

State of Conditions: There's Still Blood on the Floor.

By J. David Brackett 8.31.2020

Sunday morning, August 23rd, 2020, I awakened to the sound of screams coming from the cell across the corridor. The state prison at which I reside calls these housing locations "rooms" instead of "cells" and even has such painted on the face of the doors: "Room 1..." "Room 2..." etcetera. Yet, so long as the words "state prison" are contained within the nomenclature of this experience of which I now write - and - there is a lock on a heavy steel door confining me (as I often am) to the space within during some part of the day (generally at night), then I simply cannot bring myself to refer to my living quarters as a "room". To me, it will always be a cell. Personal affront to penological argot aside, this space (room/cell) is approximately 15 feet wide at its point of entry, 45 feet long, contains 6 bunk beds,¹ 12 lockers for personal storage, 2 toilets, 2 sinks, a single shower, a water fountain, and a 26 inch industrial fan mounted to the wall on one end... all which are mostly in a state of disrepair or, just entirely broken. A rant for another time. There are 6 windows, each approximately five feet tall, one foot wide (with a vertical center bar - to negate egress), opening out from the bottom (hinged at the top) and with no screens. The walls and ceilings are - or, were some 20 years or so ago - painted "white"; the floor is a concrete slab; and, the door and window frames are molting several shades of an oil-based, dismal gray. At this particular time of year, it is extremely hot and muggy. As I sit here and write, the floors and walls are "sweating" heavily - as am I - and the bugs are, of course, everywhere. The mosquitoes are bad here lately. Notably, the (2 story - 4 unit) housing structure in which I reside is currently purposed specifically for kitchen workers².

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1. Of the 4 housing structures located on the prison's "main compound", 2 structures are laid out as described, and 2 structures contain 8 bunkbeds-per similarly sized cell - with a slightly different - and much more crowded - blueprint.
 2. $\frac{1}{2}$ 192 prisoners @ 4 (12 man cells) per unit.

who labor to feed approximately 2,800 prisoners three times daily during the week and twice daily on weekends.³ With this view in mind, I return to those screams which had awakened me.

Screams, shouts, hoots, hollers, howls, hair-raising cackles and every other sound intrinsic to the constant cacophony of the prison experience is virtually a language unto itself. Many times I have wished that I could record it as one might think they had wandered into a zoo upon entering. I have adjusted to a level of acceptance only with the passage of time; learning to cipher through the trill of its madness to discern when something might actually be amiss. In the early years of my incarceration I came to terms with the fact that I am encompassed by a great number of mentally unstable individuals in various states of chemical imbalance - severely aggravated by the "self-medication" they indulge in; namely through methamphetamine and, an evil substance called "K-2", which are drugs that are, sadly to say, available in abundant supply (and aggressively consumed) here these past several years from what I have seen. Prisons are full of the mentally, criminally, and now chemically insane. But. Back to those screams. On this particular occasion it was the awry sound of someone experiencing considerable pain which had awakened me and caused me to jump from my bed.

I was quickly dressed and to the door of my cell which is just a few short feet away from the foot of my bunk. Pulling the door open, I was immediately confronted by the grisly sight of a black male, approximately 40-50 years old, whom I knew only slightly in passing, standing in the center of the corridor between cells, clutching a banger⁴ in his left hand, and bleeding profusely from wounds to his head, abdomen and right hand. He appeared to be in a state of shock, taking slow, deep breaths as he stared vacantly down the corridor to my right. The head injury was, by far, the worst of his wounds; a vicious laceration that had flayed several

3. "Incentive" is virtually non-existent for prison labor in the state of Georgia.

4. A "shank" or a "shiv" - a handcrafted weapon* made generally from steel for

* Stabbing & cutting.
(Also called a "tool.")

inches of skin from the top of his (shaved) head exposing his skull and causing blood to squirt liberally in every direction which covered him and the adjacent walls - in a shower of blood that had already begun to puddle around his feet. Beyond, through the open door of his cell, there was a thickly laid trail of spattered blood glistening in the morning sunlight as it slowly congealed upon the floor. From down the corridor toward the dayroom,⁵ I heard an exchange of raised, angry voices in heated debate. I have learned over time that it is always best to try and quickly discern the details of disturbances such as the one I am describing here where, one may receive the unexpected and unfortunate surprise of becoming involved in a fray - which initially had nothing to do with him - due to his "affiliation" or even mere association⁶ to one of the individuals involved. It is not a cowardly act to attempt to distance oneself as much as possible from the conflagration of violence that is a constant in the milieu of prison.

Oddly, at that moment, the injured man and I were entirely alone; while it was clearly dangerous for me to become involved, I was nonetheless compelled to ask him if he was okay - to which he did not respond. In this particular instance I did not even know the man's name and, as it was important for me to know, at the least, who the aggressor was, I proceeded to the dayroom to investigate. Here, I quickly learned the gist of what had just occurred: Only two men were involved in the altercation - both black Moslems who bunked in the cell across the corridor from me. Both, contrary to the strict tenets of their religion, had been up on "dope" (methamphetamine) since approximately Thursday (four days). Apparently, one of them (the elder of the two whom I had just encountered in the corridor) had finally decided to lay down and get some rest, but had

5. which leads to another corridor containing an additional 2 cells and is overlooked by an enclosed, split-level officer's station (that is rarely manned these days it seems).

6. By "affiliation" I mean membership in a structured organization (gang) and by "association" I mean someone as seemingly innocuous as one's new bunkmate.

first placed some store goods (Commissary) inside a net bag⁷ at the foot of his bed (for some reason) prior to doing so. Upon awakening some time later, he discovered that his net bag was missing and that the other Moslem - who was apparently penniless at the time - had mysteriously acquired the means to purchase some chicken sandwiches from a "sissy"⁸ who had worked in the kitchen that morning and had brought them back from there to sell. Believing that he had been robbed by his fellow Moslem brother (he had apparently) led to accusations of theft and worse, "messing with a sissy" (highly taboo) that quickly turned to an argument which escalated to the armed aggression that had resultantly awakened me. Both men had been armed with bangers, although the younger of the two combatants appeared to have emerged from the confrontation entirely unscathed.

That the incident was isolated to the Moslem community⁹ did little to alleviate the tension rippling throughout the 48 man unit which included a number of civilians,¹⁰ Gangster Disciples (GD's), Ghost Face Gangsters, Bloods, Argans, and of course, other Moslems. To begin with, the injured man clearly required immediate medical attention. This was not one of the typical "bi-weekly brawls" or scuffles that could be quietly bandaged up "in-house" and hopefully quickly forgotten about by the parties involved - while also being overlooked by the administration at large. Black eyes and busted-up faces are, after all, a rather common sight around here. In this circumstance, someone needed to notify the unit housing officer (fortunately, at this particular time, we had one) who would notify Shift Command (typically a lieutenant), medical staff, and whatever other administrative personnel might happen to be at the prison at the time (apparently there were none). This was problematic

7. AKA - a laundry bag.

8. A widely-used (but not entirely accepted) term for homosexuals in Georgia prisons.

9. Here, a structured and united organization of men, where if one offends one Moslem in prison, he offends - and risks reprisals by - all. (A gang).

10. Non-gang - affiliated persons including those not identifying as Moslems.

for the unit for a number of reasons, but mainly because a reporting of the incident would place an immediate "spotlight" (on our unit) foreseeably resulting in an almost instantaneous unit "lockdown" (for an indefinite period of time), followed inevitably by a "shakedown" within a day or two of the initial lockdown. Such events impact the economics of the unit (and on occasion, the entire prison compound depending on the "players" involved), where illicit commerce is adversely affected and may cost a single party thousands (if not ultimately tens of thousands) of dollars through loss of sales, trade, and the confiscation of contraband such as tobacco, cell phones, methamphetamine and marijuana during the lockdown/shakedown process. For instance, generic touch screen cell phones* average around \$1,500.00 to purchase, going for as low as \$600.00 and as high as four or five thousand dollars for one phone depending on their availability and the condition and quality of the phone. In many of the housing locations that I have personally experienced, there are often as many as two or three phones per cell (multi-man rooms such as the ones described here). Incarceration for some prisoners is clearly, from what I have seen, a highly lucrative industry. Here, the imminent consequence of what was about to occur as a result of the stabbing settled like a dark, heavy cloud upon the unit - and particularly so upon those with vested interests in illicit matters such as these.

It was the GD's who initiated action by calling for the dayroom to be cleared and telling everyone to return to their cells. The GD's are a substantially large and controlling force on this compound (although the Moslems would be quick to disagree with this statement) primarily because they appear to have been given (in my opinion) "free reign" by the local administration in many of their illicit activities. Cautiously navigating my way around the bleeding Moslem - who had now began to drift down the corridor toward the dayroom - I returned to my cell to discover that it was now a beehive of activity. I had expected this. The Moslems, of which there are five bunking in my cell alone, had all been awakened by this time and were gathering in my cell

*. † - \$100.00 Street Value.

to facilitate "damage control" over the situation. Here again, the local administration falls short in these matters by failing to enforce their own requirements specific to the housing and bunk assignments of prisoners. This allows dominant affiliations and organizational structures within the prison to congregate and monopolize certain cells and even bunk assignments. For example, in this instance, three of the five Moslems currently bunking in my cell are actually supposed to be housed elsewhere within the unit and, I am not in my assigned "bunk location" (although I am in the correct cell) where, prior to my arrival a Moslem had taken possession of my assigned (bottom) bunk after having purchased it from the prisoner who was here before me. Bottom bunks are highly prized by some prisoners for a number of reasons¹¹ and may be "sold" for anywhere between 25 and 50 dollars. Although I played no role in (and benefitted not from) this particular transaction, I found the existing arrangement to my benefit for several reasons (not worthy of mention here) and chose not to challenge it.

Thusly expressed, entering my own cell at this moment was akin to entering a hostile environment. I was an outsider to many of the men in the group of Moslems now assembled inside my cell, playing no role in the discussions and events taking place amongst them. Putting the matter into its proper perspective, I was an unwanted set of eyes and ears witnessing the exposure of illicit privacies being revealed as drugs, bangers and cell phones were hastily being collected and "put up" in various "stash spots" that had previously been carefully selected and/or carved out for them. Fortunately, I am considered, for the most part, "old school," both in age as well as in the amount of calendar years in which I have spent behind prison walls. Also, as one has to be in order to actually survive in here, I have a Solid reputation and am in "good standing" with a number of prisoners

11. Primarily where cell phone signals are available - and strongest - and, where "privacy curtains" (prohibited by rule but rarely enforced here) can be hung.

of various affiliations throughout the prison compound-including a number of the Moslem men now gathered inside my cell. Being overtly observant of the surrounding chaos-and cache of the moment revealed-Contemplates presenting oneself as an "obstacle"-as opposed to an "assist"-in the matter at hand and is best avoided through focusing one's energy-at least transparently-toward a "personal" agenda. The fortitude to remain calm-although the Stress of the moment is exceedingly great-is conferred only perhaps through years of experience in events such as these. As such, I ignored the high octane rush of testosterone and adrenaline emanating from the group in their task-at-hand and instead devoted myself to preparing for work in the kitchen where, per my work assignment schedule, I was expected to be within the hour.

In the meantime, the property and bedding of the two Moslem brothers was rapidly gathered with the assistance of members within their organization and then carried to the dayroom exit door where one has to beat on the plexiglass exterior windows to garner an officer's attention to unlock the door to permit egress. It was apparently decided that the two men would simultaneously report the matter to the housing unit officer with each man taking responsibility for his action in ("a version of") what had just occurred. Their property was made ready for relocation because regardless of the outcome, each man would mandatorily receive immediate housing reassignment (ordinarily, to "disciplinary confinement" for fighting), and this action was to prevent Staff (likely the assigned housing unit officer) intrusion of her having to enter the unit and retrieve their property herself. In this instance, both men were essentially "putting themselves on the door"¹² with the "theory" that this might circumvent a lockdown. Without either man admitting a weapon was involved (and Surrendering it to the officer) as such appeared to be the

12. Here, prison argot for an "emergency request by prisoner for immediate housing reassignment" generally resulting in one's placement in "protective custody." As Stated however, disciplinary confinement was expected here instead.

Case here - it struck me that this theory was not likely to work. Flaws such as this are often readily apparent in criminally deviate thinking. Medical Staff arrived driving a modified medical golf cart shortly thereafter, followed by a lone lieutenant ambling her way towards us from across the compound on foot. On a typical weekend the prison grounds are a virtual ghost town (except during chow call) and this particular Sunday was no exception. A 5,000 word essay alone would not adequately cover the subject of how grossly understaffed prisons are in the State of Georgia at this time. Nevertheless, the injured Moslem was quickly bandaged and carted off to medical on the golf cart while the other Moslem was placed in handcuffs and escorted to disciplinary confinement by the lieutenant. To my great surprise, when the call for "kitchen help" came over the housing unit officer's radio, I along with several others were released from the unit to report for work.

Walking slowly to the kitchen I heard the distant wail of an ambulance siren grow increasingly louder until it was silenced upon its arrival in the prison's parking lot. I wondered how much blood the man had actually lost that morning and if he would live to tell of the experience. Stabbings such as this one are unfortunately not a rare occurrence here these days it seems. It wasn't all that long ago that a prisoner in another unit had to be airlifted to the hospital after being cut deep and wide enough to expose his viscera. A good friend of mine had witnessed the event firsthand and had described it to me in vivid, horrifying detail. I wondered why these incidents of violence rarely resulted in new criminal charges being filed against the offenders - and why they were most generally never reported in the news. I looked around and wondered how many of the men who had left the unit with me were carrying bangers - prompting me to survey the chain link fence surrounding the prison yard which stands in a sad state of disrepair due to the fact that it yields much of the material from which a good many of the bangers are made. I could only shake my head in disbelief as I recalled the size and thickness of the banger which had inflicted

the injuries that compelled the events that I have thus far described here. 18 inches long and a half inch round piece of Solid Steel sharpened on the concrete to a terrifying point is not a stretch to say. I had briefly glimpsed it as it was collected along with a number of others, (cleaned), and then Stashed. I was still trying to digest the fact that these weapons existed in mass quantity and were consistently used for acts of violence on this part of the prison compound that I resided in-as I entered the kitchen for my work assignment that day.

The hours passed quickly enough-as they typically do in the chaos of a prison's kitchen-and it was not until the evening meal was near to being served that I discovered ~~that~~ my unit had indeed been placed on lockdown at some point during the day. No surprise there. I was called into the serving room-my least favorite section of the kitchen to work in*- to assist with preparing the disposable Styrofoam trays which were to be delivered on separate carts to various units across the prison compound that were currently on some form of "lockdown status". On this day, I believe we prepared trays for 8 separate units (out of a total of 16) where, 2 units were on medical isolation quarantine due to a "COVID-19" outbreak within the unit, 1 unit of "new-arrivals" were also on a mandatory 2 week "COVID-19" isolation quarantine, 3 units (of which mine was now included) were on lockdown for various acts of violence, and 2 units consisted of the customary "every-day" hole¹³ trays. These trays, in my opinion, are perhaps one of the least desirable aspects of being on lockdown (2nd only to the inevitable shakedown) due to the fact that they are of limited capacity and generally contain only half- portions of food, are hastily prepared by prisoners who could care less, and by the time the trays arrive at the unit, consist of nothing but cold, mostly inedible "mush". (Not that prison food (to wit, "here") would, even under normal circumstances, be considered "edible" to some). Fortunately, my position in the kitchen generally allows me the privilege of a slightly better selection and

*. due primarily to the unsanitary conditions therein.

13. A prison term for disciplinary confinement and protective custody.

quality of food; and, being in somewhat of a pauper's status, I confess to a daily endeavor to "obtain" some item (perhaps an onion or some seasoning) that I can take back for the purpose of bartering with. Today however, I sought only a 20 ounce empty soda bottle to fill with a solution of ("watered-down") bleach for my personal use. Chemicals to clean with (heavily diluted though they all are) - and trash bags - are just about the most difficult items for prisoners to get their hands on at this time. Neither are provided to the units on weekends or holidays and I considered it highly unlikely that any chemicals had been provided to the housemen¹⁴ for today's cleanup of the mass quantity of blood that had been shed inside the unit. To be sure though, blood is considered so loathsome by most prisoners that I would have been shocked to find that a concerted effort had not been undertaken by everyone to clean up the place as much as possible under the given circumstances. And here, this bottle of watered-down bleach was simply for my own peace of mind in personal use of it.

Around 9pm I was released from the kitchen to return to my unit. Although we are all supposed to be locked down inside our respective cells with no "dayroom" privileges (ie., television and telephone), this too rarely occurs. No wonderment there again. Compromised door locking mechanisms combined with a "criminal element" - and even more consequentially - lack of adequate staffing, generally permits prisoners free reign within the unit regardless of the administrative edict in place. As I walked down the corridor leading to my cell, I only noticed two spots that had been missed by my fellow prisoners in their cleanup efforts sometime earlier that day. Taking a quick shower I went to bed and waited for the "Correctional Emergency Response Team (CERT)" officers¹⁵ to "unexpectedly" arrive in the middle of the night to perform the (expected) shakedown of our unit (as they are known to do).

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14. Prisoners assigned specifically as "unit cleanup orderlies" for their work detail.
15. Who are generally assigned to perform the task of conducting shakedowns.

It was an unusually quiet, long and muggy night, but the CERT officers were a no-show. No big disappointment there. Breakfast in bed¹⁶ arrived, was quickly disposed of, and a number of men returned to their slumber in an attempt to sleep the day away as is the common practice to do in prison these days from what I have seen. I took another shower (this time cleaning it and then washing it down with some of my newly acquired stash of bleach water) and I afterward sat down to begin assembling my thoughts for the treatise which is presented to you here now. At around 9 a.m.,¹⁷ the kitchen staff began an unsurprising uproar due to the fact that a substantial number of their prison workers for the Monday through Thursday shift are housed in this unit and were unable to report for work because of our unit being on lockdown. This essentially crippled the kitchen as a result. To my great surprise, the kitchen workers were ordered to be released from the unit to report for their scheduled work assignment. They were not searched as they exited the unit and it doesn't take a rocket scientist to conclude that a significant amount of contraband was likely to have left the unit with them at that time.

Just when I began to relax and have my own doubts as to whether or not Administrative action (as presumed) would occur, the Warden suddenly arrived at the unit with a large retinue of officers and we were ordered to strip out of our clothes down to our state issue boxer shorts only even though there was a number of female staff present. Next we were ordered into the corridor where we were directed to stand in a line next to each other and turn and face the wall with our noses pressed against it. While we stood there, they entered our cells and ransacked our bedding lockers, and common areas within the cell searching for contraband items in what is commonly referred to as a "shakedown". I have

16. Prison terminology for the arrival of the disposable styrofoam breakfast trays.

17. To wit, Monday morning, August 24th, 2020.

heard on more than one occasion that radio personality Paul Harvey¹⁸ once said that, "if one desires to see the very worst of what society has to offer one only need to sit in the parking lot of a prison during its shift change."* If this is indeed true, it is in instances like this when I am most inclined to agree with such a statement. No consideration or respect whatsoever is given for our bedding and, especially, our personal property as it is tossed from our lockers onto the floor - inexplicably launched (sometimes) as far as 15 or 20 feet away, trampled on, confiscated without regard for rule or procedure, and in some cases, stolen or even completely destroyed. I have watched over the years as shakedown officers and staff have wantonly helped themselves to chips, soda and sweets found inside a prisoner's locker and then walked over pictures of their loved ones that lay scattered on the floor as they exited the unit. Here, perhaps there is merit in Nietzsche's statement that when you stare into the abyss long enough, you become the abyss. Nonetheless, it is all a very troubling matter for the heart's perponderance to say the least.

After nearly an hour of standing with our noses pressed to the wall, we were finally permitted to return to our cell. Of course it looked like a hurricane had hit it. I am assigned to a lower locker¹⁹ that is mounted to the wall less than a foot off the floor. It is also located next to a toilet that has leaked like a sieve at its base for the past several months (as many of the toilets here do) which filthies up my clothes and destroys my paperwork by consequence of an event such as this. "Fortunately," I have experienced shakedowns on prior occasions here and had preempted their strike by transferring clothes and valued belongings to my bunk (located towards the center of the cell) earlier that morning. It is all still, nonetheless, a very debasing experience. The cell was a complete

18. "...The Rest of the Story." * I am unable to validate this statement.

19. Lockers are +/- 36" tall, 24" wide, and 18" deep.

disaster and it took over half the remaining day for us all to reorganize our property and clean up the mess that was left behind. Most disturbing to me was that in the throes of their shakedown "procedure," the administration was negligent to remove the cover from the (broken) water fountain inside our cell (which is hanging by a makeshift string - a "red flag" of and by itself to me!) which I'm pretty sure would have revealed a smorgasboard of weapons had it been searched. Instead, they left with nothing but a few extra blankets they had confiscated and a 2nd mattress that a prisoner had acquired for his bunk. I could only shake my head in my complete failure to comprehend the administration's rationale through their actions in this matter up until this point. Before leaving, the warden stated that our unit would remain on lockdown until Friday morning (8.28.2020) although the kitchen workers would continue to be released for their scheduled work assignments until then. I, along with all the others who had absolutely nothing to do with what had occurred, would now spend the remainder of the week being punished for it. This too is a common practice in prison in the State of Georgia.

It is Friday now, and I have to report for work in the kitchen here in a short while. Our unit was permitted to go to breakfast this morning and the warden's lockdown directive has apparently been lifted. As a result of it, our unit missed our building's weekly yard call²⁰ as well as the opportunity to go to the prison's library yesterday. This is pretty much the true sum of our "punishment" for what occurred which, to many of the prisoners here, is "no big loss." No drug testing was resultantly conducted by the administration on any of the prisoners residing in our unit and, the phones, weapons and plethora of illicit drugs still remain. This morning I happened to notice a

20. Lasting approximately 45 minutes to one hour. On occasion, we may receive 2 yard calls per week depending on staff availability. Page 13.

Spot where there is still blood from the stabbing on the floor in the corridor outside my cell. Guess I'll have to try and get some more bleach water from the kitchen today. For now, I can only pray for the day that they will release me so that I can leave this life behind me.

Respectfully,

 Job 23:10

Joseph David Brachett 8.31.2020
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* Questions, Comments, Suggestions, Constructive Criticism (or otherwise) is always welcome.

Transferred to:

Colquitt County Prison
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9.3.2020

Upcoming Essays:

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2. Is the Rule Reasonable?
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1/4 - 4,812 words.