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separately - Thanks -

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APWA

In the beginning was The word,

And occasionally prison staff will abuse,
distort, and manipulate The word to present
deceptive or creative obfuscation.

Do you really believe that the "French Onion
Soup" on the prison chow menu is French
Onion Soup? Or that the "Texas Hash" is
actually Texas Hash? If you are a legislator or
a citizen you could be forgiven for thinking
that prisoners dine in restaurant style.

But once you see - or taste - many of
the concoctions present, your opinion of
prison truth in advertising will change.

What is a processed chicken patty?
Why does the "orange juice" taste like
water? Does a gathering of turkey parts
with broth and a few green beans make
the dish a "pot pie"? Where's the pot?
Where's the crust? Where's the pie?

No onions in the French Onion?
Look carefully - submerged in the salty
water you may find a crust of onion
skin. The French - and The Texans
would be shamed by the irreverent use
of their names.

In 18 years I have seen 30 food items dropped from prison menus, often in favor of processed meats. There is nothing "Cajun" about "Cajun Turkey Patties".

Fortunately, an apple is still an apple. I have read that the ultimate arbiter of legal reality is the legislature. If the solons in Raleigh should say that a dog is a rabbit, then that becomes the law. So what definition should be used, to describe the words "Reform" and "Rehabilitation".

I heard a state official on the radio state that NC prisons have abandoned rehabilitation - that was during another election cycle.

Take the word rehabilitation. Loosely, the word should mean "to live again". So how should this "live again" work for released inmates? Does the word mean "to live again as before"? Homeless, addicted, mentally ill, unemployed, disabled - under a bridge somewhere?

The value of rehabilitation can be appreciated through popular and meaningful vocational classes such as Electronics, Industrial maintenance, Heating and Air. No quarrel there.

But, for example, the "quality" of a "class" for rehabilitation purposes can be - forgive me - "strained." Not long ago I signed up for a class entitled "Human Resources Development." I assumed, from the words that my skills and opportunities involving Human Resources would benefit from this course of study upon my release.

The instructor announced, at the first class meeting that the class would be taught on a "4th Grade level."

And, true to his word, it was.

We practiced crossword puzzles and watched cable quality movies nearly every day. I found little joy in the scanty human resources. I did note that a member of the classmates could sleep sitting up in a chair.

Words in prison have power. We call this vocabulary "PRISONese." Other than curse words the phrase you will hear most in prison are "I love you, bro." You'll hear it all day. "I love ya, bro," can mean "Thank you for recognizing my uniqueness," or "Thank you for the Suboxone" last night." Nevertheless, words can begin or end friendship in prison - quickly.

Words used by staff can, from experience, be suspect. Recently the NC system announced "free" tablets "soon" for everyone. If you believe that the tablets are free I have some French onion soup to sell you - two stamps - cheap.

There are some weighty words that alert us to absolute authority in some situations, such as "security and good order," which may or may not be used to describe a right of staff and/or prisoner. Just depends on the situation.

At This moment, as a prisoner, I am confused by The Terms "Rehabilitation" and "Reform."

As I have noted, To re-habilitate means to live again, in some manner, hopefully better than before incarceration - maybe not.

Look at "Reform." The word is all over The media, The election platforms, The internet. There's ample reason for reform, if we could all agree on what the word means.

What is it about The word "form" that needs a "re." I can only offer 18 years of personal - intimate - observation - The FORM of prison that needs "re" is a dangerous, corruptive, and deceptive form, hidden like a Potemkin Village was hidden from Catherine the Great.

What goes on behind Those walls? Place a few ropes and distrust attorneys and defense attorneys inside - incognito - a prison for a week and

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believe me, they'll soon be hollerin' for release. No documentary, text, or memoir can describe - adequately - the evolution of NC prisons unless you've ridden that tiger.

By all means let us reform prisons. First we must carefully examine the reality of that beast, not some movie or TV crime series.

Words used inside and outside prisons can have very different meanings. Learn the language of policy makers and those that it is directed towards. Then ask yourselves "What is the purpose of prison in NC in 2020, and is that mission humanitarian, realistic, and honest. Or is it a sham?"

David Roger Thomas
NC Prison # 4

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One more thought on words. I taught Humanities for a decade, so words are important to me. In NC, The solitary punishment site was, at one time, an actual hole. We still call the "modern" cell a "hole". Old habits are hard to change. We don't dig our own hole anymore.

NOT TOO many years ago the name for this collection of 24 solitary cells was "Segregation" unit.

Lately, given that the majority of prisoners in "Segregation" was often Black, the name seemed - well - "inappropriate," as staff would say. And "racist" by other standards.

Today the "Hole," or "Segregation" unit confinement has undergone another change: "Restricted Housing."

Words are powerful. As powerful as shackles, on minds as well as bodies.

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