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#341916
Inmate: Animal or Human Being?

"I am not an animal. I am a human being," uttered Joseph Merrick the renowned Elephant man. Those are the very sentiments expressed by the millions of inmates incarcerated throughout the United States at this very minute. What is it about crossing the line from law abiding citizen to criminal that somehow strips us of our humanity? Up until the minute I was photographed and identified as an inmate I thought I was still a human being. However, prison and its officials have now made me question the very essence of my humanity. Does the fact that I made a mistake and am paying my debt to society strip me of the right to be called, treated, and feel like a human being? Some in the Department of Corrections think so. If that is the case then there is something wrong with the system where we are sent to pay our debts, get rehabilitated and return to society as transformed and repentant beings.

Somehow the term inmate has become synonymous with animal. Some in Corrections feel that when a person breaks the law, it makes them less than human, almost giving them the right to treat them worse than a stray on the street. Even they get a compassionate nod every now and then. They have organizations that represent their best interest. Inmates on the other hand truly have become the dregs of society that the public swears they are.

Shows like Lockup, Lockup Abroad, and Prisons depict corrections staff yelling things like *"I'll tell you when to eat, when to drink, and when you can go to the bathroom. You're breathing right now because I'm in a good mood. You only exist because I let you."* Audiences may laugh at the extreme measures taken in the

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production of these shows; however, it is the reality of many inmates in different institutions throughout the country. I cringe at the very thought that I can no longer make my own decisions, but does that give someone else the right to determine my very bodily functions. I would hope not, but that is the much distorted frame of mind of some officers.

The mindset isn't the only thing that alludes to the inmate/animal theory. Take a look at the housing units at some corrections facility. They are cinder block cages that allow minimal movement, no fresh air circulation, and would make a rubber room look like the Hilton. Officers' man computerized panels that unlock doors at set intervals just like they do in a zoo. Once free from their cells inmates are allowed recreation time in the common area that faces the officers with double paned-plexi glass reminiscent of zoo exhibits where the monkeys are put on display to the public without disturbing their natural habitat. Understanding that safety and security are issues that need to be addressed, aren't these monkey exhibits a little much? If that didn't add insult to injury how about a facility open house. I don't know about you, but I really doubt that I would want to show my loved ones where I worked if I worked here. It isn't the thought of exposing my family to the criminal element that would stop me; it would be the fact that I would walk them through buildings that housed inmates as if they were a sideshow of sorts with Batboy as the main event or the local petting zoo. If that doesn't scream animal I don't know what does.

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As you can possibly tell, I could go on and on, but I won't. Simply put inmates are still human beings despite the fact they have made mistakes. Some of us are consumed with guilt and remorse because of the choices we have made. I will not say that some don't care one way or another although the majority of us strive to make the karmic scale even again. We cannot go back and undo the mistakes or the choices of our past, but we can try to make amends as best possible just so we can live with ourselves. The concept of perpetually being treated less than a human being doesn't make it easier to continue on the journey toward redemption. If the officers who are entrusted with our safety and security treat us like animals what will the rest of society treat us like? Don't get me wrong, not all correctional staff treat inmates as less than human. Like inmates, they are not all the same. However, we all deserve to be treated like human beings no matter what.