A MORE HUMANE SOCIETY

By Brett May

It dawned on me as I worked out on the “CAGE YARD” of Salinas Valley’s Administrative Segregation Unit how strikingly similar the layout is to the rescue shelter where we adopted our first family dog. Still imprinted in my memory is the image of my Dad walking alongside a series of chain-link cages until he stood in front of one occupied by a jet black Cocker Spaniel. She had a single white spot on her chest in the shape of a diamond that only became visible when she rolled over and exposed her belly, aside from that she was black as night; fittingly we named her Ebony. She was thirty pounds of boisterous energy that neither my siblings nor I could tame. Therefore, she was only a member of our family for a short season before my Dad entrusted her to more capable hands. But it warms my heart to reflect on the way Ebony’s spirit soared when liberated from the callous grips of a cage; proof that there is no greater lesson on the value of freedom than having it stripped from you.

Such is the nature of a cage: merciless, unforgiving, unapologetic and cold; permitting only the briefest moments of distraction from the constant state of suffering that is captivity. Constructed for the recreation of inmates deemed threats to the institution, I found myself in one of prisons many cages drawing parallels between kennels: those conceived for canines and others conceived for men. The similarities in shape and design are virtually identical but the intention behind the two is polar opposite. See ironically, we as a compassionate society only cage our canine companions for a definitive period of time before we consider it cruel and inhumane; a far cry from how we treat our citizens who have committed crimes. Anything beyond that threshold we believe it is more merciful to euthanize our furry friends than subject them to indefinite “incarceration” – with its physiological and psychological consequences. But when it comes to the practice of caging humans that is a different story entirely. The cages we conceive for people are not temporary silos, here in the United States we store men for keeps; we call them prisons.

If only we as Americans were judged on the world stage by how empathetic we are to the plight of our pets, we would still be the gold standard bearers of humanity across the globe. Instead, we no longer exemplify how a civilized society should treat its inmates or its unfortunates; having forsaken the golden rule: DO UNTO OTHERS AS YOU WOULD HAVE THEM DO UNTO YOU. A universal principle that should be applied to all matters concerning humanity, especially those relating to correction and punishment. Which begs the question: why is it that we find it almost unthinkable to engage in the practice of permanently caging dogs, but don’t find it even more abhorrent to cage their benevolent caretakers forever? I stewed over this thought for the duration of a rigorous workout, my thoughts twisting and turning to the rhythm of the cadence and all throughout the remainder of that day. It baffles me that some 15 years later I am still unable to come up with a satisfactory answer to that question.

As much as I’d like to give our species the benefit of the doubt we have become a fickle, contradictory and hypocritical people. Some may even say that we derive joy from committing acts of cruelty on our own kind. Maybe it’s because American culture has become so individualistic, making it not only commonplace but commendable to benefit to the detriment of others. Thereby making it easier to justify euthanasia in the name of mercy, warehousing humanity in the name of justice and committing mass murder and genocide in the name of war. But how do we reconcile this with ourselves, when...
intrinsic to us is this innate ability to be so mercifully empathetic to man’s best friend; while we idly stand by and watch generations of human beings rot away in stone cages. We have become so desensitized to another’s plight that half the time we see it and don’t even blink. Nightly an entire thread of snippets will air on the news, strumming a heartbreaking arrangement of chords that range from devastation to loss in a matter of 60 seconds: unidentified male abducts four year old child, human remains discovered in the Bayou, unarmed man killed by law enforcement officer, female accomplice to botched robbery sentenced to life without the possibility of parole or 30 year old death penalty conviction overturned due to new DNA technology. Wow... an injustice of this proportion can still abide in America for THIRTY YEARS?! Yet we don’t even blink. Nor do we take a moment to imagine what it must be like to wake up in the morning and put on that man’s shoes. We stop short of demonstrating the same capacity for empathy that comes naturally toward our four legged friends. We as Americans have grown too accustomed to creating and existing in our own little bubbles; a form of human interaction that is contrary to our Creators design. See the thing about looking at the world through bubbles is they alter your perception. Sometimes the way we perceive things through these shimmering orbs can be very misleading.

Burst them and you’ll find that the reality is human beings are not immune to the physical and psychological effects of a cage. In fact, we are far more susceptible to irreparable damage than our four legged counterparts. The gifts that distinguish man from beast: our humanity, heightened sense of sensitivity, free will and understanding make us particularly vulnerable to the abrasive conditions of confinement. Scientific and medical studies have long confirmed the correlation between decreased human life expectancy and incarceration; these studies prove true for all mammals when subjected to substantial periods of captivity. Why then have we become so numb to our prisoners plight; because they have been unlawful? We are so quick to pass judgment on all but the image in the mirror; when only he or she who is without sin is fit to cast stones.

These skewed views are responsible for an entire fraction of our nation being misinformed; completely oblivious to the fact that right here in the United States of America our prisons are rife with less than humane conditions of incarceration. Rotten and unhealthy food, unsanitary living and bathing conditions and fatally high levels of stress from the psychological warfare contrived by Correctional Officers with God complexes. Many of us with indeterminate sentences still carry with us unattended trauma and permanent cognitive deficiencies from enduring the rubber stamp process that is the American Criminal Justice System. There are no programs put in place to account for our mental wellness. How can we proclaim to be a “progressive nation” when our ideals of justice are carried out through punitive measures that amount to cruel and unusual punishment? It’s no wonder why most permanent residents of these institutions have contemplated suicide in one form or another: assisted suicide by the by the gunman in the tower or suicide by chemical escape; fearful of deteriorating slowly in a cage. Most of us would readily accept a “DNR” notation in our emergency file, or even opt for it offered; medical terminology for: DO NOT RESUSCITATE. This may sound like an insane way of seeking asylum to someone who has never experienced the confines of a cage, but who in their right mind would want to wake back up to an existence such as this?

What I am endeavoring to do is cast light on the blind spots in our humanity. Under no circumstance should any sector of a civilized society set a higher standard of living for its pets than it does for their owners; or tolerate any form of treatment, in the name of punishment or otherwise, where humans are treated worse than dogs. Nowhere in 21st century America should there be space for a subhuman form
of existence where humanity is warehoused for keeps or a dog can be discarded by its owner and afforded a better life than a disgraced human being. For unwanted pets we have created “pet sanctuaries” — The Humane Society; they can be found in various states throughout this nation. On their grounds alternative methods to “animal incarceration” are conceptualized and implemented to ensure that all animals deemed salvageable (not euthanized in the name of mercy or punishment) are treated with dignity and afforded a meaningful existence for the rest of their days. Similar to the institutions that Norway and Germany have hatched in the way of alternative methods of human incarceration; no such alternatives are being constructed for the dregs of our society in these United States. For a nation of people who can accomplish anything we put our minds to when we work together – this has to be intentional; but my question is why? Our ability to empathize with the plight of a living being held in permanent captivity should draw no distinctions; it is inhumane no matter the species.

When our neighboring nations are developing better ways to reorient wayward souls and rid their prisons of violence – we should be adopting them and raising the bar of innovation. When our way of administering justice has become synonymous with longer and longer sentences – we should examine our lust for vengeance and reimagine or notion of justice. But when our nation is more easily moved to action by the suffering of its animals than the afflictions of its inmates, – we MUST accept a simple truth: WE ARE SORELY IN NEED OF A MORE HUMANE SOCIETY!

"Where compassion exists indifference to suffering cannot survive..."