

July 15 2020

Editors -

Preface: Prison is a poem written by illusionists
to satisfy the delusions of the public.

Some historians argue that the Black
Death that ravaged Europe, with a death rate
of about 40% gave impetus to the creation
of the Renaissance/Reformation; when humanity
finally sought, through science, reason,
and humanity to solve mankind's
problems realistically.

The prison system needs its own
Renaissance, where realistic analysis
is necessary before Reformation.

Are the present "benefits" of the prison
system equal to, or outweighed by,
the human/societal costs? Common sense
demands change in a system that
is broken.

Though crowded with a mix of the
untreated mentally ill, professional criminals,
rescued homeless and wrongfully
convicted, and excessively sentenced —
prison is a lonely place, and that loneliness
is more than most of us can bear. DRT

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EDITORS. This 400 year old description still accurately
REPRESENTS INTERNAL dialogues inside PRISON today. THANK YOU.
P.S. We ~~do~~ HAVE NO access to computers, typewriters, copiers, internet etc.

LEAR:

" No, no, no, no. Come, let's away to prison.

We two alone will sing like birds i' th' cage.

When thou dost ask me blessing, I'll kneel down

And ask of thee forgiveness. So we'll live,

And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh

at gilded butterflies, and hear poor rogues

Talk of court news, and we'll talk with them too -

who loses and who wins; who's in, who's out -

And take upon's the mystery of things,

As if we were God's spies. And we'll wear out,

In a walled prison, packs and sects of great ones

That ebb and flow by th' moon. "

- William Shakespeare

Essay by

DAND ROGER THOMAS

(Pen)

WORDS II: PRISONERS

In prison, words are as important as bars. They may fortify or may impair the unalienable Rights of human beings. Unlike the steel gates, definitions of words in prison are subject to change.

I often wonder, here in NC Prison #4, where so many officers have gone and why they have left. In jails these officers are known as "detention officers," a replacement of the term "jailer" or "guard." Here the jailors are termed "correctional officers," assuming that their primary responsibility is "to correct."

Prisoners were once titled as "72s" or "Inmates" or "Felons." The more commonly used title today is "Offender." More and more lately I've thought about referring to myself by my number, much as Holocaust victims were tattooed by their numbers. But this comparison ends with the number as identification, an indignity beyond measure.

The 54 or 55 prison sites in NC are known as "Institutions" or "Correction Centers." The meaning or significance of

These terms is debatable.

Institute what? Correct what? Ah, There's The Rub. A rose (word) used in prison is, by any other name, likely to smell The same.

So, where did all The veteran corrections officers go? Who replaced Them? Why does Their disappearance matter to "offenders"?

The relationships between prisoners and guards is more complex Than you might think, given That we all belong To The same species. There are two rulebooks for staff and prisoner behavior: one is official written authorized policy; The other is oral rules passed down from generation to generation by prisoners and/or officers.

The official policies can be mind-numbingly obtuse and/or loosely interpreted. For example, The official published "Grievance Procedure" is about 40000 words, The minimum word length for a novella. I've met few prisoners with The vocabulary or patience to read through, much less understand, This policy. If you wish To know how To write a formal grievance, perhaps you should ask an "old school" offender.

One unwritten prisoner's rule is this "Thou shalt not have conversations with officers, except to ask questions or seek information, with a witness." Unfortunately, there are a number of "professional" convicts who believe that speaking to officers can contribute to "snitching," an unforgivable prisoner in-house offense. Others encourage animosity and subdued hostility between staff and inmates as a matter of tradition.

However, here at Prison #4 these self-harmful behaviors are slowly changing. This is a small prison and interactions between prisoners and staff are more common and regular, by necessity. You see, more ~~or~~ or less, the same officers on a rotated basis. You're bored in your block and they are bored at their command post. Conversation happens. Human interaction happens.

Also, for a number of reasons, many of the older, more experienced officers have left the system and the newer officers do not have the more militaristic advice of the old hands. So I have noticed, particularly among new younger recruits that the conversations among younger prisoners and what would likely be their peers in the "Real World" is more relaxed.

However, there is a policy (posted) warning of undue familiarity between staff and prisoners that can and does result in investigation or dismissal. Yes, occasionally an officer may bring in contraband - tobacco, drugs, phones. Some may "bend" small regulations, turning a eye away from smoking in the block, arguments, tattoo work etc. The danger here is that a particularly skilled or manipulative inmate, taking advantage of a officer's financial problems or youth and desire "not to make waves" may succumb to subtle extortion. You'll see some flirtatious activity between some female officers and bold prisoners. "Jacking" is a serious offense, particularly if it is done with the express purpose of exposure before a female officer.

I can't speak to the quality of training of the newer, younger recruits before they actually are given duties on their own. But some give the impression that they are there to stay safe and feed their families, in that order.

How can one Train an officers with The similar educational background, social-economic situation, and cultural identifications, entertainment or political likes and dislikes from empathizing with The prisoners who may exhibit A TRUE identification with his watcher? Is it Any wonder that sometimes A officer may sneak a RESTAURANT hamburger To An inmate who gives him "No trouble"? Would you NOT?

The bars do NOT block The human need for companionship. We ARE social animals, and sometimes The block we are in is filled with a social animal core That we do NOT wish To associate with by choice. Adrenal organs MUST work overtime in a prison block of 34-75 in order To keep ALERT for 24/7.

Often I see teams of prisoners conspire To see "how far" They can get a guard To go - perhaps an extra food Tray? Pass a "note" To another block, shower at off hours... The list is endless.

One valuable item that prisoners may get from a new (or veteran) recruit is information. At many prisons stamps are the coin of the realm. Here, rumor and gossip are valued as much. Prison administrations are not known for their transparency with media or the inmate population. Sometimes a "helpful" guard will share privileged or confidential information about a prisoner or a staff member with an inmate. It happens. There are fewer and fewer veteran officers who can "school" the new recruits against the danger of losing trust and confidence in a staff member's impartiality.

Retribution occurs, often in the shadows - a quick trip to the "Hole," loss of job, a transfer to another camp.

When order and security are vague, new recruits leave whenever a better employment opportunity opens up.

The pool of experienced staff from which to promote is not deep nor wide.

The system becomes "infected" with a lack of history - the values, skills, and education necessary for everyone's safety.

A prisoner may take advantage of the "cracks" in the system, especially in this confusing time of Pandemic, with an advanced staff attrition rate. Staff members die from COVID 19, so do prisoners. And nurses, too.

So why do staff veterans leave prison in large numbers? Over the last few years officers have shared their views on this subject. The morale problem is serious. Here is a sampling of what they have told me:

① Assaults on officers have risen, with some deaths. Officers are aware that today's prisons are a mix of untreated mentally ill, wrongfully or excessively convicted and sentenced, with a variety of criminal charges of varied seriousness - in the same blocks or units, cells or dorms. An officer knows that some prisoners may - without any signs - "flip out." No officer is a mind reader. For some inmates life in prison is their life, better than the homeless hell they lived in the "Real World."

For others prison is a lonely place, and that loneliness can kill a soul, over time.

An officer knows that many gang members and lifetime "thugs" have not left violence and criminal goals behind them - They have brought these "tools" into the prison, a malevolent baggage. Often some "connect" up with relatives or associates from their previous lives. It is not uncommon for new recruit officers to have shared memories of past associations.

The officer knows that robbery, extortion, violence, power-struggles, sexual harassment - It's all here in prison, though a visitor passing through may "see" only a group of card-playing, T.V. watching, magazine reading, group discussion debaters - like in a crowded hotel lobby. Here, no officers stay within the dorm bars at night. They are separated from the mass of inmates by locked bars. And no cameras record the desk area in the hallway where two guards are stationed in a unit of about 120 men.

New officers, anxious to be successful in this job that supports their families, may stand up and "do my job" according to their training and their ethics systems. Others may "work the other way."

Some officers have second jobs after their twelve hour shifts. This can affect their judgment or their response time.

Ten years ago discipline in the block, unit, and prison was maintained by a mostly common understanding that officers would discover and correct infractions or behavioral problems.

Today, because of the shortage, "little things" may be ignored by some.

A tattoo session could be stopped with a simple warning, not hole-time. That contraband cigarette might be confiscated rather than giving the prisoner a "write up" (and a fine.) Physical or verbal altercations can often be settled with counseling and interventions - sometimes not.

Officers, like inmates are subtly changed by what they observe or experience. One day may be peaceful and calm. Another may be filled with all kinds of problems - inmates on inmates, inmates on staff, staff on staff. Disturbances sometimes seem to multiply in waves.

I have seen 40 gang members and their friends break the Canteen line on a holiday, with no connection. A camera sees the line break and many men - who were cooperative - pushed back. No officer maintained security through this two hour period. Once the thugs saw that there were no consequences for their misbehavior, the line-breaking at Canteen and Chow-line became a ritual. The dozens of prisoners who had attempted to respect their colleagues became angry, frustrated. Fights occur off-camera. Racism finds its way into the mix of anger.

If prisoners see unconsequented

disrespect as "normal," how will this attitude affect their behavior when they are released into community?

The inmates who tried to follow the rules of line-forming lose respect for the officers who are not present, and explanations of "not enough staff" to control these mobs does little to calm the often hidden frustrations, which evolve long after "Canteen time" is over.

If breaking rules is okay here, what does that teach prisoners there?

Officers are also frustrated. I have seen this when some officers attempt to correct the "mob" and others do not.

Occasionally a sergeant will announce on a loudspeaker: "Straighten up those lines or I will shut down the (outdoor) Canteen." The sergeant can see the mess, the crowd pushing and shoving, from the monitor of a camera from her/his office.

When inmates hear this — those who have jumped the line, often they just laugh. They

know from experience that the voice on the loudspeaker will not shut the window down.

And the linebreakers will straighten out their line. I've seen linebreakers hold back the regular line until their associates have taken a turn at the window of the canteen. I've seen linebreakers charge others a fee to use the canteen window.

I have shared my concerns with officers and a sergeant. Some say "we don't have enough staff," and one said (about the 20 or 40 linebreakers) "They're just children."

No, they are men unconsequented for behaviors that are unacceptable in a cooperative society outside these walls.

If school teachers can maintain discipline in classrooms and hallways, gyms and cafeterias, yards and buses, why can't correctional officers?

Yes, these are prisoners, but they deserve modeling behaviors if "Rehabilitation" is a goal of prison. Is it?

I have seen prisoners curse or offend/disrespect new officers who often are stunned but make little or no reply. In here, an officer who does not use his/her authority in serious matters is perceived as having no authority by prisoners.

I note, from experience, that many officers are willing to assist a prisoner in need, one on one, not 40 on one. Many hope to get thru the day safely and return to their families unharmed. The emotional stress that officers go through, from my observations, can be severe. I have seen correctional officers weep from strain and stress.

Others cope by accepting a role as a "custodial" guard rather than a "correctional officer." There is a difference between a "watcher" and a "doer."

One can't depend on a virtual computer training course to teach the intricacies of prison population control. You have to get in the

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trenches.

Have any studies been completed that analyze alcoholism, drug use, or suicide among corrections officers? Studies do show that many released prisoners return to prison, and released prisoners have a shorter life span.

So if prison doesn't "fix" anything and recidivism is so high, doesn't common sense demand that the "car" engine needs an overhaul? Other than a mental hospital or "rest home" is any place solder? And prison serves both populations as well. "Felon," "Convict," "72", "Inmate," "offender" are catch-all nets.

Prison is a poem written by illusionists to sedate the public.

Are the "benefits" of prison worth or better than the human costs? Am not blaming anyone for the dysfunctions of the prison system. There are good people on every level who are attempting to "reform" the prisons. Any "fault" can be shared by legislators, the legal system, voters, DOC and prisoners themselves. As Shakespeare wrote in Romeo & Juliet: "All are punished, all are punished."

Truly better pay, benefits, and education would help. Throwing money at the problem has never worked. More cameras, more fences, more vests and Tasers? No, the problem is a human problem and can only be remedied on a human, individual level, one prisoner, one staff member, one citizen at a time.

There are 31,000 (33,000?) state prisoners in NC and about 20,000 support staff. Can anyone honestly say that there is any reason why a nearly one to one ratio not be successful?

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How many corrections staff positions are vacant?
30%? How many psychology positions are vacant
in the prisons? How difficult is it to
find community college instructors for
prison programs who are truly qualified to
teach those courses?

Other reasons that officers have shared with
me regarding their decisions to stay or leave:

2. Sickness, Cancer.

3. Personality conflicts with other staff.

"I do my job, They don't do theirs."

4. FAVORITISM

5. Possible assaults on staff.

6. Dissatisfaction with order, organization,
problem solving disagreements.

7. Fear for personal safety

8. Better job opportunities elsewhere.

9. Harassment from other officers or prisoners.

10. Contraband issues,

11. Espionage issues

12. Overworked, underappreciated

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I'm not anti-staff or anti-prisoners.
I've had prisoners protect me from assault. I've had
officers save my life in medical emergencies.
I've had officers intervene with officers who were
involved in misconduct.

The color of my "uniform" (brown) and The
color of officer uniforms (blue/black) are not
indicative of who we are.

I've been pissed on, stabbed, beaten, robbed,
sexually harassed, threatened and manipulated.
I have no choice but to stay and find
ways to survive. How could I blame an
officer who has the choice to stay or leave?

Historically, The Renaissance and Reformation
were sparked by reactions to The
Black Death that killed 40% of Europeans.
Prison needs a Renaissance of realistic
analysis (science and humanity) before
there can be any meaningful Reformation.

attachment

David Roger Thomas
15 June 2020

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Sample stats that affect prisoners. (2018)

- Only 12% of 31,000 prisoner bunkers are in airconditioned blocks during hot summers.

(Greensboro News & Record, 12/17/18)

- 20% vacancy rate in NC staff

(GMR, 12/17/18)

- NC inmate stabbed with plastic cup. Plastic cups banned. (GMR, 12/18/18)

- 9 suicides in NC prisons in 2018.

(GMR 1/11/19)

- 65% recidivism rate in US.

- 500,000 will die from opioid O.D. by 2030.

- Rehab clients at NC center stealing drugs from restrooms where they work.

(NPR 9-8-2018)

- AP: NC prisons have 4 assaults per day. 227 workers and 349 inmates attacked in first months of 2018.

- NC DOP: "About 1 in 6 inmates suffer from some form of mental illness."

(GMR 1/28/2018)

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