

Terror of the Wand

Ten years ago, the Michigan Department of Corrections implemented a high-tech system for doing prisoner count: Each officer is issued a heavy, metal wand to use to press against a metal nodule embedded in each prisoners' door. Presumably, they are to gently press the wand against the nodule to register a requisite "beep". Being that the wand is a sturdy object, however, allows the officer, if he pleases, to slam it against the nodule, (with no apparent damage to the wand, itself). Add this: These doors are 400-pounders, and hollow, which amplifies the sound, (like a drum), as it passes through the door into the prisoners' cells. Imagine, then, the negative effect this resulting noise must have upon prisoners' mental and physical health. That effect should not be understated.

These officers do not need to bang against the prisoners' cell doors to complete their count. We know this because there are officers who come in and do their jobs--perform their prisoner counts--without a single "bang". The only noise they generate is the innocuous "beep".

Banging against the doors seems to be a matter of choice, (if not one of peer pressure to conform to this aberrant norm). They do not always slam their wands against the doors. Sometimes they rake it over the nodule, or tap, tap, tap at it, always achieving that discomforting, grating sound of metal against metal. (Who would devise such a clunky system in this 21st century? Who would buy it, and place it in the hands of a workforce that, throughout history, has been notorious for its visceral cruelty?)

Observing these officers as they wield their wands, I am startled at their unbridled insensitivity. Could they truly be as oblivious to the stress they wreak upon prisoners as they appear? But, no, even the worst offender will favor an individual prisoner, from time to time, and go light on his door, signalling a consciousness of wrongdoing; confirming that much of their banging on the doors is purposeful.

Prisoner counts occur every half hour, day and night. For a prisoner to be subjected to such a consistent barrage might be construed as a form of torture, especially when it devolves into a pattern of sleep deprivation, which is contrary to a prisoner's constitutional right to a normal sleep. (Sometimes, they hit my door so hard, my insides quake, and my blood pressure soars.) Imagine someone banging on your door, your wall, every half hour of every day--while you eat, read, sleep. How long would it take for your nerves to begin to fray, like mine are frayed?

I once told an officer, "I wouldn't kick the side of a dog's house the way you (figuratively) kick ours, because that would be cruel." What these people are doing is the equivalent of zookeepers poking at the caged animals. No one would allow that. Yet, here men as helpless as animals are poked at all day long.

Mind you, these are not renegade officers who bang on our doors. The exception is the officer who does his count without

cruelty. The rule is officers who perform those duties with a callous disregard. Even new recruits are infected with this cruel bent. Young men and women whom you might expect to rely upon their Christian upbringing in their treatment of others, instead are pounding on the prisoners' doors, as though such is how they were trained to do it.

If not torture, this behavior is certainly a torment. And, if you dare speak to one of them about it, however civil you address them, they react indignantly, as though they have that right to torment you, and you have offended them by daring to challenge that "right". Of course, that is absurd, but such is the nature of their abuse of this supposed power.

It is not just the prison guards. Prison administrators condone this behavior. (How else could this have gone on for years throughout Michigan's prison system?) Besides, many of the administrators, themselves, bang on the doors. Even healthcare workers--people whose profession it is to relieve suffering--bang on our doors with these wands. I have, personally, appealed to nurses and doctors, and nothing changes--not the behavior of the officers who work beside them, nor their own behavior.

One healthcare worker told me there was nothing she could do, and suggested that I find a way to accept it. That is like telling someone who is being waterboarded to find another way to breathe. Why should anyone have to accept abuse (here in America)? "Get used to it"? That is impossible. You do not "get used" to abuse. You incorporate it; you hope to survive it. But, each day of that survival stretches thin your humanity, until you become a sliver of who you were.

Noises can frighten and unnerve us. They can threaten any sense of security we may possess. There is no reason to implement such an oppressive system that insures gratuitous noise where no noise is needed. The people who approved this count system, and those who execute it, seem to proceed from the notion that the imprisoned have no feelings free men are bound to respect. That is a false conceit. We feel what you feel. Please stop.

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September 14, 2022