

Part I

May 6, 2021
Saginaw Corr. Facility (SRF)
Michigan Dept of Corrs.

Floating in a bowl with paper - My time behind bars within the MDOC

My name is John S. Copeman but I much prefer and insist on the derivative "Jack" instead. Having been continuously incarcerated for nearly 30-years now, I have finally cleared up my mind and likewise schedule in order to share a few things since learned, observed, experienced, lost, gained, and gathered—but when it comes to things prison—it's mostly about having endured! That's right, this inconsequential but nevertheless insistent piece of paper is just a quick story through the human menagerie of corrections; sharing insights and other bizarre thoughts on ultimately how you can not only survive doing time inside, but come out better for it. This is what I have to add to the "conversation" because my voice is sharp as a nail just under your heel, so go ahead and step forward:

Caged. For anyone that has ever been to jail and/or prison, we know only too well just how bad conditions are. These places are loud with non-stop yelling; it's over-crowded with

bodies doing things that you want to do (showering, using the microwave, etc.), so it's more waiting in yet another line. All the furniture is made either out of concrete, stainless steel, or molded plastic, so every surface is a metaphor for cold and hard. Jail clothing is well used while prison issue comes new but is meant to last for years,* sometimes decades. Once you get established and make connections, there's always the under-ground market hustlers you can use to get more. Just have to pay what they're asking of course. Help support the illicit economy of prison entrepreneurs keeps the movement of goods and services flowing as constant as any river. All monies tend to accumulate and it is these large pools that is used to ~~pay~~ ~~pay~~ pay for the high-priced items: drugs and cell phones. Everything boiling down to the ol' risk vs. reward equation as they say about most things having a price certainly appears to be true.

*Note: Underlining indicates emphasis, so I would request Italics be used in text. (if selected)

Store items such as noodle soups, bars of soap, sausage, or bags of instant coffee is the currency of the realm with varying prices from lowest to highest. Every detention and correctional facility utilizes a barter economy between inmates and prisoners. It's the most basic business model of all. Have a want or a need, simply trade something of equal value for it, provided you have money in your account to buy goods in the first place. It starts from there.

Low
stakes.

In 1992, as I sat in jail under-going the process of criminal justice via the court, probation department (which conducts pre-sentence investigations), and a state operated Forensic Center for a psychiatric evaluation, there remained almost nothing to do with great chunks of time. And so playing cards in order to subsequently gamble becomes a regular part of the routine. Something that continues on, inculcated throughout the length of one's incarceration as habit if you are not cognizant of how these vices get started.

Every jail and every prison conducts a mandatory body-count multiple times a day. To do so

You must return to your cell, room, or cubicle and sit on your bunk so that the right person is in the right spot at just the right time. When a deputy or corrections officer performs a round and sees that you are still exchanging gases or at least verifiably alive, then you all wait for "count to clear" through reconciliation of how many prisoners they are supposed expected to have. The number of bodies and identities on a master count board. Once that's rectified, they open up the day-rooms and everybody interested heads out.

The card tables is where all the real action is at—whatever your game—just figure out how much you have to risk and let it ride on odds or skill. Simple as that. This is where I learned my first, well... now that I think about it actually, my second lesson of the criminal lifestyle: Don't play gambling games if you don't like losing! Be it one-dollar candybars or \$20. chits, I hate giving away my shit to someone not even as smart or educated but obviously more skilled at counting cards and knowing odds. It's just a bad

practice to get into. This is where real losers are formed, the people that never figure this out and keep showing up asking to use credit and presumably their "good" name. (Until it isn't.) Having already lost everything of value, their foolish brains are now hooked on the high they feel. It's sad to watch but even worse to know that all those well-seasoned hands sitting around the table recognize a dupe when they see one—and purposely exploit this person for more. "Call your _____ and tell them you need to pay or..." is common behind bars. Humans really can be terrible when they want to.

Up Staged. The first lesson of doing time is this:

Keep your mouth shut and never reveal any information but to your lawyer! This especially means the cops and anyone wearing the same institutional clothes as you. Because law enforcers aren't your friends and they certainly don't care about you ~~so are~~ other than seeing a quick end to their case. A confession will do just that. And... be advised that it's perfectly legitimate for the police to use lies and misinformation

during a suspect interview. It's just another ruse among many tactics and strategies the Court OK'd in order to get at the truth and induce cooperation with the investigation. Which is really the height of irony and just another example of American hypocrisy at its finest.

Now "jail-house snitches" are nothing new for anyone that has ever watched television. Seeing plenty of high-profile crimes where the prosecution's case was weak with evidence and witnesses, so they resort to using a confidant, usually a bunky, to testify as to what they heard. Which, again, is allowable under case law.

Sneaky, double-crossing betrayers are as common to lock-ups as the roaches, and just about as ancient, too. Going back to at least Judas Iscariot, one of the original informants, it seems this trait has longevity for its selfish purpose. Whether pieces of silver or reduced sentences, some things never change.

Facing two-counts of open murder, arson, and felony firearm, I had an individual try to befriend me soon after being placed in a 12-man dayroom ~~in~~ at the county jail. Apparently this is a well-worn practice of petty

criminals and integrity-lacking Scumbags. Your typical thieves out stealing and hustling to support dope addictions. Mostly in than out of "the county," they tend to burn all their relationships because drugs turn you into a wretch trying to support an impossible habit. But to be successful at bottom-feeding, they have to use charm. It's the single main ability they have left in their pathetic lives. And it usually works!

Luckily for me, however, I am quiet and distrustful by nature — so this guy trying to win my confidence was never going to ^{happen.} ~~work~~. First of all, I didn't know him from Dick, so no amount of free commissary items is going to gain my trust. And for the whole scheme to work, the snitch has to produce information about the crime which verifies evidence not revealed in the press. Which, murder cases such as mine, are printed in bold font and descriptive headlines ~~on~~ the front page. Second, as a recently returned Persian Gulf War veteran, I had also been experiencing problems with mental health as well, mostly: insomnia, nightmares, paranoia, hyper-vigilance, aggressiveness, and memory loss. So I couldn't remember shit to tell even if I wanted to.

local papers

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And third, because of such a cluster of symptoms, I was having trouble maintaining relationships with people known and loved, so everyone else just got on my bad side almost immediately. Hence—I got into a fistfight with the guy and attempted to smash his face into a table. Obviously I never saw him again after that, but did sense having dodged a pitfall while also learning a lesson about the types of people you meet behind bars.

Spoon Raged. Almost as bad as the company you're steeped, is the biological necessity of having to eat whatever they put in front of you. Most of the time, as popular culture already knows, the food is disgusting! Also to mention cheap! The MDOC specializing in brown-meat turkey balls four times a week; served with a hearty portion of mashed potatoes boiled in skin and dirt, so that it leaves you with a mouth~~ful~~ full of gritty paste. And topped by a gelatinous gob of gray goo—a color not found anywhere but factories—is the worst industrial flavor of all. Same as paint. My stomach now churns in fear and anticipation knowing that I still have the next 1½ year,

or eighteen months, of picking through this gross monstrosity in order to survive. It's living at the lowest level, any further ^{down} than this would be dumpster diving, next stop Cardboard Box City and Desperationville among derelicts. Hmm... I'd truly like to avoid that if possible.

Almost ~~a~~ a requirement to qualify as a prison cook in food service, it is apparently first necessary to have undergone some head trauma and receive a diagnosis of **TBI** so that one fits right in with the rest of the crew on that ship of fools.

Being that not only are good cooks hard to come by, it is in no small part that good supervision is another crucial ingredient most institutional kitchens sorely lack. Titled as "food stewards" these are civilian employees that work for the department as leaders.

Responsible for the production of meals as well as the security of food supplies and daily operations of the chowhall during service, it is their function that the food be: a.) Cooked properly, b.) Ready during meals, and c.) Contain the necessary ingredients (i.e., Cheese ^{as} in macaroni & cheese) according to the menu.

Which... when it comes to prison and food preparation by ^{klepto}convicts — can become a real challenge most of the time. The state once estimating they were losing millions of dollars of goods pilfered directly from its correctional facilities every year. Ostensibly one of the reasons they used to privatize food service circa 2014. An experiment which proved a dismal failure with not one but two outside contractors (Aramark, Trinity Group) within just a few years!

If it weren't so sad (for all involved) it would certainly have proved comical, that's for sure. Fresh off the street civilians hired to come in to the hardest workplace of all with nothing more than a few weeks training was doomed to failure from the start. You absolutely cannot be in any way "soft" (too kind, caring, sympathetic, and most of all a push-over) to work in a penitentiary! We are so hard ~~in here~~ and self-centered in here because all we care about is ourselves. Bottomline. That's what makes us criminals in the first place. And then we get tempered by time and circumstance, well... that's what they mean with the expression hardened! Our hearts and minds become steel.

(End of Part I)