels. Cells are never completely dark, security is

paramount, and staff must be able to see into the cells. They called "lights out" but the lights are merely dimmed, never off. That was revelatory.

Three days later we were woken up around 3am. Staff wouldn't say but another inmate explained that we were being transported to the Denver Reception and Diagnostic Center (DRDC) where they process you into the state penitentiary. I had no idea what was transpiring and discovered that you aren't allowed to bring anything into prison, except for a bible, mail you've received in jail, and limited unopened hygiene products. That day clearly showed the new realm of hurry up and wait which is systemic in corrections. There was a lot of going into one room for hours, then being moved to a different one to wait some more. The front wall and door of the holding tanks was thick, clear glass and there were cameras in all the corners, so you could be seen from any angle, privacy eliminated. This must be what zoo animals feel like. We were given a sack lunch of something resembling bologna with sliced cheese, bread and milk but it tasted like dust to me so I gave it away. Hours later we walked with our heads down, hands clasped behind our backs, single file next to the wall, not allowed to talk to any nearby male prisoners as officers chatted, sipped coffee and leisurely decided when and how to arrange us before shackling our feet and handcuffing us with a large chain wrapped around our waists. Four of us awkwardly made our way to a cargo van where we made the ungainly climb into vinyl bench seats with no seat belts. The van meandered around the city and made several stops, picking up more women who were sentenced to prison, some of them clad only in paper jumpsuits. The calendar said summer but it was bleak and dismal in the rear of that windowless metal box, dampening our spirits. It was noontime when we pulled up to a large brick compound, drove past barbed wire, and made our way through the chain link fences. We struggled out the back of the van and our feet were unshackled to allow us to walk into the unknown halls. The handcuffs were removed when we entered the building and I wasn't surprised when I saw red welts around both wrists.

We were guided to a large white, concrete holding cell. The room filled quickly, some forced to sit on the floor. I was surprised how easily some slept. A few of the women clearly recognized each other or loudly made it known that this was habitual for them. We were taken to smaller holding rooms as they split apart the returns from the new arrivals. We newbies were taken to cold showers to de-lice and demoralize. We removed the county clothing and were provided a yellow t-shirt, oversized orange jumpsuit with short sleeves, underwear and socks. Those of us with tattoos had to be photographed for documentation, with only a towel to preserve our modesty. Staff shouted to turn this way, move there, hurry up, or stop! It was chaotic, no tolerance was given if you couldn't hear or had no idea of how this system worked. We were told to memorize the number assigned to us, now our identity, and we received identification cards and ill-fitting men's boots to wear. We waited to meet with staff to provide answers to questions about gang affiliation, faith practices, mental health diagnosis, medical history, past criminal activity, and did we know anyone who worked for the Department of Corrections? It felt never-ending. They handed out brown paper sacks with a piece of what the more experienced inmates called coffee cake. In theory, that snack was supposed to tide us over until dinnertime, which was impossible, we hadn't eaten since early that morning. We waited to meet with a dentist who gave a cursory examination and x-ray and saved the records into the computer system for future reference.

Drained, we were finally taken to the Diagnostic Unit (DU's), where we were assigned a cell by ourselves in a concrete room much like to what I had been in while at the county jail. There was a thin grey mattress and pillow on the concrete bed and a small metal desk and chair mounted to the wall. This room had a television stand installed on the wall and a ledge next to the sink. I was issued a hygiene pack very similar to the one I collected in jail except this one included a small flexible pen and a roll of toilet paper. We received a pair of ratty navy blue sheets and itchy, dark grey cotton blankets. The door popped loudly behind me and over the speaker in the wall, someone yelled to come out for dinner trays. I poked my head out, and seeing

others headed down the stairs, I followed to collect the clunky brown plastic tray to eat in my cell. I don't remember now what it was. Later the door buzzed again as an officer yelled over the intercom to return the trays to the cart. I recall trailing others around a lot to get hints of where to go next. It had been an exhausting day. Freezing cold and feeling shattered, I crawled under the blankets wearing my jumpsuit and t-shirt to get warm. Count was announced. This is when you have to go stand in front of the narrow window at the door and two officers come around to see your face and identification card, accounting for everybody. This standing, formal count procedure happens thrice daily, with two more occurring overnight, while we sleep. I finally drifted off, listening to the wails and screams of the women around me, many of whom are coming off a cocktail of drugs or who had mental health issues that weren't yet being medicated. So many new experiences to be endured on this introduction to prison.

Early the next morning, around 5am, a voice yelled over the intercom to come get breakfast trays. The door opened with an obnoxiously loud click. Bleary-eyed, I rose and collected a tray that had juice, hard-boiled eggs, and lumpy oatmeal with burned toast. It wasn't horrible, better than what the county jail provided, and I needed fuel. I returned my tray and went back to sleep for several hours. We were woken by an officer who yelled over the intercom to wake up and go and we were led like baby ducks to a classroom in another building. We completed several standardized tests that we never received the results from. As we were led over to the laundry area to have our uniforms issued, we were stared at by other inmates in the bleak yard and many yelled hello to people they recognized. We were encouraged to try everything on and once it fits well enough, every item was tagged with our name and DOC number and we were warned not to destroy state property or trade items with anyone else or face unspecified consequences. We were provided with five pairs of white underwear, white socks and white bras; three green short-sleeved shirts and elastic banded pants, five yellow short-sleeved t-shirts, two pairs yellow basketball shorts to sleep in, a brown long sleeved coat, blue knit hat, a white mesh laundry bag, two white towels, and a large green duffle bag to store it all in. We also received an electric razor. I noticed that some girls didn't receive theirs and learned that "regresses" (returns from community corrections) who had been issued one previously aren't issued another razor at state expense. If someone has money, they can purchase one for approximately \$25.00 each. In jail, we could check out a non-electric razor to shave with. In Colorado prison's the men can purchase razors from catalog but women cannot. In general, men tend to be more violent, fighting more often amongst themselves. One might assume that providing that population a sharp object would be dangerous, however, DOC assumes that only women will purposely cut themselves, and so women cannot have a regular razor to shave with, further punishing all of our gender for other people's mental health trauma's.

We returned to our cells to drop off our laundry and eat lunch. After lunch, we were allowed an hour out of our cells, which was our opportunity to shower. You had to repeatedly push a button to maintain lukewarm water running. After I dried off and dressed, I looked around and found some beat up westerns, mysteries and happily, a science fiction novel. I grabbed several and returned to my cell. Later, we were taken to medical and given tuberculosis tests, along with a gynecological exam. Blood was drawn for testing and both vision and hearing tests were administered. Before afternoon count, we lined up and met with the programmer, who explained briefly that the eight years I was sentenced to was not what I would serve, as long as I stayed out of trouble. He explained earned time, which is how many days we can receive off our sentence as long as we follow the rules, and estimated our initial parole eligibility dates. My F3 meant I was classified at medium security and could potentially earn up to 10 days off my sentence each month. I returned to my cell with a small piece of paper, and wondered how all of this time calculation worked. The programmer didn't answer my questions fully, which is how most things function in the Department of Corrections. Nothing seems logical or is ever explained, which causes a serious lack of communication and transparency. Referred to as the Department of Confusion by inmates for multiple reasons, bureaucracy moves glacially slow

and rarely does the left hand know what the right hand is doing. It is vexing and the lack of being able to control anything within your sphere, despite being an adult, causes frustration. Negative attention is still attention. If you act a little crazy when you are first processed, the system documents that behavior and when actions improve, it appears as cognitive change, even if you haven't made any internal adjustments. If you are medicated, reserved, scared and cannot open up on command to strangers, the image is that you are hostile or refuse to take accountability. When the system cannot pigeonhole you, it doesn't allow for the appearance of transformation, no matter how hard you work on civilizing yourself. If you haven't been previously diagnosed with mental illness or prescribed medications, the system assigns you a "P" score that doesn't permit you to participate in mental health classes. I have experienced trauma since I was a toddler but cannot attend Seeking Safety, the only trauma class offered, to work on resolving pain and learning coping mechanisms. There is no talk therapy in corrections, despite the immense need for it.

That evening, after dinner, we were called out of our cells and handed a small booklet called the Code of Penal Discipline which are the institutions consequences for a variety of offenses. We then watched a mandatory orientation video on PREA (Prison Rape Elimination Act). It was made abundantly clear that there is no consensual sex in prison, on any level, and we were provided information on how to report any sexual misconduct or harassment we observed. We are forbidden to touch each other, not even a brief embrace when someone is distressed or grieving. We were cautioned to not allow staff or other inmates to victimize us or anyone else. The joke became "don't take the chips" which is a common reference to a scene in the video where a "fish" (a new arrival) with no hygiene or snacks is offered a bag of potato chips by an older inmate, which she gratefully accepts. That seemingly kind gesture creates the appearance of "owing" someone and payment can come due in the form of sexual favors, which are strictly prohibited. Bullying and manipulation happen regularly. After the video, an officer handed out phone lists and we were told to fill out the first three lines to be submitted for approval. You cannot pick up a phone and dial a ten-digit number. Picture speed dial where we enter our DOC number, a PIN code and then the two digit number assigned to the person we want to call for it to be connected and the receiver must accept the call. You cannot add victims or codefendants. Calls cost \$2.40 for twenty minutes and you order telephone time on weekly canteen or your friends/family purchase telephone time on their end. It's a confusing system that isn't easily navigated, especially for the technologically challenged.

Once the diagnostic portion of processing is completed, which lasted two weeks, we were moved across the yard to general population. We were placed in Unit 5. As behavior improved, you could be transferred to other units with additional privileges. There are concrete floors, a microwave available in the common area called a day hall and two showers in a hallway, with toilets and sinks in the cells. We shared cells now, despite the fact that they aren't larger than the ones we just came from. There are metal bunks instead of the concrete shelf and locker boxes to store our property. My first roommate was very kind and helpful, who had been processed a few weeks before me, and willing to patiently answer questions. Gold kites are used to send questions to any staff and inferior medical, dental and behavioral health care is solicited by completing a Request for Sick Call form. It takes weeks to be seen by a nurse. Appointment times are posted in housing units every evening, for the next day, and missed appointments, because you don't know where to find the list, are charged \$3 and a new Sick Call must be submitted to reschedule. Emergencies costs \$5 and usually, you're sent away being admonished to drink more water and buy ibuprofen off canteen. Prescribed medications are taken by going to "med-line", which is available at meal times, and staff regularly crushes extended release pills, negating the time lapsed effect. People walk around high, doing what we call the Seroquel Shuffle, incoherent and barely mobile. Dirty clothes are collected three times weekly in mesh bags and transported to the laundry area to be processed. They are often returned wet, with items missing. We no longer eat in our cells, instead we walk over to a chow hall to access meals. Walking in the yard requires walking one direction

on specific sidewalks. We're not supposed to speak to other inmates, but people regularly do anyway, with limited consequences. Lack of personal responsibility is a general obstacle. When one acts counter to policy, all are held accountable, locked down or privileges removed. Gender is not considered. The men have behaved badly and all of us have lost regular sized toothbrushes, television remotes, oils, baking soda, specific brands of soap and even tablets. The women have done nothing to squander these, but we still lost them and the men have access to more higher paying jobs, additional food and have access to hobby workshops, expanded programs and re-entry resources.

I'm out of my element and it's difficult and demeaning. This crucible is draining, unlike anything I could have conceived of. I began to establish a small group of acquaintances and learned how to access the library, recreation and faith services. Cliques formed and I noticed that nearly everything seen on reality television related to incarceration isn't standard. Surrounded by predators, not everyone wants to leave criminal behavior in their past. I didn't think I was raised in a sheltered environment, but I learned things that I never wanted to know about guns, sex, drugs, boosting, robbery, gangs, violence and other criminal activity. Some of these girls are incredibly young but have survived horrible trauma, perpetrated by families or men they thought loved them. There are also amazing women who are strong and gracious, easing the way for others, learning and growing beyond their circumstances. With only two women's prisons in Colorado, we are all housed together, with no racial or religious segregation, or separation of violent and non-violent offenses. This concrete jungle is distorted and cut off. You are removed from everything you know and rapidly learn that control is a mirage. I remember feeling alarmed and nauseous constantly, terrified that I was going to get jumped due to ignorance or simply because others found it amusing. I kept my eyes down, not commenting on anything that happened around me in violation of the published rules. At home, I had been taught "if you see something, say something" but here, being called a snitch is a label nobody wants. Despite being an adult, we are treated as if we are children, incapable of rational thought. Our book and movie options are dictated by policies that mandate nothing that contains sex, violence, gang activity or rated above PG-13. The thirty television channels we can access are designated for us along with the menu.

DOC doesn't supply much at no cost to the inmate. You must purchase basic hygiene supplies like deodorant, soap, shampoo or toothpaste and you will incur a negative balance to acquire necessities. The only items freely given are toilet paper weekly and one package of pads each month. Once you deplete what they provided, you purchase more or wait until next months "state issue". Living on the taxpayer funded "state pay" means you earn eighty-six cents a day, if you have full-time assignment, and the state takes twenty percent of every dollar placed on your inmate banking account, whether state funded or from outside support. As a non-violent, non-drug offender with restitution of approximately half a million dollars before interest, I typically live on state pay of less than \$18 monthly. The \$4 taken from me for restitution doesn't even begin to cover the interest I owe, never mind actually paying my victims back. The rest of that ridiculously low state pay, barely covers basic hygiene items and writing supplies to stay in contact with my support system, never mind phone time, coffee, food or long-sleeved clothing to stay warm. Sitting here, on the taxpayer's dime at the cost of roughly \$40,000 annually, makes no impact on restorative justice or rehabilitation. When low-security inmates are supervised living in the community, working and paying for our physiological needs, even making minimum wage, we could pay more in restitution than we do now, supporting ourselves, instead of being a burden on the system, cogs in the mass industrial prison complex.

The most frightening situation I experienced, validated my fears about the officers not being helpful. I was in Unit 3, sharing the usual two man cell, living with my fifth or sixth roommate. It was canteen delivery day and I was excited because I had been able to order canteen and had coffee and some snacks, thrilled to eat a Snickers bar. Two male officers came to the door as we were quietly reading and yelled at us to get out. I was confused, not knowing that shake downs are a regular part of prison. This is where they go through all

your property, looking for contraband, which is a vague description for anything that you are not supposed to have or they don't want you to have. My roommate quickly explained the drill as we stepped out onto the tier. I wasn't worried, I didn't have anything we're not supposed to. I had only been here two months and, naively, was still under the illusion that keeping your head down kept you out of harm's way. Eventually, they stepped out of our cell and one asked where we got it. Got what? He accused loudly, leaned in, and berated us. My cellie and I looked at each other, clearly confused. He got nastier and accused us of hiding a shank in our bunk. This was a serious offense, shanks are a weapon, fashioned out of whatever inmates can get their hands on to sharpen. I probably don't have to clarify that no, we didn't have one. After I was sobbing and trembling in fear, he chuckled and asked why I was upset. He was just kidding around, he explained, and wanted to school us on what not to do. It was abhorrent! We returned to our cell and found that they had flung our bedding around and the contents of property boxes had been scattered and tossed. I finished cleaning up, and found that my Snickers bar was missing. I already knew that reporting the loss was futile. This structure had determined that I'm less than human and people wearing green are never believed over staff in blue. Welcome to my new normal.