

The Kindness Within Us: By Derek A. Capozzi

"I must be cruel only to be kind."

Hamlet, III, iv, line 178

William Shakespeare 1564-1616

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Authorities and society, writ large, would be remiss in their duties in failing to remember that: "'Twas a thief said the last kind word to Christ: Christ took the kindness and forgave the theft." 1/

Both of these "convicted criminals" had been brutally tortured and, then, nailed to a crucifix. They suffered through extremely painful and arduous conditions up till and through their deaths. In the end, the final act(s) of kindness in their lives had come through one another; the government, the authorities, nor much of society had any kindness to give.

But today (2,000 years later) standards have evolved: we no longer "brutally" torture prisoners: we torture them "humanely". 2/ We no longer nail their limbs to crucifixes: we 4-point them to metal or concrete beds. We're much kinder.

It seems that the more things change, the more they stay the same...

At any rate, this notion portrayed by the government, authorities and, all too often, society, that prisoners are all sociopaths who are incapable of kindness, compassion or empathy is quite simply: a myth; a lie; and, an age-old paradox. Of

1/ The Ring and the Book, VI, Giuseppe Caponsacchi, line 869 (Robert Browning 1812-1889).

2/ E.g., waterboarding; endless years of solitary confinement; lethal injection; etc.

COURSE there's a FEW incorrigibles in EVERY prison; yet, for the most part, the American prison system is filled with people who have lived amongst authorities and citizens of EVERY community out there, for years and decades, completely unnoticed by them. Just obscure figures passing by each day and night. . . .

WE'VE paid bills, worked restaurants, built homes, babysat our children (and yours too); WE'VE carried your bags and the old woman across the street's. WE'VE mowed your grass, shoveled your snow, jump-started your car. . . . THE list goes on. Still, authorities and citizens persist on portraying us all as manipulative, scheming, lying, violently dangerous incorrigibles that should NEVER be communicated with, physically contacted, or trusted in any way, shape, form or manner.

And so it is, with great umbrage taken, that most inmates ^{3/} try to cope with these ubiquitously present stigmas. Nobody REVELS in being branded a convicted felon and a prisoner: let alone one suddenly being attached to a sign stating:

DANGER! CONVICT BITES!

YES it is true WE ARE convicted felons. But WE'RE still human beings. For THE most part THE system is a hodge-podge of prisoners with long histories chock-full of economically,

^{3/} Usually psychologically and emotionally challenged ones.

geographically, educationally, psychologically, and emotionally challenged backgrounds. The expectations are bleak against this backdrop for the seeds of growth, maturity, and rehabilitation to flourish. So it shouldn't be surprising that inmates take umbrage with being stigmatized — even in light of their own past misdeeds. The fact is, most inmates are saddened by their inability to break free from the ball-and-chains which attach them to these stigmas. They feel helpless and hopeless to do so. Yet if one should peek into the depths of the belly of this beast, they would be highly surprised by all the little acts of kindness that exist and are oftentimes expressed toward family, friends, loved ones and, sometimes, even strangers. Yes, kindness: spread within the depths of hell by societies incorrigibles.

But today it seems, in our modern society, when it comes to being a prisoner, "In this world, you must be a bit too kind in order to be kind enough."^{4/} People simply do not trust nor appreciate acts of kindness from "convicts"; relegating them unto the realm of manipulation to be avoided.

Only acts of obsequious kindness seem to live

^{4/} *Le jeu de L'Amour et du Hasard* (The Game of Love and Chance) [1730], act I, sc. ii (Pierre Carlet de Chamblain de Marivaux 1688-1763).

up to their standards. Although, EVEN those are not appreciated; instead, they are EXPECTED.

This may seem deserving, but the fact is that most inmates are coming home one day and it is simply all too difficult to rekindle relationships with society while having just been treated so harshly, for so long, and labelled with such hard reputations throughout incarceration.

Inmates are not animals. 5/ With few exceptions they retain a capacity for empathy, sympathy and compassion:

"Can I see another's woe,
And not be in sorrow too?
Can I see another's grief,
And not seek for kind relief?"

Songs of Innocence. On
Another's Sorrow, st. 1
William Blake 1757-1827

We can. And we do. Perhaps not as often as nor as much as, the government or society would desire. But we are by no means saintly or infallible;

5/ Which begs the question: Do we even approve of treating our animals so harsh and indifferent? PETA and ASPCA televises their maltreatment in daily commercials, depicting their sorrowful engagement; yet, no organization is kind enough to televises the hundreds of thousands of inmates suffering endless years in inhuman conditions of solitary confinement. This tepid response to the suffering of human beings is disheartening to most prisoners; to say the least.

which, in this environment, is an impossible objective to attain: still, we try. We try where many others would quit and give up all hope.

Some of us are very particular about who we'll share our kindness with. We're introverts most days in here. Over time though, we evolve... some for the worse — but others calculate toward a decision to become more extroverted; to spread more kindness about the world around us. We come to feel, deep inside ourselves, that: "[we] expect to pass through this world but once... any kindness that [we] can show to any fellow creature, let [us] do it now; let [us] not defer or neglect it, for [we] shall not pass this way again." 6/

Many people may not like the concept of treating bad people good. This is a hard pill to swallow. We get that. But humanity would better serve itself through balancing necessary punishment with rehabilitation, assuring the latter is focused upon and accomplished just as much as the former. To accomplish such goals it is also necessary that we "[d]istrust all in whom the impulse to punish is powerful." 7/ Entrusting justice to the hands of such people is equally as bad as entrusting justice to those who would have a powerful impulse not to punish at all.

6/ Proverbial Saying (Anonymous).

7/ Thus Spake Zarathustra [1883-1891], pt. II, ch. 29.
Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche 1844-1900.

The truth of the matter is that incarceration is the removal of a convicted criminal from society in order to protect society from his/her misbehavior and then to rehabilitate him/her for their eventual return to society. The removal and incarceration from the rest of our peers for a set period of time is, in and of itself, the punishment. It's not to conduct a long-term pattern of daily acts of vengeance through barking and yelling at him/her, arranging uncouth and highly burdensome living conditions, conducting threats of, and (oft-times) actual physical, psychological and emotional assaults upon the person, and certainly not for trapping the person inside of solitary confinement cells for endless years and decades.

Treating inmates of all walks of life with respect and dignity is a humanitarian necessity. We treat humans with kindness because they are humans — not because we enjoy their company. 8/ The fact is, the government can do better. The question is, will they? And if so, when?

Kindness means humans being treated humanely. Sometimes it's the small things in life that can steer a person down one path or another

8/ We also treat humans with kindness because we are humans.

and lead them toward light or darkness; happiness or depression. calmness or aggressiveness. William Wordsworth once wrote: "That best portion of a good man's life, [is] this little, nameless, unremembered acts, [of] kindness and of love."^{9/} He understood the essence of kindness isn't one big fat gift (or act), but a compilation of life's "little, nameless, unremembered acts of kindness and of love." I know this to be true because when I look back upon the littered past of my life I find those to be the best portions, whether given or received. This should be our lodestar.

The American prison system is full of thieves, thugs, drug dealers, gun-runners and killers. I know because I am one of them. I've lived among them for nearly 23 years now. And while I won't dispute anyone's guilt or innocence, (not here at least) I do dispute government and societal beliefs and claims which portray all (or even most) prisoners as a hodge-podge of evilness incapable and unworthy of giving or receiving kindness. I've encountered more kind-hearted inmates than prison staff (or other authorities) over the years and this is telling inasmuch as it evidences a systemic inability to [re]build any

^{9/} Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey [1798], line 33. William Wordsworth 1770-1850.

trust, faith and respect for authority.

In an era of Black Lives Matter and other such anti-police movements, as I said in the beginning, authorities and society, writ large, would be remiss in their duties in failing to remember: "'Twas a thief said the last kind word to Christ: Christ took the kindness and forgave the theft." (supra.) We are all human beings, and it may be difficult at times, but a kindness within us all does exist and maybe it's time to start using it more often; Myself included.

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