

Reform: Prison Violence

"Vengeance is mine, saith The Lord,
I will repay." This verse is carved on my
grandfather's tombstone. I reflect on it here.

There are times in prison when violence and
vengeance are not given to The Lord, as They should
be. Still, many times I have heard a wronged
inmate say "That will come back on him," or
"He'll reap what he sowed," or (more often) "Karma
is a bitch." Others seek vengeance.

Violence is not always physical.

A first time prisoner is quick to learn that
when you crowd thirty or more into one bedding
area or dayroom, The environment can turn ugly.
Scientists know that too many animals in one
pen leads to aggression and violence. Humans
are a social species, but not That social. Loss of
dignity and self-esteem in prison is common.

A new prisoner on State may assume that if
he keeps his "nose clean" and avoids any
troubles, Then he will not find trouble. This
is a myth — trouble will find him.

It is true that the experienced prisoner will
seek jobs or rituals that reduce the risk of
violence, such as Librarian, or "Maintenance
Worker." They try to maintain the guiding virtues

2 of good homes and communities. They seek a better life.

These kinds of jobs in prison, along with classes or programs, may - for eight hours or so - keep the prisoner relatively free from the chance of violence. This is not always a safe bet. I've seen fights in kitchens, in computer repair classes, etc. Anger and rage, frustration and pain, are always companions of the prisoner, until he learns to subdue the baser instincts.

New prisoners are watched closely by other inmates, for signs of weakness. The lack of an observable aggressive spirit, or kindnesses of a Christian nature, or aloneness can make the new prisoner a target - quickly. Many prisoners adopt a "mask" as a warning to others that they will not be abused. They will be tested.

Violence frequency and harmfulness varies by block and by prison. Prisons are rated by veteran prisoners for "off the chain" reputations. Some of this gossip is exaggerated. It is considered a badge of honor to survive a dangerous camp such as Lanesboro in the mid-2006 era, for example.

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A Charlotte TV station produced a documentary on Lanesboro - which we watched in our block on TV - with The Theme of "worse" NC prison.

Jails have different reputations for violence, too. A larger jail may be overcrowded, with some blocks unofficially designated for gangs, or hispanics, or some other group that takes ownership of the block as if it were a township.

I encountered occasional violence in my county jail, to my surprise. I knew nothing about the incarcerated life except what I had seen in movies. The criminal life was not the focus of my life experiences.

So every act of violence came as a surprise to me, foreign to my experience as a career professional.

Reforming a prison (or ^{other} mental institution) cannot focus primarily on a physical structure. It is not what is on the "outside" that can be changed until one changes the attitudes and needs of the staff and prisoners on the inside first.

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In my county Ten-man cell, often (in jail) with prisoners sleeping on the floor, there was no TV, no newspaper, no magazine, no outdoor recreation. Sheets of water ran down the walls. Visitation required shouting thru holes in a window to your family who stood on the outside of the jail in the elements.

To me, These were violent offenses against my dignity and humanity — long before my court conviction. Perpetrating to my family.

In that little dungeon I saw officers shove inmates against spikes in the cell entrance door, and wrestle them to the floor over verbal arguments. I saw a youth cut his wrist. And saw an older inmate fend off aggressive prisoners with two sharp pencils. All this in jail, before Court.

While I slept, an officer jerked a towel from around my neck, giving me lasting pain, to this day.

That's violence. Still, Throughout jail, with this experience, I was committed to being peaceful, kind, and a good citizen. My

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The jailors allowed my mother to bring in books when she received her 15 minute "Thru-the-wall holes" visit. I shared the books with all the prisoners in the jail. Still, conditions in that county jail were among the worst of my life, and I complained - respectfully - as often as anyone would listen. I hope that by now this torture chamber has been closed. I had to beg the officers to turn off the wall speakers at 3 a.m. as it blasted country music (24/7) while we tried to sleep.

My mattress bedding was wet from sheets of water that poured off the cell walls. Was all this intentional? To break our will before court?

Finally, it was off to state prison #1 for "Processing." During those brief months there I saw only one violent act - in the kitchen - that ended with a "spray." One night they told us not to make any noise, as a prisoner was to be executed. Waiting for a man to die is a terrible feeling. My neighbor, also a new prisoner, wept and called out to God at night. Then I was transferred to a "camp" closer to home (NC #2) where I could finally walk on grass (after nearly 2 years!) and play horseshoes or volleyball, softball, or jog.

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NC Prison #2, about 500 men divided into two wings, was crowded. Supervision was not as close or strict as that of Processing, but it was still intensive. Violence was more frequent. Most prisoners had their own single cells. Here was the other face of prison. No one can teach this. No one can adequately describe it, but I can give samples for the reformers inside and outside of prisons who have the power and voice to rebuild the broken system.

NC #2 was far more disciplined than NC #3 (Lanesboro). Later, I saw inmates convince the officers to search specific cells for their own personal retaliation. I saw "sex-stables" for "protection." I saw officers at Lanesboro (#3) toss stacks of letters and magazines on dayroom tables for thieves to sort thru. At #3 there seemed to be a constant atmosphere of disruption and conflict, the stress of inmates pushing the boundaries against the staff fatigue of managing such a large (1000) prison environment.

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I don't want to make this essay about me.
I do want to offer samples of my personal
experiences and observations to assist reformers.

At Prison #2 The violence surprised me, after
a relatively free non-violent processing at Prison
#1.

Here, I saw pencil stabbing in the hallway,
a razor slit in the chow hall, Friday Night fights
in cells for gambling purposes, in which I was forced to participate.

I warned an associate that he was going too deep
in debt with a group of thugs. Eventually one of
the thugs raped the prisoner as payback.
I tried to console him but the look on his
face, of grief and shame, lasted a long time.
Another associate hung himself because his family
refused to accept a Christmas phone call.

I was whipped with a belt and attacked
regularly in my block and at work. I
didn't "snitch" to authorities because I didn't
want to experience the shame of isolation
in the Hole. At this prison both fighters
were sent to the Hole, even the assaulted.

I have been urinated on at NC #3,
purposely. And seen inmate shit in my cell sink, and

8 another defecate in a black trashcan.

I was assaulted by a gang leader on The softball field - both my eyes blackened, I wear contact lens as a medical necessity. Both of us were sent To The Hole with The warning That we were never To associate in any way - a promise I kept.

Drugs were rare (I thought) at Prison #2, except for Bagnelynis and Sudafeds. I knew of no violence over drug deals here.

There were fights at Prison #2 but I think they could have been worse except for the opportunities to keep busy. At Prison #2 I worked in The Laundry and helped on the loading dock. We had access to a good library. Staff generally obeyed policy and did not go easy on those who didn't. Consequences were swift and helped prevent violence, in my opinion. The staff seemed to cooperate and not deviate into personal favoritism or contraband violations.

↑ ~~FF~~

I believe the serious and repeated presence of officers was crucial to peace.

I never saw inmates break in lines or insult officers - (which was a regular act of disrespect at prison #4.)

Everyone was transferred to another prison. I was sent to Janeshoro. At first the small number of prisoners and mostly new staff seemed peaceful enough. But after a year this new facility filled up and a number of bad things happened.

Marijuana was everywhere. Some officers showed favoritism to specific inmates.

Theft of shoes was common, especially of new arrivals.

I stopped some sexual assaults.

I knew of people who were raped. Janeshoro was a horror show. I was stabbed.

Fortunately, I got a job on maintenance that kept me out of the dorm most of the day.

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I knew of one staff member who was the victim of an attempted rape. Other staff were assaulted.

I watched over the years as one officer turned from a caring, generous, kind, good hearted counselor into a mean guard. She told me she had no choice but to change because of the manipulative and vile nature of so many of the prisoners: to save herself.

One officer told me that Lonesboro was the most requested site to transfer to from gang members at other NC prisons. Then I was transferred to Prison #4.

Prison #4 has more drugs than I've seen at other camps, and a lot of extortion - but less noticeable violence, though it occurs out of sight, usually. Gang violence occurs with some regularity.

The difference between prison #2 and the other sites is that the officers at prison #2 were more unified in purpose and predictable in consequence. They seemed more cooperative as a team.

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Prison #4, where I am now (July 2020) has a large, open yard where prisoners can seek private, uncrowded natural areas to just be alone to think - to meditate - if that's what they want. Recently staff cut down the trees - all of them - which disturbed most prisoners. That eliminated most of the shade and eliminated beautiful nature scenery to rest the soul. Created a soul-less site.

New officers seem to show up regularly. Violence here is generally a result of drug deals gone bad. The culture and atmosphere has become more relaxed in recent years.

Sometimes a glitch in procedures or behavior will upset an individual or a group. 34 bunks in one bedding area can contribute to violence. One TV for 34 can cause problems in program selection. I've seen an inmate throw TV's to the floor in anger. Crowded conditions make it easier for inmates to "hide" misbehavior. I saw a barber obtain the officer's personal photo and info directory and use it to judge whether he should give his clients a good haircut or judge them for their charges. Violence springs from such acts. Linebreaking here - by 10 or more prisoners, creates deep frustrations and anger and actual hate! Mobs.

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Prison is The home of The most dysfunctional family you could imagine, with few ways of rescue or escape from The mania of other brothers.

The violence in prison is hard to watch OR to be a victim of. After interviews with a hundred prisoners, I am just as stunned and saddened by the violence and hardships of their lives as they recount those horrors of their past. What does prison do to help prisoners deal with dysfunctional lives that may have played some part in their crimes?

I've seen two men fight in my cell - at Lonsdale and I couldn't get them to leave. I spent an hour just washing the blood off my walls. Here I saw an inmate sold into sex slavery.

I watched an inmate kicked to death over a rumor of a harassing comment he may - or may not have made.

This Pandemic (2020) is a heavy burden, but I've seen six (6) men shed blood over a perceived jump/break in a phone line. I've seen serious, unintended, drug addictions sweep thru blocks.

At one camp, staff cut down all The Trees, housed the service dogs inside the bedding area, and maintained a large Trash dump in front of the duty office! How do these scenes contribute to peace, humanity, and self-respect?