

## Prisoners of Our Own Device

What distinguishes Heaven from Hell? Is it the geographical location? NO. The same thing that makes the Playboy Mansion so great, also makes prison what it is: its residents.

One of the things that life in confinement affords is the opportunity to reflect. As I moved through the system - jail, court, prison - I couldn't help but notice that there was something vaguely familiar about it all. Even though I was sitting in a courtroom full of complete strangers, I realized that this was not the case. I knew this because the invitation named me as the host. After taking the time to ponder what the felony information filed against me

truly meant, I came to the realization that I was the sole reason the gathering before me convened.

There was a particular sadness, on that day I slowly admitted to myself that I had become the life-sustaining blood of the system. I effectively employed my own captors.

So there I was, prostrated in the engulfing shadow of the seemingly insurmountable cyclopean walls of prison, and I had to ask myself, who could possibly build such a terrific marvel. At first I couldn't begin to fathom, but upon closer inspection, in minute detail, the builder's mark stared back at me unflinchingly. To my surprise, it bore my signature. This was impossible I told myself. Yet little did I know that every small and seemingly inconsequential bad decision that I've made

was a building block of this fortress:  
ditching school, joining a gang,  
and failing to commit to  
anything but a crime. Like  
everything else that occurs in a  
society, nothing takes place  
in a vacuum. Therefore, like I had  
the help of others when I joined  
a gang, I had help in building  
this place.

Ironically, I was removed  
from society, but instead of  
being offered a place for penitance  
I am offered a sanctuary for  
the reinforcement of anti social  
behaviors. The reason I say this  
is because the old principles  
of mine, which were the exception  
in society, have now become the  
de facto law of the land. To make  
matters worse, the fiendish  
determination with which my  
peers remain steadfast in  
their detrimental deviance

exhausts the overwhelmed state, which in turn is forced to give up on us, and the vicious cycle of dysfunction continues without interruption. Thus, most of the adversity that my cohort faces comes not from without, as we so rationalize, but is interneine. A problem that has long plagued minorities, like Zora Neale Hurston relates

"folks is too envious of one 'nother. Dat's how come us don't get no further than us do. Us talks about de . . . man keepin' us down! Shucks! He don't have tuh. Us keeps our own selves down."

As for the force attributed to outsiders, it is undeniable that it strikes a resemblance. I'd hate to say it, but again we have helped foster a culture of

aggression, setting the example through our own actions, that the only means to settle a dispute is through the use of violence. This in part because we simply refuse to mature and repudiate the standing belief that there is no place for discussion in an environment so long characterized by toxic masculinity.

Just recently, I broke my hand tending off other inmates. On another occasion, I took a razor blade to the face, resulting in 14 sutures, just for refusing to participate in gang activity. In spite of being an interested party, sadly, there are times in which I find myself wishing certain laws are not enacted, because I would rather be incarcerated than witness

the indiscriminate release, into free-society, of those not ready.

In conclusion, this is a beast of our own creation, therefore its unraveling is also up to us and nobody else. Not the politicians, criminal justice advocates, nor the president. The other day, I heard someone complain about a minor transgression he had suffered at the hands of another. I asked him why he was so upset and if he recognized anything about the way he was treated. He said he didn't, so I had to remind him of how he himself had treated others. Just like we created a whole lifestyle based on self-sabotage and destruction, we can build a better tomorrow for everyone. But, before we can do this, first we have to overcome our own demons, individually and collectively.

I mean, how can we conquer the world if we can't even master ourselves?